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# Being Muslim for dummies, or how not to be a threat 101: embodied performances of race and religion after the Manchester attack

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## ABSTRACT

Performances of Muslimness are often performances of the body. Such performances surfacing after the May 2017 attack on Manchester Arena demonstrate British Muslims' negotiations of the sociopolitical narrative equating the Muslim and terrorist bodies. Drawing on two such performances, I argue that post-attack performances of Muslimness as innocence do more than play into "with us" vs. "against us" narratives: they also enable British Muslims to survive the trauma of the British state's vilification of Islam and Muslims. These performances are thus a damning indictment of the hostile environment that the British state, public, and media have created for British Muslims.

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It's the summer of 2022, and I'm on a research trip to the UK. Back in Manchester where I completed fieldwork from 2017 to 2018, I'm here to investigate performances held around the fifth anniversary of the attack on Manchester Arena.<sup>1</sup> During the trip, I've attended religious and secular commemorations at Manchester Cathedral, Victoria Station, the Glade of Light, and the Great Manchester Run. As the trip wraps up, I go to purchase luggage one afternoon. My partner and I have acquired more stuff than anticipated; we need more suitcases. I walk my Brown, visibly Muslim, and male body down a bright, sunlit street towards a shopping arcade called Manchester Arndale, which sits near Piccadilly Gardens. Nearby, around this time of year in 1996, the Irish Republican Army detonated a truck bomb that injured over 200 people and caused nearly \$1.6 billion, in today's terms, of property damage; Arndale was built during the area's reconstruction in the early 2000s (Jahangir). I enter the shopping center and find Sports Direct, a large athletics store carrying clothing and travel items. I ask the white security guard if they have suitcases, and he directs me to the back wall near the cash registers. I am disappointed in their selection; none of them are big enough for how much stuff we've accumulated on this two-month trip. I leave the store and encounter the security guard on my way out; *maybe he knows of another place with bigger luggage*, I think. I ask him as much. He says he doesn't know of another place and then, without missing a beat, asks: "what d'you need such a big suitcase for?" Immediately, my guard goes up. I feel a sensation rising from my gut into my chest: anger.

*This guy is an idiot*, I think. I calmly reply: “I’m from the States, and we’ve gotten too much stuff on this trip.” Our exchange then takes a different turn:

HIM: The States? The United States?

ME: Yeah.

HIM: Whereabouts do you live?

ME: In Connecticut.

HIM: Oh. I have friends in California.

ME: I used to live in California.

HIM: They used to send me some great weed<sup>2</sup> from there.

ME: Live your life, man.

I walk away and continue looking for a suitcase.

I begin with this vignette to invite readers into the world of Muslim performances of the nonthreatening, particularly in terms of the 2017 attack on Manchester Arena.<sup>3</sup> The attack occurred on May 22, when a 22-year-old British Muslim man named Salman Abedi detonated an improvised explosive device outside Manchester Arena as an Ariana Grande concert was concluding; captured on CCTV at a local train station some days before, Abedi was seen struggling with a heavy suitcase that authorities later determined was used to transport bombmaking materials. Aside from Abedi, 22 individuals were killed and hundreds were injured. After the event, British Muslims negotiated reinvigorated narratives that equate the figure of the Muslim with the figure of the terrorist; hate crimes against Muslims in Manchester surged by 500% in the month after the attack (Halliday). These narratives, laced with assumptions of criminality, were visited upon my Brown, Muslim, male body when interacting with the security guard, during a trip overlapping with the attack’s fifth anniversary. The security guard, it seems, was testing whether I was with him or against him. Are these the only two positions that Muslims can take – either with a non-Muslim, British public, or against it – relative to events like the attack? Or are there other possibilities?

In response to these questions, my argument is that post-attack performances of Muslimness-as-innocence do more than just play into “with us” or “against us” narratives: they also enable British Muslims to survive the trauma of the British state’s ongoing vilification of Islam and Muslims in creative ways. Whether through the UK government’s counterterrorism-oriented Prevent agenda<sup>4</sup> that ensconces suspicion of Muslims in state policy (Ramadan), the “hostile environment” approach to immigration that is “wrecking the lives of people who have a right to be here [in the UK]” (Hill), or the country’s rampant and increasingly Islamophobic post-Brexit environment in which anti-Muslim hate is “getting worse” (Hopkins et al. 6), the British state, its media instruments,<sup>5</sup> and derivative public opinion are stacked against Muslims. Creative responses, like those I investigate here, are required.

In what follows, after laying out my critical framework, I draw on two examples of such performances<sup>6</sup> – vlogger Baktash Noori’s free hugs and North Manchester Jamé Masjid’s (NMJM) Children’s Peace Walk – that occurred in the days after the attack.

Reading them together through the lens of performance, I attend to body, affect, and effect – including my own body’s sensations in encountering videos of these performances – to show how Noori and the Walk negotiated discourses around Muslimness that surfaced in the attack’s immediate aftermath, specifically the narrative that renders the Muslim body as the terrorist body. These performances of innocence and the nonthreatening alternately played into and established distance from the position of the relatable and respectable Muslim, the one who performs a palatable Muslimness for British sensibilities. Ultimately, these examples indict British society while revealing the multilayered nature of British Muslims’ negotiations of the Muslim-as-terrorist narrative, surfacing the relatable Muslim as one who is coerced into performing a particular way of being, in order to survive.

### **Muslimness and the body**

Performances of Muslimness are, so often, performances of the body. The routinized and normalized need to perform the nonthreatening Muslim is a survival strategy that enables the existence of the British Muslim body, despite the fraught relationship between British Muslims and the British state/its publics. In England’s north, the Muslim body becomes the Asian body. Britain’s history of imperialism and the migration of people from formerly colonized nations to England, where mill towns in Greater Manchester and beyond were often the first step of employment for South Asian men who came to England after the British left India in shambles (Alexander et al.), mean that Muslimness in Manchester is tied to the diasporic and migratory patterns of South Asian bodies moving to and from the colonizer’s land. Race scholar Ambalavaner Sivanandan puts it succinctly: “we are here because you were there” (Sivanandan quoted in Younge). This draws on an even longer history of Orientalist discourse, in which Muslims are imaginatively rendered an “Other” that comes from someplace that purportedly opposes the supposedly progressive West: the “East” (Said). This “East” is a place of fantasy and exoticism, backwardness and conservatism, and – crucially – anger and violence. In the Western imaginary, these narratives continue to be mapped onto Muslims in an undifferentiated way. And because so many Muslims in England’s north are of Asian heritage, the Brown body in Manchester is similarly imbricated, as in my interaction with the security guard. Events like 9/11, 7/7, and the Manchester Arena attack only reify problematic Western imaginings of Brown Muslims by aligning these imaginings with Orientalist visions that equate the Brown Muslim with angry and violent male-ness. All this conveniently elides the role of Western neo-imperial military adventurism, which is a core part of attackers’ motivations: British military activities in Libya, for instance, directly contributed to Abedi’s desire to undertake the Arena attack (Doward et al.). The Muslim bodies that responded to the attack through particular social performances thus did so to survive and maintain their position as British Muslims, despite Britain’s historical hostility towards Islam and Muslims.

In the face of Western anti-Muslim sentiment, Muslims have engaged in performances of survival for decades. Political scientist Mahmood Mamdani, for example, first coined the notion of the “good Muslim” and “bad Muslim” in 2002, arguing that the West’s late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century characterizations of Muslims have exclusively occurred in terms of the so-called war on terror, and that the “goodness”

or “badness” of a Muslim is dependent upon their degree of support for that same “war” (Mamdani 766–75; Mamdani). The “good Muslim” is “with us” because he is compliant with and submissive to state power, while the “bad Muslim” is “against us” because she questions authority and foreign policy decisions. Mamdani’s argument, however, presents an awkward binary, for it occludes issues of race, class, sect, gender, and sexual orientation. This binary also problematically erases the lived realities of the movement of Muslim bodies, bodies that come from a range of geographical and historical circumstances.

Thus, I want to complicate Mamdani’s argument by positing Muslimness as a more inclusive category. Muslimness is ill-defined; intentionally so. It allows for a surfacing of difference within a common umbrella, including various levels of investment, attachment, belief, and practice. Unlike critical theorist Paul Gilroy’s notion of the term “black,” which he has characterized as a catchall that uses color to forward “the possibility of Afro-Asian unity” (39), the label of Muslimness attempts to address sociologist Tariq Modood’s critique of Gilroy’s “black.” Modood sees Gilroy’s “black” as a label that obscures the importance of ethnicity and religion while allowing dominant white society to set the terms of debate regarding race. For Modood, Gilroy’s “black” ignores “the dialectical relationship between what a racial group thinks it is and how others treat it” (52–58). And if – as historian AbdoolKarim Vakil writes – “religion is ‘raced’, and Muslims are racialized” (276), then Muslimness has the potential to be an inclusive term that recognizes race and allows for Modood’s “dialectical relationship,” both communally and individually. Muslimness for someone who is white passing is different to Muslimness for someone who is Black, both of which are different to Muslimness for someone who is Brown, Native, Arab, East Asian, or otherwise racialized. This is precisely because of how different bodies are perceived in the British context, where “what a racial group thinks it is and how others treat it” do not always align. If Mamdani’s binary obscures the body because of the value judgment it assigns to different Muslims in terms of the national security state, then Muslimness seeks to recenter that body.

From this body-Muslimness relationship comes my approach to analyzing Noori’s hugs and NMJM’s parade. All bodies perform Muslimness differently: some do so in ways that play down visible Muslimness, like shaving one’s beard before going to the airport; some do so in ways that are legible to fellows Muslims, like saying *salaam alaikum*; and some don’t bother performing at all, by misrecognizing or ignoring their audience entirely. In each case, the body holds knowledge about Muslimness. Law scholar Khalid Beydoun refers to these variable performances as different strategies for “acting Muslim” that confirm, conform, cover, or conceal Islam (9). But Beydoun’s legal lens attends primarily to the actions of these bodies, less so their affect. As such, he misses out on *the emotive experience* of being Muslim in these circumstances. Understanding affect through the body’s experience yields knowledge, as confirmed by – among others – anthropologist Renato Rosaldo. While conducting fieldwork with his wife among the Ilongot people of the Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s, Rosaldo’s wife died suddenly after slipping and falling into a ravine. Up to this point in his 14 years of researching the Ilongot, Rosaldo had not properly understood Ilongot headhunting, in which a bereaved Ilongot man – in ritual form – hunts and decapitates other men in the tribe in order “to carry [away] his anger” at the loss of a loved one, “severing and tossing away the victim’s head” because it enables the grieving man “to vent and

... throw away the anger of his bereavement” (1). It was only upon losing his wife and becoming “enraged” and “like in a nightmare, the whole world around me expanding and contracting” while expressing “sobs without tears” that Rosaldo “found the rage in grief,” which – among other things – moved him to a closer understanding of Ilongot grieving practices (7–9).

Sitting with my body’s affect is therefore an essential tool for comprehending how Noori and NMJM’s performances took place, for my positionality as a Brown, Muslim, male surfaces particular parallels between myself, Noori, and the NMJM marchers. If the task of examining and writing Muslimness too often falls to Muslims, it is both a blessing and a curse: *to be able to* make oneself legible and *to have to* make oneself legible. As literature scholar Sidonie Smith writes in citing critical theorist Judith Butler’s work, “the injunction to *be*’ a particular kind of subject ... ‘produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated’” (Butler quoted in Smith 20; italics in original). There is thus an incoherence to me having to make Muslimness legible through writing it, given that my position relative to the videos of these performances is as an audience member who – like thousands of others – merely viewed YouTube and Facebook recordings. But I also could have been a Muslim in one of these performances, and indeed, have been, in many unfiled moments of my life. This could-have-beeness affirms a connection between the Muslim bodies that hugged and walked in post-attack Manchester, and my own. It is not that their emotions are mine. Rather, by watching them, the emergence of certain feelings in me surfaces knowledge about Muslim bodies and their anxieties, vulnerabilities, and positionalities. Writing myself into this analysis recognizes the labor that my affect does in understanding Noori and NMJM’s racialized positions as Muslims with diverse bodies, in the tradition of performance scholars D. Soyini Madison and Thomas DeFrantz. As Madison writes, “the writing *is* a performance” that allows “the performer” to “first remember where theories begin” (107; italics in original). In my case, theory begins in the Muslim body.

## Hugs of hope?

For over an hour in the early evening on 26 May 2017, vlogger Baktash Noori stood opposite the Royal Exchange Theatre, yards from St. Ann’s Square, a space that was slowly but surely becoming a spontaneous container for Manchester’s post-attack mourning (Manchester Together Archive). Sporting simple attire – a black baseball cap; a white t-shirt with a large circular logo in the center depicting a black honeybee, the symbol of Manchester, and the words “Manchester” and “Manc and Proud” emblazoned around the bee; a pair of black capris; and black shoes – Noori was blindfolded and wore a black backpack, his arms outstretched, his posture relaxed. To his right, on the ground, was a cardboard sign: “I’m Muslim and I trust you. Do you trust me enough for a hug?” (The Life of Bako). Noori stood, waiting for passersby to hug him, while his friends Ahmed and Abdullah watched and recorded from a shop window nearby.

In the video footage, it takes some time before Noori receives his first hug, despite multiple individuals reading the sign as they walk by. The first hug comes from a middle-aged white man, walking in a group, who passes Noori’s sign and then doubles back. As he gives Noori a hearty hug, the video subtitles his words: “good man. You’re

not alone, kid. Don't think you're outside." Then he walks away. This action breaks the ice, leading to all types of pedestrians hugging Noori: white, Black, Asian; old, young, middle-aged; male, female, nonbinary; walking, in wheelchairs, wearing assistive devices; with backpacks, in heels, on the phone, smoking, with water bottles, carrying bags; big, medium, small; and so on. Pedestrians approach Noori cautiously, excitedly, generously, nervously, wholeheartedly, slowly, quickly, and otherwise. At least two individuals who hug Noori – one Black man and one Arab woman – say salaam to him: “peace be upon you.”<sup>7</sup> The lines of people waiting to hug Noori grow longer and longer, as the performance builds on itself and an audience develops. The video concludes with Noori giving a short speech, in which he implores the audience to “please do not do not” allow “an idiot’s mistake, a stupid mistake by some idiot” to “represent a large community or a large group of people like us” (*The Life of Bako*).

Noori’s performance is powerful, yet problematic. In watching videos of Noori’s hugs, I found myself choking up, particularly welling up in my upper chest. This is the height of vulnerability, where a man who looks like me exposes his body in public – blindfolded and without physical protection – to reenact details of an attack that happened less than a week earlier. Widely circulated media reports and CCTV images showed Abedi, just before the attack, in the Arena’s lobby wearing a large black backpack in which he had packed his bomb (Kerslake et al.; Saunders). By wearing a smaller object of similar style, Noori directly links himself to the attacker via outward appearance. Noori’s black backpack recalls Abedi’s black backpack, challenging passersby to question their own assumptions of this visual and querying the mediatised narrative that links young Muslim men to terrorism (Baker et al. 257). In Noori’s performance, reclaiming the black backpack draws connections to young people’s purportedly deviant behavior of wearing hoodies (Beck), a symbol that has been and continues to be reclaimed by Black young men (*60 Minutes*; Weeks). Noori’s performance thus created an affective link between my body and his, through vulnerability.

Powerful, too, is the simplicity of the cardboard sign. A clear affront to the same Muslim-male-as-terrorist narrative, the sign publicizes Noori’s Muslimness. Despite the aforementioned history of Muslims in Manchester, Noori’s body – Brown and male – could be seen as Muslim or not, given the range of religions present on the Indian subcontinent. However, in naming his Muslimness explicitly, Noori eliminates the ambiguity of his Brown body and recognizes the Asian body as less threatening than the Muslim body. If the sign had referenced Noori’s Asianness instead of his Muslimness, speaking of trust would be confusing. But because of the histories and sociopolitical narratives around British Muslims – and the attack as context – it seems almost natural for the sign to highlight narratives that frame the public Muslim body as untrustworthy. It thus probes passersby, inviting and provoking them. Do passersby uphold ideas of Muslims as untrustworthy and dangerous, of Muslim communities as closed off and anti-British? Do they ascribe that narrative to Noori and his Brown, male body? Do they critique it? Enough to act on it? Ahmed and Abdullah’s obvious filming of Noori also puts pressure on passersby: maybe they shouldn’t hug him, because it’s all being filmed anyway. Even still, Noori’s sign recognizes narratives that link Muslims to “religiosity, conservative cultural politics, and extremism” (Bayat and Herrera 4). It rejects and dismisses “conservative cultural politics” framings of



Muslims by embodying a liberal position. Noori's hugging thus engages and disagrees with this narrative, rather than sidestepping or ignoring it.

Here, Noori's hugging becomes more troubling. Because rather than disavowing sociologist Asef Bayat and anthropologist Linda Herrera's narratives around being Muslim, the hugs play into their presence. At work here is what performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz has labeled a "disidentification," in which minoritarian subjects reformulate "the world *through* the performance of politics" (xiv; italics in original). Noori attempts to remake "the world" that is in front of him – the Muslim-male-as-terrorist narrative – into something else, through giving free hugs. His closing speech, a plea for understanding, surfaces the survival function of disidentification, creating distance between Abedi and Muslims as Noori understands them. Noori is not interested in ignoring the narrative altogether. Rather, by disidentifying, he choreographs and performs a nonviolence that he hopes will ensure his and other Muslims' survival.

Here, the "good Muslim" is being performed (Mamdani). As a "good Muslim," Noori must reassure passersby – as one older white man told him while they hugged – that "we're all the same whatever we are." By performing the "good Muslim," Noori is flattened into whiteness' sameness; performing the "good Muslim" erases the Muslim body. Yet, young Brown Muslim men in Manchester *are not* the same as, say, young white men in Manchester. Abedi's actions place a burden on Noori and others who look like him and share his faith to profess an innocence that assuages British masses. This burden is borne by Brown bodies that are framed and read as Muslim bodies. It is not borne by white bodies. Noori's Brown Muslim body must be docile. It must be quiet, unassuming, and not causing trouble. It must either drift away into the background or make white non-Muslims feel better, literally, by hugging them.

Noori's performance of Muslimness is highly relational, however. While it does make white non-Muslims feel better, it also establishes a link to other Muslims. Even though I was not present at Noori's performance, the video enabled affect to travel beyond the ephemerality of his performance. I welled up the most when watching two individuals offer Noori a word of salaam as they hugged. In those moments, Muslimness was being performed *for and with other Muslims* as an affective resonance across a communal relationship to Islam. Knowing the significance of the salaam, almost like the "Black nod" that connotes recognition and respect as an adaptive strategy in racist institutions (Jones), my body felt noticed. It felt recognized. So too, perhaps, was Noori's. The oneness of the performance was moot, supplanted by an affective, transmedia relationship to Muslimness. The salaam served as an affirmation for Noori's work, confirming safety and solidarity between Muslims both hugging him and watching later; not only as fellow human beings who sympathized with victims and survivors, but also as fellow Muslims negotiating similar senses of trepidation in the attack's aftermath. Noori's performance was highly vulnerable. This represents a different aspect of Muslimness: having to perform a sense of being nonthreatening while knowing that you are not alone.

Still, in positioning himself outside but within walking distance of St. Ann's Square, Noori is on the literal edge of the community that can mourn Manchester. There is, as comparative literature scholar Hamid Dabashi describes, "a towering moral upperhand that denies Muslims as Muslims the agency to mourn the victims of Manchester." Noori, in identifying himself as Muslim, must place himself outside the space where the



spontaneous mourning of victims takes place. Thus, he is opposite the Royal Exchange Theatre, a Manchester cultural institution that seldom makes performance beyond its hallowed walls.<sup>8</sup> If his performance of Muslimness renders him peripheral to the city's mourning, it simultaneously asks an edifice of theatre to act differently. Noori's performance choreographs Muslimness in affectively powerful ways, but it is also politically mute and narratively naïve, engaging with rather than sidestepping a problematic sociopolitics around Muslimness, masculinity, Brownness, youth, and terrorism.

I read Noori's hugs, therefore, as seeking to provide hope. But to whom, exactly? Who benefits from and who is harmed by this exercise? Is it uplifting Muslims themselves? Is it hopeful for non-Muslim passersby? Is it Noori's own hope, that he and other Muslims will not be considered adjacent to violence? The answer, perhaps, is a mixture of all. Wider British, non-Muslim society benefits, for Noori performs an assuagement of the British press and public, helping them to believe that they are safe again. There is no discernable downside for Britons broadly, for this performance fits neatly into well-worn narratives about Muslims. But even still, there is a major drawback: Noori's hugs reinforce the narrative that such performances are necessary at all. They become de rigueur – daresay required – for British Muslims to enact, in exchange for being left alone. Any hope that such performances provide is thus fleeting and short-lived, sticking around only until the next attack.

## A parade of Muslims

On 26 May 2017, as Noori offered hugs to strangers, a group of approximately 500 children and adults departed from North Manchester Jamé Masjid (NMJM) in Cheetham Hill. Quietly walking 2 miles south to Manchester Arena, the marchers carried flowers and signs that said “WE ♥ MCR” and “WE ARE ONE,” with a red heart in the O; the bottom of each sign read #WeStandTogether. Marchers also carried Capri-Sun pouches and water bottles for hydration, amid the early summer sunshine. A banner at the front labeled the event the “Children's Peace Walk” while sporting the “WE ♥ MCR” slogan and NMJM's bright blue and red logo, with the “N” and “J” of NMJM styled as minarets topped with a crescent moon; a rotating group of primarily young people held the banner. The marchers wore diverse garments but were dressed mostly in South Asian, specifically Pakistani Muslim, garb: many of the women sported headscarves, *dupattas*, and *shalwar kameez*, while many men wore *shalwar kameez* or Arab-style *thobes* and *kufis*, as well as khakis and button-down shirts.

NMJM livestreamed the procession on its Facebook page, including separate streams for the beginning of the Walk and arrival at the Arena. In all streams, distinct and intentional choreography was evident. Early on in one video, Qamaruzzaman Azmi, the *imam* and leader of NMJM, made a statement to the audience on Facebook Live. Imam Azmi stated that the march was taking place because “we want to show support for the general community of Manchester” and that NMJM was “very much against what happened” because “this is not the message of Islam” – rather, “the message of Islam is peace” (North Manchester Jamé Masjid). Imam Azmi went on: “therefore, we are taking all the students from the masjid, from the mosque, to show their respect,” and “we will be placing flowers on the site where this atrocity was carried out.” Indeed, the livestream

and news coverage depict a somber and serious mood, often with children looking directly into the camera.

Choreography was also evident in the structure and movement of the group, as well as ongoing direction provided by organizers. Some adult marchers in high-visibility vests positioned themselves on the outside of the group, showing the edges of the march. Police officers – also in high-visibility jackets – walked alongside, focusing on the spatial relationship between marchers and the wider public. A support vehicle, sporting multiple decals with the “WE ♥ MCR” slogan and the NMJM logo, drove slowly at the head of the march to warn oncoming drivers of the walkers. One of the men livestreaming the march continually coached marchers to change their pace to catch up with others ahead of them or slow down to allow others to catch up; at one point, he also directed all marchers to remain behind the large banner and for children to come to the front so that they could be seen by television cameras. When arriving at the Arena, passersby applauded the walk’s completion. The choreography continued, with banners directed to be held aloft as photographers and television cameras captured the moment. One banner was then folded and set aside, while another remained visible. Then, the children were ushered to the Arena wall, near the remaining banner, to lay flowers. The wall became a collection point for NMJM community members’ sentiments, underneath a series of handmade signs that expressed hate for Da’esh, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban; solidarity with victims’ families and the British government; and distance, by calling those who are “hurting innocent people in this way” as “not Muslim” and not “deserv[ing] of being called human” (North Manchester Jamé Masjid). After they laid flowers, marchers were directed by organizers to clear the area quickly, move away from the Arena wall, and – accompanied by more applause from passersby – begin walking back to NMJM.

As a hybrid performance of Muslimness and innocence, the choreography of the Walk demonstrated a well-defined sense of organization and structure. Organizers made clear, through shouting out directions and otherwise guiding attendees, what I call a choreography of nonviolence: the peacefulness with which they wanted events to unfold, the order they wanted NMJM community members to embody, and the calm with which they wanted them to behave. This choreography furthered NMJM’s project of nonthreateningness, while simultaneously being oriented to two specific audiences: the media there to cover the Walk and British non-Muslims. Opportunities were created for photographers and camera people to take pictures and videos that could accompany news reports of the Walk, including at key moments like the group’s arrival to the Arena. This choreography was curated to present an aura of respectability, with NMJM spokesperson Moin Azmi explicitly referencing “the image we want to show” the public (Lodge), by beginning the livestream with Imam Azmi’s condemnatory message that distanced NMJM from Abedi. The Walk and its choreography thus displayed a nonviolent nonthreateningness that was prepared for and oriented towards the audience that NMJM sought to cultivate, surfacing *how* it wanted that audience to view NMJM and Muslims more broadly.

This message was unified. Across all the Walk’s accoutrements, NMJM’s message was explicitly one of reassurance: *everyone in our Muslim community condemns what happened, and we are not like the person who did this; we are good Muslims*. The implicit corollary of this message was also a clear, if more subtle, plea: that Muslims not be further vilified, blamed, or harmed as a consequence of Abedi’s actions; that they be recognized

as allies rather than enemies; and that they, as NMJM spokesperson Azmi stated, “are a part of society campaigning against the terrorist” (Lodge). Whether in terms of organizers telling marchers to quickly lay their flowers and move on, marchers only walking on the sidewalk, or signs that expressed solidarity with the British government – even though the British government’s position has been questioned by other Manchester mosques like Didsbury Mosque, which Abedi and his family attended (Didsbury Mosque) – the Walk was thus a performance of innocence that did two different things: (1) aligned itself with British values of not making a fuss or causing a disturbance, and (2) understood the attack as a call for Muslims to defend themselves in particular ways.

This type of Muslimness was applauded, literally, upon the group’s arrival to the Arena. Passersby – perhaps non-Muslim ones, perhaps others – put their hands together to acknowledge the marchers’ performance. What, exactly, were they applauding? The appropriateness of this performance, which lined up with British sociopolitical expectations about what Muslims *ought* to be doing in the wake of the attack? The genuinely heartfelt nature of this gesture? The integration of children? The organization and orderliness of the event? Some combination of all? Something else altogether? Without interviewing the audience, it is impossible to say with certainty what applauders were thinking. Media coverage chronicling the event, however, shows that the performance was received positively: marchers were characterized as appropriately showing their “disgust at the actions of bomber Salman Abedi” and “solidarity with victims” (Lodge), engaging in peaceful actions like saying “prayers” and “carrying flowers and balloons” (“Muslim Children and Their Families”), and “show[ing] their revulsion at the terror attack purportedly carried out in the name of their faith” (Sawer).

A specific type of Muslimness – one that was appropriately disciplined to British norms around how to be Muslim in this type of moment – was celebrated. Attire plays a role in this. Muslimness continues to slip into and with Asianness in Manchester, such that the donning of Pakistani-specific garb by NMJM walkers offers a familiar scene for British publics. And even with this fluidity, the Asian body is less threatening than the Muslim body. British familiarity with a certain type of Asian performance provides a sense of comfort that a solely Muslim performance cannot. In applauding the walkers, British publics could find solace and normalcy in the fact that Muslims were compelled to discipline and parade themselves – literally – to the scene of the crime, professing their innocence and disavowing the attacker, all dressed in the garb of a less threatening body.

However, by imbricating children, the Walk takes this performance of Muslimness one step further. Statements by NMJM spokesperson Azmi indicate that “the children were more upset this time because other children had been killed” and that “they wanted to show solidarity and be part of society” (Lodge). Here, is Azmi speaking for NMJM’s children? Is this a carefully crafted statement in which he presents the message of Muslim innocence that NMJM wants to convey, through the vector of children? Is this evidence of an adultist tendency to speak *for* children rather than to center their voices? Indeed, none of the videos or news pieces about the walk have any quotes or statements from children involved, even if the event was called the *Children’s Peace Walk*. Similarly, NMJM’s livestream of the Walk did not involve conversation with any children. And, religious leaders’ statements undermined the idea that the Walk belonged to the children: witness Imam Azmi’s declaration that “*we are taking* all the

students” to the Arena (North Manchester Jamé Masjid; italics added) and others indicating that “we organised the walk for our students” (Misbahi quoted in Lodge).

Thus, through the symbolic rather than actual centering of children, the Children’s Peace Walk problematically conveyed a youthful Muslimness: innocent, blameless, and nonthreatening. This blamelessness was then leveraged to create an image that could map onto British Muslimness more broadly, so much so that the Walk was cited in the first independent review of the Arena attack as an outstanding example of post-attack community mobilization (Kerslake et al. 118). By visually centering children while keeping them silent, children – as innocents – were associated with Muslimness to elevate the innocence of Muslims and Islam, serving to construct a Muslimness that feeds into rather than sidesteps or ignores problematic narratives. Muslimness as performance was thus connected to a childlike innocence that was *actively performed* and *passively presented*: active through the walking of youth, and passive because of their silence amid the media’s coverage and audiovisual documentation. In the Walk, NMJM’s children became symbolic tokens for the nonthreatening type of performance that Muslims are expected to perform after events like the Arena attack.

NMJM’s Children’s Peace Walk was a performance of Muslimness that was both highly effective and concerningly familiar. Its effectiveness came from its capacity to convey a uniform message of innocence and nonthreatening Muslimness to a Manchester and wider British public that was grieving an attack perpetrated by a man who claimed Muslimness. In staging the Walk, NMJM organizers distanced themselves from Abedi. But they did so through a concerning vector: children. By deploying Muslim children as innocent, thereby rendering Muslims on the Walk innocent by association, NMJM effectively undermined the purported innocence of children by bringing them into a problematic narrativization of what it means to be Muslim: always and forever having to defend one’s religious community against unsubstantiated vilification. Simultaneously, non-Muslim child victims of the attack were being lauded, in media statements and public narratives, as innocent victims. NMJM’s mastery of the concept of innocence struck a chord with the Walk’s observers, connecting to the innocence that so galvanized Manchester in collective mourning. Yet if innocence moved easily, from attack victim to community response, the innocence that Manchester’s Muslim children were afforded was not the same as the innocence afforded to the attack’s victims. Muslim children had to *perform* their innocence, earning it rather than simply being assumed to have it, as the attack’s victims were. Innocence and Muslimness thus intertwined to create a performance in which the nonthreatening nature of Muslim children – and Muslims, by extension – had to be demonstrated so it could be rendered true, even while other children from the same city were not called upon to engage in such a performance.

### **Not being a threat: why bother?**

Given these two examples, what does it mean to not be a threat? After the attack, Noori and NMJM’s performances involved playing with or disputing a core assumption: that the Muslim body is the terrorist body. Both Noori and the NMJM walkers surfaced specific aspects of the bodies that experienced the attack: Noori’s likeness to Abedi as a young, Brown, Muslim man with a black backpack, and the NMJM children’s likeness

to innocent child victims of the attack. In drawing attention to these likenesses, Noori and the NMJM walkers responded to the attack through their own experiences as Muslims. Yet, notably, they did not do so from the position of mourning. Rather, the attack required them to defend themselves. If mass acts of violence are often understood in terms of how the target mounts a defensive and reactionary response, Noori and NMJM's actions demonstrate how these types of attacks have multiple types of victims and their varied strategies for survival. Noori and the NMJM walkers were differently victimized, compelled to perform a particular type of presence that primarily highlighted their Muslimness rather than their sorrow, through the less threatening Asian and child body. As Muslims in Manchester, neither Noori nor the NMJM community were afforded a time to reflect, remember, mourn, or memorialize, privileges that were public for much of the rest of the city.

Noori and the NMJM walkers thus offer a clear response to the question that Dabashi asks: "Can Muslims mourn Manchester?" The answer, it would seem, is no. Dabashi confirms: "Muslims as Muslims are collectively identified with those murderers, and therefore as Muslims, they are not admitted into the moral domain and the ethical spectrum of those who are mourning the consequences of such heinous crimes." Noori and NMJM's actions betray an implicit understanding of their limited ethical position, in which it is not possible for Manchester's Muslims to be part of the city's collective experience of mourning. Instead, they are on the outside looking in, only able to demonstrate their upset through less threatening Asian and child bodies that both grieve and are afraid: grief at the loss of fellow humans and fear of what might happen to them or other Muslims if they do not differentiate from Abedi.

This fear reveals the uncertain ambivalence embedded in Muslim responses to such events. It is a fear described by performance poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan as the moments in which "my mother texts me *too* after BBC news alerts," asking "Are you safe? Let me know you're home okay?" out of concern for whether Manzoor-Khan is "safe from the incident, yes / but also safe from the after-effects" (17; italics in original). Doubt and ambiguity are embedded in Muslim responses to such moments, at the basic level of hoping and praying that they themselves are and will remain safe. Has my daughter been caught up in the event, Manzoor-Khan's mother wonders? Is she safe? And if she is, will she stay that way? Or will she escape one violence, only to fall victim to another? Noori and the NMJM walkers' performances take a similar position. These are performances of survival.

Such performances require emotional creativity. As I watch videos of Noori and the NMJM walkers, feelings move over my body: goosebumps asserting themselves, eyes filling with tears, tides rising in my chest, and more. Part of this is because I am a Brown, Muslim man who has been vilified by the same narratives that Noori and NMJM attempt to distance themselves from: the first time I was called a terrorist was the day after 9/11, as an elementary-school student in a public-school computer lab where I was learning how to type. Not much has changed in the intervening 20-some years. Watching Noori and the NMJM walkers perform recalls feelings of guilt, shame, and outsidership that I felt as a child.

But I am also human, someone who is both touched by the thoughtful curatorial hands that shaped these performances and angered by the need for children to perform innocence of something that has nothing to do with them. Both sets of performances struck

an affective chord with their audience, a group that Smith has defined as “a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense” (19). The trouble is that, to British audiences, these performances *make sense* for Muslims to undertake. As demonstrated by the applause afforded to the NMJM walkers and the comments Noori received, the performances do not only feed into narratives about Muslims; they also *emotionally* keep Muslims in their place. The actors undertaking these performances tapped into their audiences’ feelings to surface a feel-good factor: *those Muslims over there aren’t so bad*. Noori and the NMJM walkers’ performances are thus attuned to the emotional registers of their environs. This is necessary. In post-attack Manchester, failure to do so risks the emotional and physical safety and security of Muslims and their bodies.

A cynical reading of my attention to affect might characterize Noori and NMJM’s performances as manipulative: that British Muslims are attempting to emotionally influence the rest of the country by performing innocence after such events. Perhaps they are. But if they are, it is because they have been forced to. The fact remains: British Muslims would not need to be so creative with their performances of Muslimness or so attuned to the emotional proclivities and sensitivities of British publics after an event like the Arena attack if the British state, press, and public was not creating a context that imagines Britishness and Muslimness as fundamentally incompatible. Indeed, the ongoing vilification of Muslimness in the UK, particularly heightened after such events, can be likened to a continually traumatic experience for British Muslims that results in a trauma response. Here, I follow social worker Resmaa Menakem definition of a trauma response: “react [ions] to present events in ways that seem wildly inappropriate, overly charged, or otherwise out of proportion” that “can become embedded in the body as standard ways of surviving and protecting itself” (8).

This is exactly the case for British Muslim post-attack performances. It may seem “overly charged” for a young man to blindfold himself and wait in public to see if someone will hit him or hug him, exposing his body to potential harm to exonerate himself and his faith from crimes that neither have committed. It is perhaps “wildly inappropriate” for schoolchildren to parade themselves on city streets to show that they are not a threat to others, simply because they have a particular faith. These are behaviors that, on the surface, are “out of proportion.” Yet, they demonstrate how Muslims have “embedded in the body” performance techniques and tactics that turn choreographies of nonviolence and innocence into “standard ways of surviving and protecting” themselves. These choreographies are then lauded and celebrated because of the extreme link made in Britain between the Muslim body and the terrorist body. This vicious loop is one of the few ways in which, after such events, British Muslims can survive.

## Closing

In performances of Muslimness, affect and effect manifest differently. But often, a single type of choreography is present: that of innocence and nonthreateningness. My own performance and the others considered herein demonstrate how Muslims in Britain regularly and routinely negotiate the sociopolitical narrative that links Muslim and terrorist bodies, links that have their problematic roots in soils as diverse as racism, Orientalist exoticization, imperialism, Euro-American military adventurism, the CIA’s



financial and materiel support for the *mujahideen* in the late 1970s, policies that govern immigration and attempt counterterrorism, and the manipulation of public opinion through the complicity of Britain's tabloid press. To survive amid this overwhelming and intertwined onslaught, which particularly surfaces as a narrative of suspicion after a violent criminal attack is perpetrated by a Muslim against non-Muslims, British Muslims must undertake deft negotiations. These deft negotiations maneuver Muslim bodies through a minefield of problematic discourses and histories that structure and shape their lives, leveraging less threatening Asian and child bodies to reduce the fear factor associated with Muslims. They are creative performances that are attuned to both affect and effect, even while they hypervisibilize Muslimness and put Muslim bodies on display, risking further harm. But there is a tradeoff: Muslims who undertake these performances in post-attack contexts tend to be left alone, maintaining their existence, survival, and – perhaps surprisingly – anonymity in the British public sphere.

Mastering how to not be a threat, therefore, is an essential skill for the twenty-first-century British Muslim, one that is learned and honed at a young age. Yet unlike attending an acting school or conservatory, in which the consequences of failing to perform to requisite standards are relatively low, the sociopolitical stakes of a British Muslim failing to perform innocence and nonthreateningness after such an event are much higher: suspicion, criminalization, deportation, violence, inability to survive, and more. British society suspects Muslimness for its mere existence, for merely being. The existence of British Muslim post-attack performances of innocence, therefore, are a damning indictment of the state of the British nation – a purportedly multicultural and open society – and how it perceives of and relates to those who are racialized as criminal and rendered religiously as peripheral. Perhaps that, in and of itself, is the real threat that needs to not be.

## Notes

1. Portions of this essay can also be found in my book *Making Muslimness: Race, Religion, and Performance in Contemporary Manchester*, forthcoming with Routledge. I'm grateful for the publisher's permission to reproduce the relevant sections in this essay. I am also grateful to Les Gray for their feedback on this work, as well as the two anonymous peer reviewers who sharpened this essay.
2. Weed is illegal for recreational use in the UK.
3. Of course, such performances did not originate with the Arena attack, as discussed below.
4. Aiming to prevent people from being drawn into terrorist activity, Prevent depends on public sector employees in health, education, and social services to refer individuals whom they suspect of extremist mentality or activity to Prevent's deradicalization program. Referrals have disproportionately targeted Muslims and communities of color (O'Toole et al.). Prevent has thus been characterized as "demonising Muslim schoolchildren" (Khaleeli) and lacking a scientific evidence base ("Anti-Radicalisation Strategy"). After an independent review in 2019 and the release of updated guidance in 2021, Prevent's disproportionate focus on "Islamic extremists" rather than "the white supremacist ideology of extreme right-wing groups" is firmly ensconced in policy (Home Office), despite British police reporting that the UK's "fastest growing terror threat" is from "the far Right" ("Anti-Terrorism Statistics").
5. The British press is particularly bad. A voluminous critical discourse analysis of all articles published in British newspapers from 2000 to 2009 demonstrated that the British media routinely portrays Islam and its adherents "as causes for concern, if not sources of threat" (Baker et al. 65).



6. I take a broad view of performance, by which I mean digital or embodied enactments that incorporate one or multiple audiences, performers, and spaces. Other performances by Muslims responding to the Arena attack include hosting interfaith iftars during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting (Wood); refusing to hold funeral prayers for Abedi (Rose); attending counterprotests against far-right demonstrators (*BBC News*); and performing spoken word poetry (Manzoor-Khan).
7. Muslims of all backgrounds greet one another with salaam, which is understood to be universal. In the Qur'an, this greeting is also described as the one that angels will offer to righteous souls entering heaven (16:32; 39:73).
8. I make this claim based on my work with the Royal Exchange, which included conversations with various staff members while being commissioned during my fieldwork to write a monologue commemorating the 70th anniversary of Partition.

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