

**Arabian Knights:  
Punk Islam and Selected Works of Michael Muhammad Knight**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an analysis of Michael Muhammad Knight's works with a particular focus on *The Taqwacores*, *Blue-Eyed Devil*, *Osama Van Halen*, *Impossible Man*, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*, and *Tripping with Allah*. It differs from earlier critical writing on Knight by taking a Bakhtinian approach to his ground-breaking first novel *The Taqwacores* and its attempt to open a dialogue on reforming American Islam, focusing on Knight's relationship to the Beats and their often overlooked Islamic discourses as his ideal model for this artistic/social reform, and tracing a shift in his work from reformist, documentary fiction to self-focused, "cool" autobiography. It argues that what enables Knight to initiate a punk reading of Islam, to cut-up the Quran, and to prescribe ayahuasca (a psychoactive vine native to Amazonian Peru) to pilgrims going to Mecca is his interpretation of the famous statement attributed to Hassan Sabbah: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted." Meanwhile, Knight's approach differs from that of many writers from Rabelais and Dostoyevsky to Nietzsche and Burroughs who have cited or paraphrased this statement. While these writers describe how devastating it would be to live in a godless world where everything is permitted with no hereafter, Knight stresses a vague "coolness" in Sabbah's statement which he uses to guide his own style of living. This is a criticism, not of his belief, but of its consequences. What is absent in Knight's works is a consideration of the matter of death, and this absence opens a space in which everything is permitted since there would be no final judgment. Moreover, although Knight has successfully brought some marginalized narratives of Islam to public attention, his disrespect towards mainstream, middle class Muslims, whether orthodox or progressive, in his recent works closes off the dialogue which seemed to open with the publication of his first book.

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To my dear mother and father

## Chapter 1 Introduction

“The United States can save Islam.” (Knight, *The Taqwacores* 72)

How can the United States save Islam? In *La lumière vient de l'Occident: Le réenchancement du monde et la pensée nomade* (*The Light Comes from the Occident: The Re-enchantment of the World and the Nomadic Thinking*), the Iranian comparative philosopher Dariush Shayegan argues that the geographical/ontological Occident is both the origin and grave of modernity, and hence that the upcoming shift in the direction of the spirit of the age will be essentially spiritual. Citing the words of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, “only the spear that smote you can heal your wound,” Shayegan believes it is the West, and North America in particular, that has both the wound and the spear of colonialism in its hand. He then comes to the conclusion that “if there is any light, it will come from the Occident” (22). But how shall one detect this illuminating light, distinguishing it from imitations, given that many contemporary North American spiritual movements often have hybrid characteristics derived from traditions from Zen Buddhism to Native American mythology. It is not sufficient to describe other traditions, whether kindheartedly or antagonistically, as “cool,”<sup>1</sup> revolutionary, or dangerous. Shayegan warns that

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<sup>1</sup> The term “cool” is used in this thesis in the way Knight himself uses it: an empty, unidentified signifier which justifies the authenticity of anything Knight personally and subjectively endorses. Marshall McLuhan uses the term to distinguish “hot media” (e.g. radio) from “cool media” (e.g. telephone) on the basis of the audience's level of participation (McLuhan 162). However, Knight appears to use the term in its colloquial, slang connotations meaning attractive, superior, or unproblematic. The *OED* (Oxford English Dictionary, Third Ed., 2008) refers to two such uses: the first was by African-Americans in the jazz age as a term of approval; the second uses it in a slightly less strident way as an endorsement of that which is satisfactory or acceptable. Interestingly, the first example for this second usage is in Kerouac's *On the Road: The Original Scroll* in which it is used to refer to the caution of a marijuana dealer from whom Sal Paradise buys marijuana which turns out to be fake (189). In Knight's usage there may be a

understanding the spirit's territory is possible only by bringing the other into dialogue. This thesis seeks to examine Shayegan's critique in a consideration of an emerging American novelist, autobiographer, and cultural critic, Michael Muhammad Knight. It focuses on "Punk Islam," a term initiated by Knight in his debut novel *The Taqwacores* (2004), which not only connotes a recent religious revivalist phenomenon in the United States but also functions as an umbrella term representing Knight's fragmentary, personal journey to find a "cool," spectacular (re)reading of Islam in the context of post-9/11 America. According to Anna McGinty, though extensive surveys has been done on the demographics and dynamics of Muslim communities in 21<sup>st</sup>-century North America, less attention has been given to "the political strategies of self-representations and how local initiatives connect to and assist national rhetoric on Muslim identity" (2958). McGinty focuses on those self-representing narratives that have constituted "mainstream" American Islam which follows "the relational process of assimilation" or "making sameness" (2959); however, the works of Knight—an American white convert—unfold a distinctive narrative emphasizing subcultural American values (e.g. punk, drugs, pedophilia, professional wrestling, superheroes) that he believes to be illuminating and capable of healing both Islam and America. Knight is considering whether American Islam is manufactured and illegitimate as a Las Vegas Mecca or "*The Arabian Nights*" theme park he encounters in Florida (*Blue-Eyed* 132). He is pursuing the possibility of a reformed American Islam, but everywhere he encounters romantic myths and stereotypes about Muslims, fanciful and horrifying, reinforced by reactions to 9/11.

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certain "retro" quality, the return of a popular slang term of the 1960s and 1970s revived in the 21st century, but without any clear countercultural markers.

Born in 1977, Michael Muhammad Knight is a Muslim American writer who has for the most part tried to reconcile the two apparently distinct “Muslim” and “American” segments of his identity. Having been raised Roman Catholic, Knight converted to Islam in his adolescence after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the life story of the famous Afro-American convert to Islam. Knight’s attempt at reconciliation is generally a reaction to the events of 9/11 and the resulting atmosphere of distrust in which “Muslimness” and “Americanness” became stereotypically represented as two paradoxical discourses (Hassan 89). Knight’s writing career has had two main parts. First, his debut novel *The Taqwacores* and to a lesser degree its sequel *Osama Van Halen* (2009) are examples of Knight the novelist who has inspired some members of a youthful generation to form real Taqwacore bands, as well as being the core source material for two motion pictures. Second, he is openly a follower of Wallace Fard Muhammad and the sect of Five Percenters (or the Nation of Gods and Earths) which is a subset of the American Nation of Islam propagating that only 5% of poor, righteous, African-American men know the truth. Knight’s other works are manifestations of his own religious beliefs and his attempts to understand and explain himself.

The scholarly reception of Knight’s body of work remains somewhat limited and it is usually restricted to a consideration of his first novel *The Taqwacores*, though there is an ever-growing volume of reflection and reaction in the twittersphere and blogosphere and in the pages of some of Knight’s most recent highly self-conscious, self-reflexive works.<sup>2</sup> In “Infinite Hijra: Migrant Islam, Muslim American Literature and the Anti-Mimesis of *The Taqwacores*,” Salah D. Hassan reads Knight’s debut novel through the lens of “migrant Islam” while defining the

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<sup>2</sup> Increasingly Knight is engaged in an intertextual dialogue with his critics and readers within the pages of his later works, that also offer incidental commentary on his methods of composition, intentions, and future plans. He often refers to articles or theses on his works (e.g. *Tripping* 135).



term not only as the literature of the Muslim immigrants, but rather as “the movement of ideas, values, words, and styles of thought that are productively at home with new technologies and emerging social environments that give rise to new forms of Muslimness beyond the adobe of Islam” (87). By reinforcing the aggressive, antagonistic aspect of the novel towards the mainstream, middle class Muslim Americans, Hassan recognizes Knight’s text as an alternative Islamic fanaticism that “does not reject Americanness, but rather sees in it the possibilities of subverting all other forms of Islam and also their antithesis” (97). Although Hassan has successfully shown how *The Taqwacores* is Knight’s “cultural simulation of otherness” (98), his use of Oscar Wilde’s concept of anti-mimesis lacks precision. Wilde’s understanding of life as an imitation of art helps to explain the emergence of real Punk Islam bands after the publication of *The Taqwacores*, but it overlooks the novel’s function as an intertext in dialogue with different forms of art and life, specifically American counterculture literature.

In “A Brain Full of Contraband: The Islamic Gonzo Writing of Michael Muhammad Knight,” Brian J. Bowe places Knight’s writing beside Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism. Although Bowe’s approach correctly traces Thompson’s influence on Knight’s mode of writing which is largely autobiographical, as well as its embedding in Americana, it rarely touches upon Knight’s reading (and re-reading) of Islam through a genealogy of figures that—unlike Thompson himself, whom he does cite—Knight recognizes as saints or at least teachers, namely Wallace Fard Muhammad, Peter Lamborn Wilson, and William S. Burroughs. Thompson’s gonzo writing resembles Burroughs’s in that they both recognize the writer as a camera or a recording instrument, what Burroughs calls “insect intelligence” (qtd. in Baldwin 155). Nonetheless, to a larger degree Burroughs is a teacher to Knight showing him not only *how* to

look, but rather *where* to look; and that is in a general sense the world of esotericism connected to drugs and sexuality.

Among the four Master's theses on the works of Knight, "Anarca-Islam" by Mohamed Abdou and "Muslim Rock in the United States: A Social History of the Taqwacores" by Sarah Siltanen Hosman are most relevant here.<sup>3</sup> Abdou reads Knight alongside the works of Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey) as a part of his greater project, calling Knight and Wilson Muslim anarchists who have followed an anti-capitalist approach to break the myth of Islam as homogenous and monolithic (16). While Abdou's effort to read Knight alongside one of his past masters is promising, it is limited only to *The Taqwacores* and does not include Knight's later works. Sarah Hosman has done valuable ethnographic research on the music scene of Punk Islam known as Taqwacore. By doing interviews with the musicians and band members within this subculture and its representations in the media, and not limiting herself to Knight's texts, Hosman demonstrates how Taqwacore as a subculture and a subgenre of punk rock has reconciled Islam and American popular culture, allowing members to manage their hybrid identity by gaining inspiration from Knight's first novel. Moreover, Hosman argues the Taqwacore subculture differs from that of heavy metal bands working in Middle Eastern countries (as described in Mark Levine's *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*), and she interrogates what the hybrid quality of being a North American Muslim Musician means.

Most of the critical literature on Knight and Punk Islam is limited to *The Taqwacores*. In "From Muslim Punks to Taqwacore: An Incomplete History of Punk Islam," while calling

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<sup>3</sup> The other works are "Formations of Antidoxy: Michael Muhammad Knight, Progressive Muslims, and the Islam of the Self" by William Ian Guthrie, and "Desacralization and Critiques to Islamic Orthodoxy in Michael Muhammad Knight's Taqwacores" by Wawan Eko Yulianto.

Taqwacore “one American version of [P]unk Islam” and a kind of “Frankenstein’s monster,” Anthony Fiscella draws a historical map of relations between punk and Islam and determines three chronological waves in the development of Punk Islam (278, 256). The first wave, starting in the late 70s, witnessed the development of “nonreligious or antireligious punk” produced by those with a Muslim background (e.g. Alien Kulture); the second wave, beginning in the 80s, involves “punks converting to Islam” or Muslim punks propagating their religion without “directing an explicit challenge to Islam” (e.g. Aki Nawaz); the third wave’s best example is Knight’s *The Taqwacores* which Fiscella characterises as “the re-imagination of Islam through punk eyes and the challenging of religious authority” (260-61). Although there is “no common theology” among the characters in *The Taqwacores*, as Fiscella argues, there is a central rule that “no one can exclude someone else... for their religious beliefs or practices” (276). While this argument might be correct regarding Knight’s first novel, his later works manifest his belief that only five percent of people know the truth; thus, he is excluding the rest from being righteous. In “Politics and Islam in the United States: The Taqwacore Approach,” Aline Macke describes the message of Taqwacore as “infrapolitical,” or providing the means “which enable them to express specific [social and political] views” (55). While Macke’s analysis of the lyrics of Taqwacore bands (e.g. The Kominas) is promising, she fails to analyze the message of *The Taqwacores* and its connections to the rest of Knight’s body of work.

This thesis is an analysis of six important, representative texts within Knight’s body of work, an example of post-9/11 Muslim American literature, consisting of two novels (*The Taqwacores* and *Osama Van Halen*), an autobiography (*Impossible Man* [2009]), a memoir travel book (*Blue-Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey through Islamic America* [2006]), and two essay-style collections (*William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran* [2012], and *Tripping with Allah: Islam,*

*Drugs, and Writing* [2013]).<sup>4</sup> The thesis differs from those earlier critical readings not only because of its larger scope, but also because it takes a Bakhtinian approach to *The Taqwacores* to show Knight's attempt to open a dialogue on reforming American Islam, using the Beats and their often overlooked Islamic discourses as a model for this artistic/social reform, and tracing a shift in his work from reformist, documentary fiction to self-focused, "cool" autobiography. Though Bakhtin's theoretical framework demonstrates how Knight's debut novel functions as a polyphonic work of fiction which opened up a dialogic space so that several different narratives of Islam (some marginalized, some mainstream) come into a hybrid confrontation, the thesis does not limit itself to Bakhtin and seeks an analysis of Knight's "cool" Islam by working at the intersections within his works, considering his own commentary on these works while tracing some of his main sources of inspiration. It argues that what enables Knight to initiate a punk reading of Islam, to cut-up the Quran, and to prescribe ayahuasca to pilgrims going to Mecca is his interpretation of the words of some past masters, such as the statement attributed to Hassan Sabbah: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted." Knight, indifferent to the consequences of everything being legitimate, stresses a vague "coolness" in Sabbah's statement which he uses to guide his own style of living and which influences the direction of his later work. This is a criticism, not of his belief, but of its possible consequences. What is absent in Knight's works is a consideration of the matter of death as a result of his growing, celebrity-fueled ego, and this absence opens a space in which everything becomes allowed since there would be no final judgment. Moreover, although Knight has successfully brought some marginalized narratives of

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<sup>4</sup> Knight's other three books are not discussed in this thesis, because their main concerns are repeated in his other six texts. *Journey to the End of Islam* (2009) is the story of Knight's pilgrimage to Mecca, while he has written two specific books on Five Percenters: *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York* (2009), and *Why I Am A Five Percenter* (2011).

Islam to public attention, his disrespect towards mainstream, middle class Muslims, whether orthodox or progressive, in his recent works closes off the dialogue which seemed to open with the publication of his zine-style first book.

Knight is writing in the post-9/11 period in which mainstream American perceptions were inflamed and everything relating to Islam was directly associated with terrorism on American soil. Visiting Ground Zero in *Blue-Eyed Devil*, he notes that “For enough people this was the whole of Islam’s story, the first thing they’ll think of when you say ‘Islam in America’ and nothing will ever outweigh it” (190). These perceptions, however, are only addressed incidentally in Knight’s works, and particularly in his later, autobiographical reflections in *Blue-Eyed Devil*. He appears unaware of a somewhat deep-seated anxiety that even Jack Kerouac mentions in *On the Road*, when Dean Moriarty in one of his odd costumes, “a sweater wrapped around his ears,” says “we were a band of Arabs coming in to blow up New York” (117). In general, Knight is more focused on uncovering a genealogy of Islamic saints and sages: “My books explore the neglected corners of American Islam, the heresies, the fringe sects” (*William* 103). He separates incidental or “social” prohibitions from more doctrinaire heresies regarding the performance of everyday life, and locates the origins of a distinctively American Islam in the figure of Wallace Fard Muhammad. Even though Knight considered going to join radical military forces fighting for Chechen independence when he was in Pakistan for a few months as a teenager in 1994 on a short course of Islamic study, this is an isolated and passing fascination. He does not offer his opinion on 9/11 directly, though later “[i]n my half-asleep dreams I wondered how long it would take a suicide-bomber to die after his bomb went off,” and in a melancholy moment he writes a poem about praying on the American flag “with a chunk of World Trade concrete as my turba,” a piece of soil or clay from a holy site (*Blue-Eyed* 29, 69). It

appears, however, that Knight's main concern becomes a multi-faceted "Jihad against yourself" as Amazing Ayyub says in a different context in *Osama Van Halen* though Ayyub's primary obsession is hyper-masculine stereotypes ("morals aside, at least respect the balls") (19, 27). He participates in a stunt ostensibly designed to force Hollywood "to give a positive depiction of Muslims, just one movie where we're not these two-dimensional Al-Qaeda stereotypes" (34).

Knight does become involved with the seemingly homogeneous American reaction to everything Islamic post-9/11 in a different fashion. He becomes personally involved in this reaction, because he is asked by the media to be the face and voice of radical, youthful Islam who will somehow help to explain the Punk Islam generation, amid a proliferation of texts promising to make comprehensible "the great post-9/11 something-something..." (*Blue-Eyed* 206). As he says contemptuously in *Blue-Eyed Devil*, "it seems that every corner of Western media has a throbbing boner for Muslims, and Muslims are stepping over each other to present themselves as redeemers of the Good Islam or champions of the New Islam"; ever the entrepreneur, from his promotion of backyard wrestling to selling his own texts, Knight considers that "someone ought to become a millionaire while the getting is good" (207). He mocks his fashioning as the "*enfant terrible* of American Muslim writers," but he is prepared to exploit it (206). It appears that Knight is not really engaged with perceptions of 9/11—except to note in passing regarding "George W. Bush[']s... outreach to Muslims" that he prefers he stop "bombing people"—save primarily as a golden opportunity to promote himself and his wares (*Blue-Eyed* 157). With his fascination for the bizarre and dramatic, he gives perhaps the greatest attention to the opinions of his father, a diagnosed schizophrenic. During one of their rare visits, the subject arises, and "Dad said that the attacks were spiritually linked to a mob hit that occurred during the World Trade Center's construction. A man had been pushed down an elevator shaft and stayed at

the bottom for the next thirty years, generating bad karma that resulted in the towers' destruction"; his father's hallucinatory perceptions go still further, involving his profound misogyny and suspicions of liberalism or innovation in any form (51). Knight's father says that "9/11 had as its root... an epidemic of sex-change operations taking place in the country" that destroys the individual's "dreams" and "self-identification" after which "they implant his mind with suicidal impulses," and "while in this state of crisis with new female genitalia, he finds himself seduced by what I call the Parasitical Appendages of Islam" (51-52). Reactions to 9/11 join Knight's personal phantasmagoria and present an opportunity for self-promotion.

Like Sal Paradise, the Kerouac character in *On the Road*, who at the beginning of the novel discovers a muse and subject in Dean Moriarty, Knight is an author in search of a character, or at least a subject, and he eventually becomes both his own character and his subject. While his attraction to Islam does not appear to be cynical and he isn't trying to create a DIY Islam, he is a man of diverse, diffuse, and reckless religious and creative passions. His mother tells him that she has always recognized his stubborn quixotic enthusiasm, his religious advisors in Pakistan warn him against the dangers of unregulated, heterogeneous reading, and Knight himself acknowledges that he carries the predisposition for schizophrenia that afflicted his father, and nearly led to his father's attempted murder of his mother and Knight himself before their escape when he was two (he calls himself the child of rape by a white supremacist). Though he is a young convert to Islam and is aware of being subject to a text-based fascination lacking the "heart or culture or family tenderness, which is why we often go nuts" (*Osama* 69), he pursues all manner of heterodox, esoteric reading on Islam (including Peter Lamborn Wilson's endorsement of "spiritual" pedophilia), testing the boundaries of faith, by at one point burying, cutting up, and even urinating on the Quran, citing religious precedent but also hoping to

provoke a display of anger from Allah. Inevitably, the discussion of the nature and severity of violations of Islamic rules regarding bodily purity and doctrinal orthodoxy becomes a major subject of his discussions in all of his encounters with other young Muslims, whether converts or not.

While he actively pursues a male genealogy of sages, saints, and teachers in his quixotic quest for the origin of American Islam, he also follows a more eclectic agenda. He appears driven to test the outer limits of his faith and his gendered identity at every opportunity by a wide range of sexual—often masturbatory or demeaning and exploitative—experiences, retelling the same event, such as his first *Victoria Secret Catalogue*-inspired masturbation in *The Taqwacores* and at length in *Invisible Man*'s "Prostrations and Ejaculations" (*Taqwacores* 198, *Impossible* 73-87). He is finally driven to experiment with hallucinogenic drugs, partly inspired by William Burroughs and his quest for yage, for their potential spiritual insights but also because he hopes they will allow him to explore his own gendered identity (again possibly inspired by Burroughs's experiments) and his anxiety that masculinity is directly connected to the code of abusive violence and terror embodied in his father whom he seeks to understand (*Tripping* 160). After a number of false starts, in an intense and transformative drug experience, he first lusts after the figure of the Prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima, listening carefully to her words of wisdom. He then metamorphoses into Fatima himself and engages in extended, ecstatic sexual encounters with Ali, Fatima's husband. In another gender-bending episode in Knight's writing, Yusef Ali in *The Taqwacores* dons the burqa (253). This transformative, humbling event ends *Tripping with Allah*, and though Knight comes to regard it as denoting his vocation for writing and scholarship, as his "veil" is now "text," its ultimate impact on Knight is uncertain (*Tripping* 248).



Knight's reformist sentiments and motives in *The Taqwacores*—"We have a chance here [in the U.S.] to do something great" (74)—escape the bounds of the novel genre in its "sequel" *Osama Van Halen* which begins as a metafictional work largely about a novelist by the name of "Michael Muhammed Knight" who has written a novel *Muhammad Entering from the Rear*. In chapter two of *Osama Van Halen*, Knight breaks the bounds of the more conventional postmodern novel, and the authorial narrator begins explaining the real-life shift that happened when *The Taqwacores* itself escaped the bounds of fictional representation and was read as factual documentary and imitated in an Islamic punk scene and punk bands named after the novel's bands. At this point, Knight begins the main preoccupations of his next four texts. The first preoccupation is a fragmentary and ongoing reception history of *The Taqwacores* and a rehearsal of its movement from self-published zine-style document to published novel, and his work at promoting, distributing, and selling it. The second preoccupation, related to the first, is a somewhat obsessive pursuit of the trappings of underground cult celebrity and online fame in casual hook-ups around the country with female fans often with immigrant, Islamic backgrounds. The final preoccupation is an ongoing road trip to locate the sites of the origin of Islam in America (and especially "fringe" Islam and specifically sites relating to Fard), ending with his growing fame as a representative of new, radical youth Islam at conferences and his enrolment as a graduate student of Islamic studies.

## Chapter 2 Punk Islam and *The Taqwacores*

“The spiral-bound taqwacore fantasy was supposed to be my farewell to Islam, a vomiting-up of all my religious failure... but then the book introduced me to some real-life Muslim misfits and I found a place for myself.” (Knight, *Osama* 24-25)

Knight’s first novel, the 250-page *The Taqwacores* (which has been turned into two movies, a documentary by the Montreal-based director Omar Majeed in 2009, and a feature film in 2010), has thoroughly different characteristics than his other works. The novel, which was intended to be Knight’s swan song as a Muslim (according to the above epigraph) but later became known as his “groundbreaking” masterpiece and “a manifesto for the Muslim punk movement,”<sup>5</sup> is a narrative of a group of young American-based Muslims who individually look “like an outer-space carnival, each an epic in his [or her] own right with comic book haircuts and unknown band names” (*Taqwacores* 220). After this novel, there is a dramatic shift in Knight’s approach. While *The Taqwacores* attempts to document selected marginalized, reformist narratives of the Muslim community in North America—constructed by those who “were ready to change the world. No matter how drunk and stupid everyone got” (*Taqwacores* 223)—in the form of a novel, his later works are manifestations of his own belief and reflections on his personal journey as a privileged, English-speaking, white American Muslim convert who increasingly has become

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<sup>5</sup> Praise for *The Taqwacores* is quoted on the back cover of Knight’s other books. For example, *The New York Times* has called it “*The Catcher in the Rye* for young Muslims,” according to the covers of *Journey to the End of Islam* and *Tripping with Allah*. *Newsweek* has named the novel “a manifesto for the Muslim punk movement” and *Mackean’s* has labeled it “groundbreaking,” according to the covers of *Impossible Man* and *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*.

a cult celebrity. This shift is not merely a generic one from fiction to autobiography, since even in his second novel *Osama Van Halen* it is “Michael Muhammad Knight” who has become the main protagonist, putting his ego in the spotlight because, in his own words, “he’s got a serious identity fetish” and like a wrestler “refuse[s] to ask the referee for help because that meant breaking character” (*Osama* 125, 145). In fact, Knight no longer believes in the power of novelistic discourse of which, according to Bakhtin, one of its foremost elements is the self-consciousness of different characters and the elimination of the author’s own voice. Instead, Knight has come to prefer a spontaneous, flamboyant, and self-centered style of writing that promotes himself as “the Godfather of Muslim punk” (*William* 107). He calls fiction a form of *hijab* (veil) which guards the Islamic modesty of the writer behind an invented protagonist, though he declares that he does not have any Islamic modesty left to guard (*Osama* 22-23). Though Knight has recently called his first book “immature and not really all that well-written” (“Muslim,” par. 3), *The Taqwacores* is a polyphonic work of art which “argues against the idea of a monolithic Islam” and has brought together a number of different readings of the religion, while decentralizing its perception in mainstream American popular culture (Abdou 21). *The Taqwacores* is an unsettling novel, and it is “perhaps the only contemporary work of fiction that brings together Americanness and Muslimness not in some happy hybridity, but in a destabilizing marriage of American punk culture and Islamic heterodoxy” (Hassan 89).

This chapter advances a Bakhtinian reading of *The Taqwacores*. While it is possible to investigate the novel from different perspectives, as Hassan, Abdou, Fiscella, and Hosman have done, Bakhtin is useful for various reasons. First, Bakhtin’s discursive analysis of the novel genre by means of situating the relation of the author to his or her characters illustrates Knight’s change in approach. Not only will this help us to understand Knight’s reception of his

accountable *self* as a writer, but it will also show his sense of responsibility towards the *other*. Although early in his career Knight kind-heartedly embraces the other, for instance by suggesting to “[b]e bigger. Kill ‘em [anyone who excludes you] with kindness. How the fuck are they going to hate you when you love them”; “hate” becomes more central in his works rather than “kindness” as he attacks people outside of the Five Percenter circle, a fact that undermines the promise of his reformist ambitions (*Taqwacores* 216-15). Second, as *The Taqwacores* itself is as much a fictional narrative as a tangible manifestation of American Muslims’ everyday lives, Bakhtin’s articulation of the carnivalesque helps to demonstrate the nexus between the work of art and the everyday. With this in mind, Knight’s first novel as well as some of his other works will be analyzed to trace how the author’s rise to fame has affected his approach to writing. Finally, Bakhtin’s emphasis on power relations in novelistic discourse is valuable for an understanding of *The Taqwacores*. Therefore, in order to demonstrate the carnivalesque forces at work in Knight’s first novel, I will first discuss the possibility of understanding punk as a form of carnival. In short, *The Taqwacores* has created a loose mode of carnivalesque which enables a new strategy of resistance against formal and hierarchical points of view on Islam, particularly American Islam. However, the short life span of real Taqwacore bands,<sup>6</sup> as well as Knight’s own shift and his recent displeasure with his first novel, interrogate the authenticity or effectiveness of *The Taqwacores* as a “groundbreaking,” essential text.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Wikipedia page on Taqwacore (music genre), the Canadian band Secret Trial Five, who appears in the documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, once declared “the band has been identified as being part of a genre called ‘Taqwacore,’ but they now actively reject that association... Taqwacore has caused a racist, islamophobic and sensationalist media frenzy. It has also been wrongly reported that the inspiration behind Secret Trial Five are the writings of Michael Muhammad Knight” (par. 7). Though the original source for this declaration (the band’s official website) is not available, the band has released a song on YouTube called “We’re not Taqwacore” with the lyrics: “What the fuck is a Muslim punk? / rather hang with Taliban than dick around with drunks / Muhammad wasn’t white and neither is this fight / and we weren’t birthed by Michael Knight.”

## 2.1 Punk and the Carnavalesque

“Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.”  
(Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7)

“There’s something to good punk rock that I don’t think you’ll find in any other genre quite the same way –while most shows are about celebrating the people on stage, punk shows only celebrate the crowd.” (Knight, *Blue-Eyed* 175)

The novel genre is a form of utterance that describes the paradoxical characteristics of human language, drawing a constellation of different powerful forces in collision with each other. According to Bakhtin, having a narrative and being fictional are not fundamental elements of the novel genre; instead, the novel is a space where different voices and ideologies interact. In other words, any text that utters diverse voices and ideologies simultaneously, with no preference of one over the others, would be called a novel. Such a quality can be achieved when a text decentralizes any single-sided perspectives and enables the centrifugal forces to criticize even the text itself. In Bakhtin’s words, “parodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles occupy an essential place in the novel” (*Dialogic* 6). To some extent, the same argument is applicable to carnival as well. Bakhtin believes carnival to be a living novel. During the medieval period, carnivals were an opportunity to resist official feasts and to satirize the centripetal powers, above all the church. One of the main characteristics of the official feasts, according to Bakhtin, is their perception of time; they look back on the past and use it to consecrate the present. They are “the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and

indisputable” (*Rabelais* 9), and that is why they seem monolithically serious. Carnivals, on the other hand, as opposed to the official feasts, are ordinarily based on a grotesque laughter, and celebrate “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (*Rabelais* 10). Thus, the carnivalesque can be marked as an interruption in the status quo and a suspension of all “hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (*Rabelais* 10).

Comparing the two passages by Bakhtin and Knight at the beginning of this section and noting their surprising similarity in approach, we may employ Bakhtin’s theory of carnival to analyze contemporary forms of popular culture, particularly popular music. Alison Halsall, for example, has applied Bakhtinian concepts to the famous “South Park” animation series. However, there are also works that have directly focused on the carnivalesque and grotesque realism in relation to the field of popular music. In “Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism,” which is the outcome of a concert fieldwork study in America, Karen Bettez Halnon has emphasized the genre’s social position as a site of cultural contestation. Halnon opposes the assessments which consider heavy metal to be a non-political cultural form reinforcing alienation, and she categorizes the genre under “grotesque realism” in light of Bakhtin’s theory. She insists that although outsiders may count carnival and its rebelling nature against everything that is “moral, sacred, decent, or civilized” as alienation, carnival is in fact “a dis-alienating, liminal utopia of human freedom, creativity, and egalitarianism” in the eye of its insiders (35). Furthermore, the grotesque carnival is not merely that which is “disgusting or obscene in a limited sense,” but a potentially “limitless challenge to the structural and moral orders of everyday life” (36).

While heavy metal and punk historically may have divergent features, they both advance an anti-mainstream critique of social norms and the popular music scene. Hence, both may be

put in the same category of centrifugal power forces which try to resist the established status quo, like medieval carnivals. Mikita Hoy, for instance, points out that “as the harbinger of carnival, the punk, like the clown, is granted... the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage” (772). Additionally, in “Anarchy in the UK: 70s British Punk as Bakhtinian Carnival,” Peter Jones expands carnival’s application to punk itself. Jones suggests that “there are not only strong affinities and parallels between many aspects of punk and carnival, but that the former can to varying degrees be legitimately considered as a reincarnation of the latter” (25). He considers Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as a utopian desire to become momentarily liberated from the limitations of the established truth, and argues that punk manages to demonstrate anarchic, libertarian, and utopian tendencies without ever having a consistent ideology or systematic political project. Moreover, he asserts that punk, like carnival, is “fluid, heterogeneous, and transient, marked by irreverence, dissent, and symbolic resistance through music, dress and behavior,” and it breaks the norms “by demystifying creativity and the production process with its egalitarian message of anyone-can-do-it, a rhetoric of amateurism, raucous style, and inclusion of new and often taboo-breaking topics” (28). Relating Bakhtinian dialogue and the grotesque body, Jones considers 70s British punk as the voice of disaffected and marginalized working class youth in opposition to monologic official discourses.

Knight’s Punk Islam similarly aims at voicing some marginalized narratives of Islam in North America, and it challenges the mainstream, middle class interpretations of Islam; however, the complexity of analyzing punk as a genuine form of resistance in the post-9/11 era lies in its fast-growing integral connection to media images and representations—as 9/11 itself is a highly representational incident—unlike the Middle Ages carnivals and even 70s punk. At its best, *The*

*Taqwacores* created a mode of resistance at the moment of its zine-style self-publication when it was only loosely representing a reality beyond its fictional characters; but from this moment onward, especially after the publication of *Osama Van Halen* and the two movies, *The Taqwacores* has escaped the bounds of fictional representation and has been turned into—with much help from Knight—an image of the real. Thus the novel functions as a symbolic mode of resistance since it has greatly benefitted from the logic of late capitalism in regard to the matrix of marketing and advertisement, though it has many elements from different American and non-American subcultures. While punk “only celebrate[s] the crowd” according to Knight, the punk scene he has come to represent is inseparable from his own image as the founder of this so-called “movement.” Knight claims in *The Taqwacores* that “for every culture-hero living out his myth, there must be a witness willing to pass the story on” (49). As will be discussed in the following pages, *The Taqwacores* has two main characters each representing one side of Knight’s own self: the right-wing angel Yusef Ali (his name resembles Abdullah Yusef Ali, the well-known Indian translator of the Quran into English) who is narrating the story of his “culture-hero,” and the left-wing angel Jehangir whose name means “World Conqueror” and connotes a “fuckin’ Mughal king” (65-66). Even in his first novel, Knight is basically narrating himself and passing on his unique, “impossible,” and “cool” story; but the difference is that in *The Taqwacores* there are two alter-egos speaking with each other (and with other characters), while in the other, later works it is merely his huge ego narrating the story of his rise to fame as a cult celebrity.

## **2.2 What is Punk Islam?**

“Things are changing. A distinctly American Islam has already begun to take shape. Now say what you want about Islam being universal and above this of



thing, but it's not. We don't need every Muslim in the world to think and talk and dress and act the same. There's already a Saudi Islam, a Turkish Islam, a South Asian Islam and Malaysian Islam. They are different and they should be.”  
(Knight, *Blue-Eyed* 14)

This thesis distinguishes the two terms “Taqwacore” and “Punk Islam,” though they are both initiated by Knight in his first novel *The Taqwacores* and are sometimes used as synonyms (e.g. Hosman). “Taqwacore” represents the American subgenre of punk music that was named after Knight’s novel, yet there were musicians around the world who appeared to be Taqwacore but who had produced their works before the publication of *The Taqwacores* (Fiscella 257-58). However, “Punk Islam” as the main focus of this thesis refers to a certain interpretation of Islam. It is an umbrella term that connotes Knight’s own personal, “cool” (re)readings of Islam which are not only reflected in his first novel but also his other books. According to Knight, there are different versions of Islam based on different cultures and nationalities, and his Punk Islam aims to be “a distinctly American Islam” (*Blue-Eyed* 14). As will be further discussed in the next chapter, Knight has used the American Beat aesthetic as a model for his articulation of Punk Islam from the starting point of his writing career. In *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*, Knight decodes the last sentence of *The Taqwacores*, “*Sulayman hiya hatta matla ill Fajr*” (*Taqwacores* 254). He describes how he “butchered the last verse of the ninety-seventh sura (chapter of the Quran) writing out *salamun* as *sulayman*” which changes the meaning from “Peace until the rise of morn” to “Solomon until the rise of morn” (*William* 238). Knight considers this as one of his earliest cut-up experiments with the Quran under the influence of Burroughs, and asserts that “messing up the Quran in the very last line would have been the most punk thing to do” (*William* 238). This example demonstrates how Knight uses the term “punk” as an aesthetic approach

which is not limited to music or literature. Knight never explains the reason for the above experiment other than claiming it to be punk and considering it merely a “cool” thing to do in order to provoke an angry reaction from the orthodox who do not tolerate distorting the Holy Quran. Knight notes in *The Taqwacores* that “it’s only *Muslims* who use the term ‘innovation’ to mean something bad” (14); although this statement tends to generalize the reception of innovation in all other non-Islamic discourses and traditions, to some extent it is true that many, more orthodox Muslims try to avoid it. In what follows, I will examine the different connotations of the so-called “innovative” expression of Punk Islam with a focus on the characters of Knight’s first novel, along with an analysis of his sense of “coolness.” But first it is beneficial to clarify what Punk Islam is *not*.

Although “Taqwacore” has recently become a title for a trend in punk rock, like “Christian Hardcore” and “Straight Edge,” Punk Islam is not predominantly a subgenre of punk struggling to distinguish itself from other forms; it is rather primarily a subcategory of Islam, or more exactly, a type of reform movement within Islamic discourses. Knight did not document a pre-existing movement or phenomenon in *The Taqwacores*; rather, his novel ignited the first popular flame of the idea of Punk Islam which was then grasped by some other young American-based Muslims and non-Muslims who started real Taqwacore bands such as The Kominas, Vote Hezbollah, and the all-female, Toronto-based Secret Trial Five (Hosman 20-25). Knight himself distinguishes between Taqwacore and Punk Islam; while the former refers to the music scene in which “some of [the] stuff is neither Muslim nor punk,” the latter is Knight’s own African-American interpretation of Islam (*Osama* 86). Punk Islam, as described in Knight’s works, has not arisen to break the rules of punk or make punk Islamic; rather, it seeks a transformation within Islam and its formal readings. Stated differently, Punk Islam does not attempt to convert

punk rockers and make them become devoted Muslims according to sharia law; instead, it is an effort to introduce a new, punk version of Islam. If there is a need for change, it has to be a change in ideas and the way people comprehend Islam; Muslims should become aware of both the ancient and contemporary marginal narratives of their religion, and non-Muslims need to know that Islam is not a single, monolithic entity as it is often represented in the Western media.

Moreover, while Knight is inspired by Sufism in many different ways in his articulation of Punk Islam which I will discuss later in the chapter, Punk Islam and Taqwacore are not “Sufi Rock.” What the Pakistani rock band Junoon did in the 90s differs from what Knight and Taqwacore bands have tried to accomplish. Junoon was a band of musicians coming from the East, prior to 9/11, to combine elements of their own musical heritage with Western elements. Their music is often regarded as one of the first examples of Sufi Rock, a subgenre of “world” music or “world” fusion, which is designed to satisfy mainstream listeners of both cultures through a happy hybridity. Musically, however, Taqwacore is not an example of the art of fusion, since it sounds almost exactly like 70s punk rock. The difference, or Taqwacore’s unique characteristic, is the theme, the lyrics, and the ideas being manifested, as well as its aggressively DIY aesthetic.

The DIY (Do-It-Yourself) aesthetics of punk culture, as defined in *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Culture*, is “a key component of the loose aggregation of ideas and ideologies that passes for a coherent philosophy of what it means to be a true punk” (Cogan 61). DIY reflects the tendency of the artist to have absolute freedom over the direction of his or her creativity, and to take full control of all the stages of releasing a record, as well as the means of production. The DIY aesthetic is mainly apparent in the visual aspects of the sleeve and other promotional material for the record, an unusual occurrence since musician and visual designer often have two

distinctly separate roles in the record industry. When a musician controls the visual context of his or her record, such as sleeve or cover art, poster, zine, and even fashion, the result appears amateurish, exotic, and unprofessional according to mainstream aesthetics. In this regard, punk is not merely a genre of music, or a fashion trend, or even a mere lifestyle; it is rather an ideological statement, insisting that one does not need expertise or professional qualifications to enter any cultural field. Moreover, punk is a philosophy and an aesthetic in which complexity is not by nature worthier than simplicity. Although punk is mostly known as a social phenomenon which emerged in the U.K. and U.S. in the mid-70s, it is also a more general world view or cultural and political aesthetic connected to the carnivalesque. To the same extent, Punk Islam does not only refer to music.

Before its official, uncensored publication by Autonomedia in 2004, the first edition of *The Taqwacores* had been “photocopied and spiral-bound at Kinko’s, and distributed by hand, zine-style” (“Taqwacores,” par. 1).<sup>7</sup> The novel as a material object functioned as a form of underground DIY zine before it came to the public’s attention. Knight’s first book differs from his later work even on a material level; his last two books, for example, have professionally-designed covers, and they have been widely advertised through e-media. Thus, even with regard to their material production, Knight’s works have evolved, and they are no longer published in an underground, amateur style. I will discuss in the next chapter how this difference in image is reflected in the content of Knight’s recent books, and how he has abandoned the aesthetic that once had defined his work.

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<sup>7</sup> Soft Skull Press (Knight’s exclusive publisher) published a revised edition of *The Taqwacores* with no noticeable change in 2009. However, according to Autonomedia’s official website, the UK edition of the novel published by Telegram in 2007 is partially censored due to “the hypersensitive cultural environment of post-Danish cartoon Europe” (“Taqwacores,” par. 2). Knight speaks about this censorship in *Journey to the End of Islam* and describes it as “ridiculous” that “non-Muslim editors are telling a Muslim author how he can properly relate to his religion and how Muslims will interpret his work” (81).

Based on punk's DIY aesthetic, Punk Islam is a testament to the cultural and political aesthetics of amateurism in two distinctive ways. First, Knight and the members of Taqwacore bands are not Fagihis or Islamic experts; rather they present their own personal, idiosyncratic readings of Islam.<sup>8</sup> Knight states this notion directly in a poem in *Blue-Eyed Devil*: "I don't need an ayatollah / to fatwa my ass / I can do it myself" (69). From this point of view, Islam is not a monolithic, homogeneous unity, identified solely by formal Islamic discourses. However, due to Knight's growing emphasis on subjective, idiosyncratic interpretations, the solidarity of the Taqwacore scene—as represented in the documentary—has been reduced to the point where Secret Trial Five (once to be known as a Taqwacore band) compose a song declaring "We're not Taqwacore" (see footnote #6). Second, the term "punk" demonstrates their anti-mainstream position; it is the voice of marginalized people who have been dismissed by the mainstream culture of Western (and also non-Western) societies. Sarah Hosman has correctly stated that "both punk rock and Islam... put faith in or embrace their own rules and traditions as opposed to worldly or mainstream culture. A prioritization of one's own culture above the mainstream is an interesting parallel between the two" (3).

Nonetheless, Knight's works do not aim at a wide range of readers; they generally seek to gain the attention of the *insiders* who associate themselves with his Punk Islam. Even in regard to *The Taqwacores*, only a selected group of readers have access to all layers of the narrative due to its linguistic challenges. This does not mean that it is impossible for an outsider to read the novel, but it indicates that the reader should have knowledge of both components of Punk Islam.

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<sup>8</sup> Although Knight is currently a PhD student in the field of Islamic Studies, he does not introduce himself as a Fagih or Islamic expert in the traditional sense of the word, and even hates to be known as an academic. He notes, "This new persona as an aspiring scholar has ruined me as a writer... Retraining myself as a critical thinker has put me speed bumps on the path" (*Tripping* 182).

It is a book for the Muslims who are fluent in English and have some interest in American popular culture, specifically popular music. This keeps the novel not only out of the reach of non-English speakers, but also away from the first generation of Muslim immigrants who probably do not have an acquaintance with Knight's use of American slang, cultural references, and band names. *The Taqwacores* speaks to those English speakers who are familiar with certain Arabic-Islamic terms. The novel is full of untranslated words, and there is no glossary as there is in *Blue-Eyed Devil*. Names like *Ayesha* (one of Muhammad's wives) and concepts like *iman* (Islamic faith) would not make much sense to a non-Muslim reader. According to Mucahit Bilici's valuable analysis of the relations between the English language and Islam, English speakers who adopt Islam have different approaches toward the use of Arabic language than do Muslims who adopt English. Bilici notes, "While African Americans prefer Arabic words such as *al-Islam* (instead of 'Islam') and *deen* (instead of 'religion') as a way of authenticating themselves as Muslims, immigrants prefer English words such as 'God' in order to authenticate their Americanness" (88). While he is a white convert, Knight's experience with Islam bears more similarities with that of African-Americans considering his interest in the Nation of Islam and figures like Malcolm X and Fard Muhammad. He even declares that he is "perfectly fine with alienating non-Muslim readers" (qtd. in Macke 54). Knight strives to introduce himself as an authentic Muslim who is familiar with the Arabic language, though he confesses that his "Arabic sucks" (*William* 238). This linguistic issue partly justifies the production of two movies based on *The Taqwacores*, since the novel itself is incapable of catching an audience outside of its subcultural circle.

The characterization of Punk Islam itself is a subject addressed in *The Taqwacores*. The issue is discussed primarily by the two main characters of the novel who, with some other young

Muslims, live in a filthy punk house in Buffalo, New York. They are Yusef Ali, the quasi-neutral, authorial narrator of a story that can be read as his “coming-of-age narrative” (Hassan 94); and the iconic Jehangir Tabari who is perhaps the dominant character among the taqwacores and who becomes the first Punk Islam martyr at the end of the novel.

A character representing Knight’s stay in Pakistan and his evolving understanding of Islam and Sufism, Yusef Ali is an engineering student who has grown up in an orthodox Muslim family from Pakistan and has just moved to the Punk Islam house in Buffalo. He says that he feels sometimes “more like an anthropologist than actual member of this strange society” (211). Although little by little he becomes interested in the idea of Punk Islam and even starts to adore Jehangir as his “culture-hero,” he remains an outsider to the scene mainly because no matter how hard he tries, he is still a conscientious individual who “can’t separate spirituality from [his] family, [his] heritage, [and his] identity as a South Asian” (49, 87). Yusef Ali’s suspension between two worlds, those of Pakistani Islam and American pop culture, has made him a remarkable observer to document what he sees in the house with immense astonishment. Near the beginning of the novel, he says: “inevitably I reached the understanding that this word ‘punk’ does not mean anything tangible like ‘tree’ or ‘car’. Rather, *punk* is like a flag; an open symbol, it only means what people believe it means” (7). This acknowledgement of the subjective quality of Punk Islam, he proceeds to detail at length:

I stopped trying to define Punk around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren’t so far removed as you’d think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way –the energy, perhaps, that comes with knowing the world has never seen such positive force and fury and never would again. Both have suffered from sell-outs and

hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion had crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth.

I could go on but the most important similarity is that like Punk as mentioned above, Islam is itself a flag, an open symbol representing not things, but ideas. You cannot hold Punk or Islam in your hands. So what could they mean besides what you want them to? (7)

This passage is not only read by Knight in the 2009 documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, but it is also included in some of the critical literature on *The Taqwacores* as a definition of Punk Islam (Luhr 449; Fiscella 255; Guthrie 26). While the tendency to define Islam itself as something indefinable is considered by Yusef Ali as a punk approach to religion, it can be traced back to medieval Sufism. In Knight's words from *Osama Van Halen*, "the Taqwacores are like modern-day Qalandars" (76), and "rather than a 'Progressive Muslim' movement, we needed some of that serious lunacy" (139). While mentioning the influence of Sufism on Knight, Luhr argues how "punk has provided a means for young Muslims to explore their personal beliefs despite persistent American stereotypes about Islam" (448). Knight's Sufi inspiration is supported by his statement that we must "forget what is and is not Islam" which is taken from Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (*Taqwacores* 87).<sup>9</sup> The influence of Sufism is also shown in Knight's articulation of Islam according to a valorization of individualistic interpretations, such as Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi's accent on reading the Quran as though it has been revealed to *yourself* and Mansur Al-Hallaj's utterance "I am God" (Chittick

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<sup>9</sup> In a short essay published in 2003, Knight declares "If someone had to ask me of my religion, I would reply that I am a Sufi. A Sufi, though not necessarily a Muslim Sufi. Perhaps an agnostic Sufi, if there can be such a thing" (Knight, "Forget" 362).



17). Based on Knight's reading of Sufism, Punk Islam is opposed to mainstream orthodoxy and encourages interested outsiders to form new small communities or subcultures. Therefore, it can be argued that Punk Islam is a form of reform or rejuvenation, or more exactly, a distinctly 21<sup>st</sup>-century North American interpretation of medieval Islamic Sufism, which is in some ways different from the hierarchical structure of many Sufi sects across the globe.

Furthermore, punk has a counter-cultural characteristic that Yusef Ali mentions later on in *The Taqwacores*:

Punk rock means deliberately bad music, deliberately bad clothing, deliberately bad language and deliberately bad behavior. Means shooting yourself in the foot when it comes to every expectation society will ever have for you but still standing tall about it, loving who you are and somehow forging a shared community with the other fuck-ups. (212)

The narrator's approach to masturbation, a major preoccupation in many of Knight's works, is one of the instances reflecting this notion of "shooting yourself," as well as the novel's obsession with all manner of violations and the intricacies of Islamic censure. When Yusef Ali first tries to ejaculate in the room which formerly belonged to a puritan Mustafa, he describes how "I fucked my hand and fucked it faster like I was raping myself" (164). Hassan believes the masturbation scene to operate as "a clichéd metaphor for Knight's writing of the novel" (99); however, it demonstrates instead an obsessive amusement in breaking norms and laws. In Pakistan, Knight was told in an Islamic lecture that masturbation is "unnatural and a sin" (*Impossible* 191). He thinks of *ghusl* (the mandatory shower after ejaculation) as "the brilliance of Islam... in governing our animal desires" because it naturally restricts his "three times a day" masturbations

(*Impossible* 79). In fact, Yusef Ali and Knight, when he was in Pakistan, understand Islam as an obstacle to masturbation.

Jehangir Tabari is the other character in *The Taqwacores* who talks extensively about Punk Islam. His presence in the novel and the way he embraces both punk and Islam collide with Yusef Ali's, and give a significant dialogic quality to the novel. *The Taqwacores* is created in the space between these two characters and in their dialogues with different points of view and different levels of discourse. They are like two angels on the left and right shoulders of an author who is living in a post-Nietzschean world where the divine source of morality is lost ("Nothing is true; everything is permitted") and thus he cannot easily differentiate between good and evil. Coming from California to New York (a symbolic West to East migration) with "foot-high yellow mohawk" (13), Jehangir is the archetypical Taqwacore who plays *adhan* (the Islamic call to prayer) with an electric-guitar on the roof of the punk house. In the role of an insider and native informant, he tries to give an explanation of Punk Islam to Yusef Ali:

"Some people would say punk is all about disseminating your own culture, shunning mass media conglomerates and never selling out; but the bands we look to as spiritual forbears—the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Ramones and so forth—were all on major labels. And some people would say punk is only about loud, aggressive music; but death metal's loud and aggressive. Is that punk? What about loud, aggressive rap? Or is punk supposed to be destroying social mores and manners and taboos? If so, where are the bands doing that today?"

"So what do you think it is?" I asked.

"I think it's just about being ugly." (55-56)

Jehangir claims that it is impossible for a handsome, well-dressed engineer like Yusef Ali to become a punk, contending that punk signifies “Ugly Muslims” (56). The dialogue demonstrates the subcultural and anti-mainstream aspect of punk: beauty, for example, is not superior to ugliness. Furthermore, the appreciation of ugliness and unorthodox clothing relates to Sufism. According to William Chittick, while the derivation of the word “Sufi” has often been debated, its most likely original meaning is “one who wears wool.” Chittick believes by the eighth century the term was applied to “people whose ascetic inclinations led them to wear coarse and uncomfortable woolen garments” (18). Like Sufis, Jehangir’s dressing style does not fit mainstream fashion.

Punk Islam’s antagonism towards official Islamic discourses is addressed by Jehangir. On one occasion, he declares: “I’m so Muslim, fiqh is worthless. No madrassa of imperfect human beings can claim ownership of my deen. Allah’s not entrusting the alims with shit. Let them give their jerk-off fatwas about how long a man’s beard should be, fuck all of ‘em” (106). Here Jehangir questions the hierarchical educational system of Islamic madrassas (schools). He is saying that the teachings of fiqh (the body of Islamic law) by alims (or ulama, a high class of Muslim legal scholars), with their emphasis on legalistic minutiae like the length of a man’s beard, are incapable of elevating his deen (religion or the path to God). In another passage, when trying to convince others in the house to stage a punk show, he also challenges the formal interpretations of the sobriety of Islam by stating that “people are so uptight and emotional about religion and take it so seriously, sometimes you need a punk to say ‘fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck everything you stand for, you’re full of shit and there’s sperm in your hair.’ Nobody needs to be on a high horse about themselves” (129). And when he is asked “why the need to rile everyone up?” he responds, “because it’s fun” (212). His outrageous, provocative, challenging

tone and vulgar expressions are never found in Yusef Ali's words; unlike Jehangir, he is still cautious and cannot give up his respect for Islamic tradition.

Jehangir is also ignorant about death, significant because he is the only character who dies in the novel. Islam embodies three main themes which are Birth, or the creation of existence; Life, or the being itself and the way human and non-human subjects need to live; and finally Death, or the end whose exact hour only God knows. Jehangir merely touches on the second matter, life, but he appears to have no understanding of death. On one occasion, discussing Islamic faith, he says,

It's supposed to be all about having no fear of death, right? And we got that part down, we've done that and we have plenty of Muslims who aren't afraid to die... But now Muslims are afraid to *fuckin' live!* They fear life... more than they fear shaytans [devils]... or qiyamah [the day of resurrection] or the torments in the grave, they fear Life. (41)

Hence, Punk Islam for Jehangir is a challenge to conventional modes of living and not a theological discourse. Birth and death are almost absent in his interpretation of Islam. He even dies in silence, and there is no description of the moment of his death in the novel. The mystical aspect of death in Islam has been degraded into a grotesque quality in *The Taqwacores*. Here we see a departure in the Taqwacores' and other North Americans' views of Islam. This disregard for the mystical aspect of death is not a general trend in popular North American Islam. For example, "Mecca," a Sufi rap song by the Somali-Canadian artist K'naan, featured in David Cronenberg's movie *Cosmopolis*, features a chorus that is very different from Jehangir's death-escaping attitude: "Coming from the streets to Mecca / Death no matter where you go, come and get you." In *Impossible Man*, his autobiography, Knight himself addresses how, back in Pakistan,

Islam had provided him with a healthy relationship to death. However, he instantly adds “in America they believed in nothing after death, so all anyone wanted was to live long and look young for as much of it as they could” (194). Knight is simply generalizing about this Faustian desire for life. Indeed, this deal with the devil to remain forever young represents how he himself recognizes the American approach to death. Knight declares that he is ready to sacrifice his life for Islam and even challenges “the value of an extra ten or twenty years away from your Creator” (194). However, Knight’s approach is not parallel to that of Quranic discourse, as the former emphasizes humans’ free will on matters of death and martyrdom, while in the latter it is the God’s (or *al-Mumit*, the Bringer of Death) will that predominates.

Nonetheless, there is no definitive statement of Punk Islam in either Jehangir’s words or Yusef Ali’s. According to Bakhtin, a novel stays polyphonic as long as its hero remains self-conscious and does not become a “mouth-piece” for the author’s voice (*Problems* 51). The fluid definition of Punk Islam in *The Taqwacores* is built in the distance between these two characters. The innocent Yusef Ali and the rebellious Jehangir both give their own interpretation of the term; while the former tries to stay respectful and does not recklessly attack his old heritage, the latter’s wish is to destroy all that is old. In other words, their collision is another expression of the universal battle between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Who wins the battle at the end of the novel? Jehangir dies after the long-awaited punk show, and Yusef Ali goes back to his home while insisting that “Jehangir’s distorted melodic solo did not represent the majority of American Muslims” and that Punk Islam now feels like “an ex-girlfriend” to him (245). Although one may argue that the novel returns to its beginning at this point, it is also possible to understand Jehangir’s momentary interruption of the status quo (by means of managing a Punk Islam concert) as the triumph of the carnivalesque. This dual interpretation of the ending of the novel

displays the way Knight has distinguished his own belief from that of the two main characters', and reinforces the polyphonic nature of *The Taqwacores*.

Another critical aspect of Knight's work in *The Taqwacores* is his obsession with inventing new terms through wordplay, mostly referencing American popular culture and Islamic tradition, and combining the two to create a unique Punk Islamic cultural discourse. Among these invented terms, and perhaps the most significant, is "Taqwacore." Coined by Knight in this novel, Taqwacore reflects the hybrid identity of Muslim Americans and the synthesis of Islamic and American cultures within many Muslim Americans' lives. "Taqwa" is the Islamic concept of an awareness or consciousness of God and is sometimes translated as "the fear of God." "Core" is short for "hardcore," a term used to describe an individual or a group of individuals characterized by their extreme devotion to that specific group identity and its values, while also rejecting the norms of mainstream society. This type of combination may look promising at first, since it is apparently creating a new cultural space for dialogue through the realm of language. However, the game quickly becomes insipid as the novel gets saturated with new phrases. "Khalifornia," "Liwaticore," "Jinncore," "Homocore," and many suggested names for Punk Islam bands do not indicate any particularly new aspect of the hybridization of Punk Islam but point to Knight's shifting focus. The belief that "there is a Cool Islam out there... You just have to find it," indicates what will divert Knight's focus (*Taqwacores* 136). While in *The Taqwacores*, he is trying to depict some of the main paradoxes that an American Muslim may encounter post-9/11, Knight then becomes fascinated by the idea of merely searching for a "cool" version of Islam, and "cool" mostly signifies close encounters with sexuality and drugs.

### **2.3 How "Cool" is Punk Islam?**

“If Islam was to be saved, it would be saved by the crazy ones: Jehangir and Rabeya and Fasiq and Dawud and Ayyub and even Umar.” (Knight, *The Taqwacores* 38)

In addition to Yusef Ali and Jehangir Tabari, there are other Taqwacores with dissimilar characteristics living in the Punk Islam house. Umar is straight-edge who unlike the majority of the Taqwacores does not drink and smoke. Rabeya is a riot grrrl wearing full burqa while writing Patti Smith’s poems on her bedroom wall and crossing out the verses she does not have sympathy with from her Quran. Fasiq Abasa is a silent Indonesian who smokes cannabis on the roof and reads the Quran while stoned. Finally, there is Amazing Ayyub, an always shirtless Iranian Shia who has “a huge KARBALA [the location of the battle between Muhammad’s grandson and the Umayyad caliph in 680] tattooed in Old English letters just below his collarbone” (10). All of these different characters have their own interpretation of Islam and Punk and their collision of readings and ideas contributes to the novel’s polyphonic quality. Their differing representations of the figure of Prophet Muhammad are the most evocative of the grotesque.

Muhammad (the Prophet of Islam and the central figure of the religion) was the first Taqwacore according to Knight. The Autonomedia edition of *The Taqwacores* starts with a handwritten poem, “Muhammad was a Punk Rocker.” The poem, which was later covered by Kourosh Poursalchi in a mediocre hip hop song, reveals the so-called revolutionary side of Muhammad’s character:

I see Muhammad	Getting the high score
Down at the corner stone	When he delivers sermons
Rocking on Galaga	The kids think he’s a bore

But when he smashes idols	And dangling wallet chain
Everyone cheers for more	They knew him by his spikes
Muhammad was a punk rocker	And said he was insane
He tore everything down	[...]
Muhammad was a punk rocker	When he was in a dumpster by himself
And he rocked that town	Allah told him crazy things
All the people in Mecca	For Muhammad to share with all of us
Knew Muhammad's name	On his six holy strings. ( <i>Taqwacores</i> 3)
They knew him by his fucked-up hair	

The way Knight has addressed the figure of Muhammad in this poem and elsewhere in *The Taqwacores* and his later works is directly related to grotesque realism. As Bakhtin has argued, “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (*Rabelais* 19). Thus, “parodies of the Middle Ages are nothing but a selection of all the degrading, earthy details taken from the Bible, the Gospels, and other sacred texts” (*Rabelais* 20). In Knight’s poem, one no longer sees an unreachable sacredness in Muhammad, but rather an earthly icon that wears a wallet chain and plays Galaga (a fixed shooter arcade game published in 1981). Bakhtin argues that “the grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (*Rabelais* 317). Knight likewise claims that “everything in the body regenerates. You get new skin, new organs, new cells. Quite literally, the person you were seven years ago no longer exists” (*Taqwacores* 246). The argument, when being applied to Muhammad, differs from both the orthodox Islamists’ views and those of the anti-Islamists.



Whereas the anti-Islamists' representations mainly aim at provoking hatred and try to depict a demonized, monophonic picture of Muhammad (for example in the works of Ali Sina),<sup>10</sup> the punk version considers the Prophet as a receiver of divine revelation from God while putting him in a degrading context at the same time. In other words, Knight's view is something in between the two versions. Not criticizing the Prophet would reinforce his status as unchangeable and place him outside of time and space. On the other hand, criticizing him from the outside would merely strengthen the atmosphere of distrust between Islam and the West.

Alongside the above-mentioned poem, Knight's grotesque realism can also be traced in other parts of the novel. For instance, on one occasion Jehangir describes Muhammad by saying that:

The guy was human and capable of evil and sickness as much as anyone. Nothing special. His shit smelled just as bad as yours. In fact, Muhammad being a sicko is totally punk rawk... Just accept that Muhammad had his darkness. He had demons, temptations, compromises; look at the shaping of Islam as he rose to power. (129)

The portrayal of Muhammad in Jehangir's words firmly relates to Bakhtin's argument which holds that "the defecation series creates the most unexpected matrices of objects, phenomena and ideas, which are destructive of hierarchy and materialize the picture of the world and of life" (*Dialogic* 187). Although Knight is not denigrating Muhammad, his words materialize the body of the prophet of Islam.

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<sup>10</sup> "Ali Sina is the pseudonym for a Canadian Iranian whose blog [alisina.org](http://alisina.org) is dedicated to attacking Islam" (Hassan 100).

Knight also addresses the figure of Muhammad in other works. In *Tripping with Allah*, for instance, Knight's pursuit of an ayahuasca trip is actually an attempt to "see Muhammad on a flying jaguar" (4). Knight argues that "Muhammad wasn't a theologian or a literary theorist but a fucking shaman" (259). Moreover in *Blue-Eyed Devil*, he declares that "sometimes I get more out of Walt Whitman than Prophet Muhammad and I'm sorry for that but I'll say Takbir [reciting the greatness of God] anyway, the world came from Allah so take what He gives you" (4), and he later asserts:

One of my unacceptable ideas is that Prophet Muhammad did horrible things that can't be brushed aside with a simple "it was okay in that time and place." There are few ways to look at it, but I reconciled the issue by realizing that those ugly moments in Muhammad's life—the wars and Qurayzas and mean stuff—had all gone down after Khadija died. The man had a broken heart and it messed him up, made him hard. That I can relate to. (181)

Here, Knight emphasizes the separation of Muhammad's Meccan period from his later period in Medina which led to the establishment of an Islamic state. In Mecca, Muhammad's call to Islam had a sort of "underground" quality and the verses being revealed to him had a mystic tone emphasizing matters such as creation and death. The Medinan period, in contrast, demonstrated a tendency to centralize forces around an already-established truth. Consequently, Taqwacores embrace Muhammad's Meccan period of prophecy as being "punker" than the latter.

In addition, the Taqwacores are known for their hedonistic perspective, which would later overwhelm Knight. Similar to official Islam, Punk Islam regards Fridays as a special day of the week; not only because of the day's ceremonial group prayer, but also its "after party." Lynn, a white young girl in *The Taqwacores* who is in the position of an outsider, thinks of Punk Islam

as something “cool”: “on Friday afternoons you’d have all these Muslims here listening to khutbahs [public preaching] and then at night all the punks come in for beer and ass. It’s like two entirely different worlds in the same house” (83). Here, the pleasure-seeking of Punk Islam opposes the puritanism of more orthodox readings. In Jehangir’s words, Islamic faith is not something to be found beyond the earthly world, and so he puts on the punk concert at the house and invites all the Punk Islam bands he knows from across the United States to contribute. This final, extravagant concert which leads to his death represents a Bakhtinian carnival similar to Rabelais’ “Abbey of Theleme” in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* where the lives of inhabitants are regulated “not by laws, statues, or rules but according to their will and free choice” (*Rabelais* 126). Jehangir does not exclude any band from the show, each act attempting to out-do the previous one in increasingly outrageous performances, because “the whole point of Taqwacore is that Islam can take any shape you want it to. If we deny a band their spot because we don’t like their attitudes or their interpretation, then we’re no better than all the Conformist Chickenshit imams out there” (193). His death by the end symbolizes the difficulty—if not the impossibility—of bringing all the different interpretations of Islam under the same roof.

### Chapter 3 Michael Muhammad Knight and the Beats

“who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels  
staggering on tenement roofs illuminated” (Ginsberg, “Howl” 5)

In one of his latest books, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*, Knight discusses how William Burroughs’s acknowledgments of Peter Lamborn Wilson, an American Anarcho-Sufi scholar reminded him of his own debts to both writers. “My inheritance from Peter means that I have inherited his Burroughs, whatever he had with Burroughs, and whatever imagined connection they both had to [Hassan] Sabbah” (11), Knight declares. He sources one root of his own intellectual flowering in one of the central figures of America’s Beat movement, William Burroughs, considering him to be not only “the real godfather of punk” but even “the real godfather of *Muslim* punk” because he smuggled a piece of fringe Islam into the American subconscious (*William* 19). In *The Taqwacores*, Knight refers to him as “Imam Burroughs,” citing Burroughs’s claim that “Muhammad was an invention of the Mecca Chamber of Commerce” (157),<sup>11</sup> and to some extent Knight embraced Burroughs’s version of Islam. However, over and above Knight’s direct references to the Beats, from his first book to his last, there are ideological and aesthetic connections between these two different American protest traditions and literary movements (the Beats and Punk Islam). While Knight has been called the “Jack Kerouac of American Muslims” who has written “today’s *On the Road*” according to the jacket covers of *Journey to the End of Islam* and *Blue-Eyed Devil*, his works have an intertextual

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<sup>11</sup> In *Naked Lunch*, in addition to questioning the prophecy of Christ and Buddha, Burroughs writes “*Mohammed?* Are you kidding? He was dreamed up by the Mecca Chamber of Commerce. An Egyptian ad man on the skids from the sauce write the continuity” (96).

relationship to the broader Beat aesthetic of seemingly spontaneous, unedited expression. Moreover, the Beats' adoption of a very free, idiosyncratic interpretation of spirituality, and their devotion to some Islamic figures like Hassan Sabbah (the leader of the mysterious Islamic sect of Assassins or Hashshashin in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>12</sup> as well as their incorporation of aspects of jazz music and methods of composition in their writing, and finally their oppositional stance towards conventional, mainstream American material and sexual values, are interesting points of connection.

After providing a context for the examination of the relation of Knight's writings to that of the Beats, this reading will focus on two pairings of texts: Knight's *Blue-Eyed Devil* and Kerouac's *On the Road*; and Knight's last two books, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran* and *Tripping with Allah*, and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. This chapter will examine the Beats' Islamic religiosity and its influence on Knight, demonstrating how Knight's enthusiasm for articulating a new "cool" version of Islam in his later works has become an egocentric attempt at self-understanding, self-justification, and self-promotion in contrast with his earlier Sufi-inspired work.

### **3.1 On the Beats**

The most famous Beat writers, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, produced their most acclaimed works in the mid-50s, but they went on to have a major impact on literature and cultural politics for decades to come. "Inspired by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky" as Matt Theado argues (17), these young men were attracted to the underground notes of society

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<sup>12</sup> In his 1988 esoteric novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco allocates a chapter to Sabbah. Regarding the name "Assassins," he notes, "not a lovely word now, but for them it was splendid, the emblem of a race of warrior monks who greatly resembled the Templars; a spiritual knighthood" (523).

at the early stages of the Cold War, while being curious about the zest of life available outside the so-called “first world” or the “global north.” The term “Beat,” as initiated by Kerouac, refers to “beatific” but also to the seemingly worthless, the materiality of objects when perceived with a Zen mind, and America’s vast underclass, the homeless hobo saints of the road. Beat also not only identifies the movement’s, and especially Kerouac’s, spontaneous writing style, but also a passion for travel resembling that of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud,<sup>13</sup> while opposing mainstream post-war American social and cultural norms. Given that they were an inspiration for the 60s hippie movement (though Kerouac hated the connection and Ginsberg embraced it), one might call the Beats a materialization of the modern anti-sedentism.

To provide a context for a comparison between Knight and the Beats, it is necessary first to examine the Beats’ understanding of religion and spirituality, as well as music to which Punk Islam is closely connected. Knight’s attempt to initiate a distinct post-9/11 American subcultural movement bears similarities to the uses made of the Beats’ body of work in beginning a cultural revolution.

### **3.1.1 The Beats and Religion**

“Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman’s an angel!” (Ginsberg, “Footnote to Howl” 3)

In spite of the perception of the Beats simply as bohemian hedonists that greeted some of their first publications in the 1950s, religion, spirituality, and the sacred, inherited from various sources, are serious concerns for all three of the most famous Beat writers. According to Randall

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<sup>13</sup> According to Knight, Rimbaud had “his own translation of the Quran and ran guns in Africa” (*Osama* 157).

Styers, the cross-cultural, comparative approach to religion was established in the eighteenth century, “but the usage of the term [religion] had shifted dramatically away from attention to ritual toward an internal state of mind. Religion had become principally a matter of ideas and beliefs” (4). John Lardas has taken the same approach in *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*, arguing that only with a broad understanding of religious experience can one recognize the Beats as being interested in things of the spirit. He uses Charles H. Long’s understanding of religious meaning as a force that “pushes beyond all the specific modern modes and paradigms... to the fullness and poverty of being which is designated by the term sacred” (qtd. in Lardas 7). However, while Lardas details the Beats’ relation to traditions such as Buddhism and figures like Oswald Spengler, he provides almost no discussion of Islamic or Arabic references, even those relating to Hassan Sabbah.

Whether or not God exists and whether or not our world is holy were prominent concerns for Dostoevsky, or as Kerouac called him in *On the Road* “Dostioffski” (69). Considering Dostoevsky within the context of the novel genre and in terms of polyphonic, multi-voiced approaches to the divine is useful in a study of Knight and the Beats. Bakhtin, a major commentator on the works of the Russian writer, has pointed out, “it is given to all of Dostoevsky’s characters to *think and seek higher things*; in each of them there is a *great and unresolved thought*; all of them must, before all else, *get a thought straight*. And in this resolution of a thought (an idea) lies their entire real life and their own personal unfinalizability” (*Problems* 87). But how should one comprehend this exploration of “higher things” in relation to the Beats and their view of religion and the holiness of Being? The “unfinalizability” of Dostoevsky’s characters, as formulated by Bakhtin, has a direct connection to their tendency to discover the undisclosed meaning of life while experiencing either a symbolic or real journey.

Bakhtin asserts that “in order to break through to his self the hero must travel to a very long road” (*Problems* 234). This notion is also understood by Knight through his reading of Josef Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In his autobiography *Impossible Man*, Knight relates how he interprets his trip to Pakistan and his return home as a Campbellian quest: “Having attained the Ultimate Boon and returned from the unfamiliar world back to the familiar, it became my duty to share the Boon with mankind” (231). This type of pilgrimage is a common theme in many novels, from *Don Quixote* to *Ulysses*, and can be found famously in *On the Road*. Sal Paradise, the novel’s hero, travels across America and goes finally to Mexico in order to answer his fundamental question, “what do you want out of life?” (57). He is driven by the object of his quest and by his fascination with its progress, and early in the novel he rejects an offer of work at a carnival (20). By doing so, he does not ignore the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and laughter; rather, he tries to invent his own carnival with “the gang” (20) or “the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time” (5). The shifting membership of the gang is made up of holy saints<sup>14</sup> who give meaning to the road; in other words, there is no road without a community or fellowship of rebellious, saintly companions. Nonetheless, holiness is not merely limited to the pilgrims according to Kerouac’s sacred formula: if “the road is life” (212) and “life is holy” (58), then logically the road or the journey itself is holy likewise. As I will explore later, Knight’s *Blue-Eyed Devil* and *Tripping with Allah* conjure this notion.

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<sup>14</sup> This notion is expressed in Ginsberg’s “Footnote to Howl” as well: “Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cassidy” (6).



The theme of holy travel is not limited to Kerouac and can be found in works by Ginsberg and Burroughs, who both appear in fictional form in *On the Road*.<sup>15</sup> While Ginsberg's poetic, bardic, Blakean, and Abrahamic address to holiness is clearly expressed in his "Footnote to Howl," Burroughs's approach to religion is more complicated and diffuse. As Gregory Stephenson argues, there are major themes connecting "Burroughs's writing and Gnostic thought," for example (59). In comparison with the American journey of Sal Paradise, *Naked Lunch*'s William Lee's trips extend further; he goes to a mysterious Tangier and a sci-fi, hybrid Interzone to find the edge of human consciousness, while sympathizing with North Africa's culture of heroin or junk and discovering "The Algebra of Need," a psycho-science of addiction (*Naked* 201). Burroughs's interpretation of the figure of Hassan Sabbah is of importance here, as he often cites "nothing is true; everything is permitted," a statement attributed to Sabbah and believed to be his last words. In interviews with Tennessee Williams in 1977, Burroughs explains that if one sees everything as an illusion, a solipsistic perspective one might call it, then everything is permitted: "And this was given a slightly different twist, but it's the same statement as Aleister Crowley's, do what you want to do is the whole of the law"<sup>16</sup> (*Live* 383). On the one hand, Bakhtin believes a leading theme in Dostoevsky's works, especially in regard to his rationalist characters such as Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is that "*all is permitted* (in a world where there is no God and no immortality of the soul) and, linked with it, the theme of ethical solipsism" (*Problems* 152); on the other hand, Crowley has derived his Law of Thelema from Rabelais' Abbey of Theleme mentioned in the previous chapter. The connection between

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<sup>15</sup> Kerouac fictionalized the names of all the characters in the published version of the novel to avoid unholy lawsuits.

<sup>16</sup> Probably because of the nature of the interview, here Burroughs has paraphrased Crowley's original equation known as the Law of Thelema: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" (qtd. in Drury 86).

these figures' use of Sabbah's statement expresses in different ways the anxiety of living in a godless world where there is no longer an ultimate truth.

### 3.1.2 The Beats and Music

“Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop apocalypse! Holy the jazzbands marijuana hipsters peace peyote pipes & drums!” (Ginsberg, “Footnote to Howl” 8)

Knight's use of punk as an inspiration for his writing bears similarities to the Beats' affection for jazz music. The Beats' appreciation of jazz—and particularly bop—goes hand in hand with their understanding of holiness. This parallel is mainly a result of the improvised nature of jazz voicing which, similar to punk, contrasts with the tradition of European classical music based on staff notation and also radio-friendly pop and jazz standards. However, rather than a formal, technical interpretation of jazz, the Beats have a racialized, exotic understanding of the genre, recognizing it “through the eyes of white culture” (Malcolm 106). This was not an uncommon perspective at the time. Discussing the early developments of jazz in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gunther Schuller indicates how European composers viewed it as an exotic music: “It was something other than the normal. There was a dichotomy, in short, between *us* and *them*. Whether the Other was demonized or romanticized as a noble savage, the major point is that the Other was different from the normal in some significant way” (qtd. in Salamone 56). Considering the Beats' interest in the marginalized unknown, it is no wonder that they embraced the genre; if jazz represents the Afro-American other, it helped to redefine the European side of their Americanness. Salamone describes the purity and authenticity of jazz as a “Dionysian performance” (51), and live, improvised jazz possesses a holy aura which makes it unique and

intangible. For the Beats, jazz is as holy as a Zen-like revelation; it creates a moment and then evaporates, leaving a spot on the soul.

In Kerouac's *On the Road*, when George Shearing finishes his performance at the Birdland jazz club in New York, Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), points to Shearing's empty piano seat and says "God's empty chair," and then Sal concurs, "God was gone; it was the silence of his departure" (128). While the passage clearly expresses how Sal and Dean understand the performer and the performance as part of a sort of religious experience, it also demonstrates their dilemma over the existence of God. There is no longer an omnipresent Abrahamic God as in Sal's Roman Catholic faith; rather, there is a Nietzschean one that can die. The blind Shearing is again named as a holy figure later in the novel, when Sal and Dean come to watch another of his performances by chance and Dean says "Sal, God has arrived" (242). Meanwhile, Sal describes another young man's solo as something coming from "angelical smiling lips upon the mouthpiece... lonely as America" (241). If the main performer is God, his companions can be angels crooning the holy hymn, the holy howl. As Ginsberg insists, "Everyman's an angel," and especially those who play jazz ("Footnote" 3).

Apart from their ecstatic, divine inspiration from jazz, the music is also reflected in Kerouac's spontaneous, improvised, and seemingly unedited writing style. The Beats were able to transmit their perception of music through words on paper to later generations. As the musician R. B. Morris points out on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original publication of *Naked Lunch*, "various heavy metal and punk acts, as well as countless others in the pop-music culture inherited that part of the previous generation that was primed by the Beats" (111). In a general sense, punk is another "white appropriation" of the unconstrained spirit of 1940s and 50s free-form jazz bop. Punk's DIY aesthetic, discussed in the previous

chapter, has affinities with both Kerouac's spontaneous prose and Burroughs's cut-up technique, given that they all insist on ignoring mainstream, professional modes of creating art.

Among various punk acts, one interesting figure who links the Beats and early New York punk bands is Patti Smith. The poetic voice of the punk scene in the late-70s, Smith passed the Beat aesthetic to another generation. Although Smith later had personal relationships with Ginsberg and especially with Burroughs, her role is more significant. Believing that the physical performance of a poem is more important than the poem's words, she was fascinated by "a certain kind of poetry that's performance poetry. It's like the American Indians weren't writing conscious poetry. They were making chants, they were making ritual language –and the language of ritual is the language of the moment" (qtd. in McNeil and McCain 161). With this understanding of performance, she transformed Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl" into a hallucinatory punk song. Furthermore, Smith's utterance of "at heart, i am a muslim, at heart, i am an american, at heart, i am a muslim, at heart, i am an american artist, and I have no guilt," a statement which is found on Rabeya's bedroom in Knight's *The Taqwacores*, demonstrates how she, like Knight, recognizes Islam as something compatible with her hybridized, punk Americanness (*Taqwacores* 135).<sup>17</sup>

### **3.2 Jack Kerouac vs. Michael Muhammad Knight**

After the success of *The Taqwacores*, which received a great deal of critical acclaim, Knight published his second book *Blue-Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey through Islamic America* in 2006. Unlike his first book which was a fictional story of fringe Muslims living in a small house in Buffalo, New York, *Blue-Eyed Devil* is Knight's autobiographical journey across the United

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<sup>17</sup> Smith's statement is part of the lyrics of the song "Babelogue" from her 1978 album *Easter*.

States. As its title clearly suggests, it is a “road” book which in different ways resembles Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The similarities between these two books can be categorized under two main themes. First, they both symbolize a spiritual journey inspired by Eastern religious traditions to find the “real” America. Second, the protagonists in both books seek to escape their white, colonial identity through a fascination for other ethnicities that they believe to be more “pure.”

### 3.2.1 What is the Road?

“Did this mean that I should at last go on my pilgrimage on foot on the dark roads around America?” (Kerouac, *Road* 303)

“I felt like my trip itself had become an act of worship.” (Knight, *Blue-Eyed* 7)

The road has a symbolic, spiritual connotation for both Kerouac and Knight, though it is not exclusively symbolic or spiritual. *On the Road* and *Blue-Eyed Devil* are examples of a postcolonial American pilgrimage. In this context, I am using the term “postcolonial” as a challenge to the white, masculine, and Christian sides of North America’s culture and politics, as well as to America’s ambivalent status as a postcolonial, imperial country. Kerouac’s and Knight’s journeys, despite a half a century difference, lead towards a critique of colonialism’s dominant masternarratives.

Kerouac’s trip is first and foremost an American one: “I’d been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers” (10). However, even until the middle of his second trip, Sal is unclear about the exact purpose of his American journey: “What was I doing? Where was I going? I’d soon find out” (139). In his response to a letter from a theology student in 1961, Kerouac gives an answer to this question, explaining the

religious theme of *On the Road*: “Dean and I were embarked on a tremendous journey through post-Whitman America to FIND that America and to FIND the inherent goodness in American man... It was really a story about 2 Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him” (qtd. in Leland 17). While here Kerouac claims they found God, in the novel it is not the inquiring Sal who addresses this question, but rather Dean, the “young punk” who has turned into a mystic by the beginning of the second trip (120). In “the first days of his mysticism,” Dean confides to Sal that “God exists”; however, “we both understand that I couldn’t have time to explain why I know and you know God exists” (120-21). To a great extent, for Dean, the existence of God is embodied in the lived experience of the American road, and this explains why they “won’t go off the road” (121).

Knight’s *Blue-Eyed Devil* starts by referring to William Carlos Williams’ “the pure products of America go crazy” (1). Similar to Kerouac’s narration of *On the Road*, Knight narrates his rebellious journey across the country, hitchhiking, meeting eccentric people, and dating random girls. But above everything else, *Blue-Eyed Devil* is the starting point of Knight’s ongoing quest to find the secret history of Islam and the manifestations of Allah in America. The genealogical root of Knight’s version of Islam goes back to Wallace Fard Muhammad, the mysterious founder of the Nation of Islam who seems to have more than a dozen identities and biographies. Knight declares that “Fard was and is my American Islam, and I still read his lessons more than the Quran, but I don’t need a reliable origin story” (*Blue-Eyed* 199). Elijah Muhammad, the then leader of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and three-time heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, are only a few of the figures associated with Master Fard’s teachings or “The Supreme Wisdom Lessons.” Beginning with this book, Knight praises Fard, making the lessons into the core of his hybridized, sometimes paradoxical system of belief. Knight’s praise

for Master Fard is repeated in all his subsequent books till the last one where he calls “Master Fard Muhammad, my uncanny X-Man. Master Fard Muhammad, master of sacred geometry, knower of the right shapes and their functions in the universe... He’s me: Master Fard Muhammad within the frames of my knowledge” (*Tripping* 190).

In a sense, Fard is Knight’s Dean Moriarty, a muse or mystic who shows him the path of God. The road has no meaning without the significant other as a companion, whether the gargantuan Dean or the uncanny Fard. *On the Road* is as much the story of Sal Paradise the narrator, as it is the story of Dean Moriarty, his muse and subject. The novel begins, “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up... With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (1), and ends, “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (307). Dean’s being represented as a “gargantuan figure” (259) for whom “sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life” (2), might reinforce a view of him as being merely a hedonist, and ignore his mystic, religious character. One should not forget that Rabelais’ pleasure-seeking Gargantua was also the builder of the Abbey of Theleme. In the final stages of *On the Road*, Sal likewise describes Dean as sacred: “he was finally an angel” (263), and “he looked like God” (284). The relation of Sal and Dean is significant because the narrative is built in the space between these two characters, as with Yusef Ali and Jehangir discussed earlier.

The religious connotation of the road for Kerouac and Knight is also a reflection of their respective embrace of Buddhism and Sufism. While neither Buddhism nor Sufism is a monolithic entity, both including various sects with different beliefs, they do share the common motif of the road or the path on which one must travel to free the spirit or soul and eliminate the talkative, tricky ego. This is specifically reflected in the concept of *Tao* in East Asian religions

and *Tariqa* in Islamic Sufism, both representing the “path” to the ultimate truth. Both Kerouac and Knight were inspired to apply these concepts to an American context. While their attempt might be solely a simplified form of orientalism, one should be careful not to dismissively stereotype the white American fascinated by Eastern mysticism.

Early in *Blue-Eyed Devil*, Knight quotes from Peter Lamborn Wilson’s *Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam*: “so permeated is Islam with the culture of travel—from that of Ibn Khaldun’s bedouin to that of the Meccan pilgrims—that Sufism falls naturally into the habit of expressing the entirety of its project in terms of wayfaring (suluk) in which each aspect of the Journey becomes metaphor for an aspect of the spiritual quest” (*Blue-Eyed* 4). Prior to Knight, the application of this culture of travel, and the symbolic connotation of the road and the spiritual journey are found in Farid ud-Din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, perhaps more clearly than in other Sufi texts. This lengthy Persian poem from the 12<sup>th</sup> century tells the story of a group of thirty birds on a journey to find their king, Simurgh.<sup>18</sup> Though they fail to locate the king finally, the road makes them fathom the king/god/Simurgh within themselves: “When they cast furtive glances towards the Simurgh, they perceived that the Simurgh was no other than those self-same thirty birds” (Attar, *Conference* 117). In Sufi terms, it is not only the real, material road that matters, and even “writing is a path itself,” according to Knight (*Blue-Eyed* 4). In *Blue-Eyed Devil*, Knight uses Wilson’s argument to guide him through his journey in order to detect holy Islamic sites. However, Knight’s effort is influenced by Kerouac as well, since they both have given an American connotation to the spiritual road.

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<sup>18</sup> In the Persian language, Simurgh consists of two words, *si* meaning thirty and *murgh* meaning bird; thus simurgh literally means thirty birds, though it also refers to a benevolent, mythical flying creature in ancient Persian mythology. The closest creature to Simurgh in Greek mythology is the phoenix.



According to Lards, “Kerouac viewed Buddhism as a means to reinvigorate his literary creativity as well as a spiritual path” (246). In *On the Road*, Sal often signifies the road as the path of life. He says, “we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life” (212), and later that “the road must eventually lead to the whole world” (231). But the most significant instance of the road’s being equated with life is when Sal describes how Dean “was reaching his Tao decision in the simplest direct way,” and Dean says “What’s your road, man? It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow” (251). However, Sal does not seem confident about locating the end of the road. Despite the skepticism of Dean and Carlo (the Ginsberg character), Sal says, “nobody can get to that last thing. We keep on living in hopes of catching it once for all” (48).

In addition to the spiritual connotation of the road, the representation of the narrator’s father in both *On the Road* and *Blue-Eyed Devil* shows Kerouac’s and Knight’s view of guiding, mystic, paternal relationships. Although Sal rarely speaks of his father, though the “scroll” version of the novel as well as its film adaptation begin with a reference to Sal’s father’s death, on one occasion in New Orleans he has a noteworthy dialogue with Old Bull Lee (the Burroughs character). At the race track with Old Bull, hesitating about placing a bet, Sal comes to “one horse called Big Pop that sent me into a temporary trance thinking of my father, who used to play the horses with me” (153). He tells Old Bull about this moment only after Bull has chosen another horse which loses to Big Pop. When Old Bull hears about this, he angrily responds, “you had a vision, boy, a vision. Only damn fools pay no attention to visions. How do you know your father, who was an old horseplayer, just didn’t momentarily communicate to you that Big Pop was going to win the race? The name brought the feeling up in you, he took advantage of the name to communicate” (153). He then starts to explain the significance behind Sal’s sudden remembrance of his father, asserting that “mankind will someday realize that we are actually in

contact with the dead and with the other world, whatever it is” (153). Considering that Burroughs was a fatherly, mentoring figure to Kerouac, both in real life and in the novel, though Kerouac helped compile and edit *Naked Lunch* and gave it its title, the way he wants Sal to interpret that moment is quite revealing. It not only demonstrates the way Burroughs, the (god)father, understands the nature of mystical visions, but also Sal’s uncertainty since he remains silent.

Knight’s relationship with his father, as explained in his autobiographical works, was similarly fragile and mystical if also supremely dysfunctional. Based on his mother’s reports, he refers to himself as a child of rape, though he shares his father’s fascination with Charles Manson and corresponds with him, but he also contemplates murdering his father to avenge his mother’s violation and his own abandonment. In his most recent *Tripping with Allah*, Knight mentions “dad saw things that weren’t there, and his visions led to him holding women hostage and putting a knife to the throat of his infant son” (160). He also notes that his father was a “diagnosed schizophrenic” who claimed he had been a member of the Hell’s Angels (a mafia-like one-percenter motorcycle club); subsequently, when asked if he think his father manifested something which the world could not understand, Knight firmly denies the possibility and says, “dad was actually unwell” (92). However, in his “road odyssey through Islamic America,” when he is looking for saints’ tombs and holy sites, he pays a visit to his father in West Virginia (*Blue-Eyed* 47). Recalling how his father’s family once caught him with “a backpack full of books on Nazism and the occult” (48), he mentions that his father, though advising him not to use the word “reincarnation,” firmly believed his son to be F. Scott Fitzgerald (38). But the skeptic Knight has no empathy toward his occultist father and does not recognize him as a “cool” or odd religious figure. His reaction differs from Knight’s portrayal of his mother, to whom he says that he owes his early developments in Islam (64). Even *The Taqwacores* is dedicated to “Mom first,

Allah second” (2). This makes one wonder just how Oedipal Knight’s rejection of occultism and acceptance of Islam might be.

### 3.2.2 How White am I?

“Wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.” (Kerouac, *Road* 179-80)

“As a white Muslim I was a pink elephant.” (Knight, *Blue-Eyed* 2)

The act of conversion is a journey. At the age of fifteen, the Christian-born Knight converted to Islam mainly by listening to “a lot of” Public Enemy and reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (*Blue-Eyed* 1). “As a convert, Malcolm was my culture” (*Blue-Eyed* 76). The fact that Knight had not converted to Islam by reading the Quran, the Hadith (the corpus of sayings attributed to Muhammad), or even a Sufi text, indicates how American his experience has been. Considering his admiration for Malcolm X which later led to his discovery of Fard Muhammad, Knight’s conversion is not merely theological, but rather racial, an attempted “conversion” from American whiteness to Knight’s version of American blackness. He correctly argues that “you can’t talk about Islam in this country [America] without bringing race into it” (*Blue-Eyed* 2). He continues, “in the much-hyped war of civilization, nothing proves the truth of Islam more than a guy that’d rather switch sides than fight” (2). Knight has tried his best, as documented in his post-*Taqwacore* books and particularly in his accounts of studying Islam in Pakistan, to eliminate his white privilege. His interest in the Five Percenters sect and in Fard’s teachings is a way to show his enthusiasm for marginalized voices in American society. Fard’s supreme “lessons” essentially target racial issues, and Knight often cites Fard’s declaration that “the black man is

God” and “the white man is Devil” (*William* 36). This simplistic binary, other than its sexism, simply dismisses other ethnicities. In addition, Fard and the Five Percenters believe the human race consists of three categories: 85% are uncivilized people who do not know the Living God and are easily led in the wrong direction; 10% are rich, blood-sucking slave-makers who teach lies to the poor; and 5% are poor, righteous teachers who are all-wise and know the Living God. Knight in contrast is looking for a “non-order order with no hierarchy, no master” (*William* 190).

In *Tripping with Allah*, Knight directly addresses the Beats’ views on race and class, condemning Kerouac’s “I want to trade places with the Negro” (124).<sup>19</sup> Knight does not want his trip to remind one of the Beats’ various journeys:

They [the Beats] didn’t know anything except that the white man’s America into which they were born, and the whole language in which they were taught to think, was totally and irreparably fucked. So they kept trying to fix their heads and pull out all of the white world’s pins and needles, but they had no real path: go to South America, go to India, dive into that *Spiritual Orient*, that *magical brown people* idea, do every drug, invade every context. (Knight, *Tripping* 7-8)

Knight’s critique of the Beats has some merit. Kerouac does sentimentalize and also stereotype East and West as brightness and darkness, a binary with racist overtones. Beside the fact that he describes himself and Dean as “two broken-down heroes of the Western night” (190), Kerouac (Sal) often mentions his geographical orientation: “there is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded” (79). He also sees America’s East

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<sup>19</sup> “I Wanna Be Black” is a song by Lou Reed from his 1978 album *Street Hassle* which shares the same motif: “I don’t want to be a fucked up, middle class, college student anymore... / I want to be black, I want to be like Malcolm X.” Like Patti Smith, Reed was also a link between the Beats and New York punk.

and West in personal terms: “I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (15). Nonetheless, the West is dark and cold, and “beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West” (58). Like a black hole, the West swallows everything, even the light. Furthermore, Kerouac’s orientalist point of view is also presented in his stereotypical perception of Mexicans and Arabs. Arriving in Mexico, Dean exults, “we’ve finally got to heaven” (277). There is marijuana, and there are girls, and it is like a “strange Arabian paradise” (289). But even if Knight correctly perceives Kerouac’s limitations, his own Five Percenter orientation may not be much more enlightened.

### **3.3 William S. Burroughs vs. Michael Muhammad Knight**

“They drive herds of squealing pigs into the Ka`bah, they shit on the floor of the United Nations and wipe their ass with treaties, pacts, alliances.” (Burroughs, *Naked* 38)

“America looks a lot like pre-Islamic Mecca, because you have all of these big religions and small religions and false messiahs and UFO cults and 2012 books and we can worship whatever we want with no fears of God’s Prophet tearing it down.” (Knight, *William* 92)

Could Knight’s body of work enable a new, reformed Islam? How is Knight’s “cool” Islam similar to Burroughs’s “Islam Inc.”? In what particular way does Knight’s work show the influence of Burroughs’s style of writing? In order to answer these questions, this section first compares Burroughs’s and Knight’s use of the cut-up technique as a form of mystic experience, as well as their discussion of drugs, to show finally how Knight’s understanding of particularly academic writing in his most recent work has made his “cool” Islam a failure.

### 3.3.1 The Cut-up Technique and Esoteric Drugs

In *Cracked Actor*, a 1975 BBC documentary about David Bowie's cocaine addiction period in Los Angeles prior to his Berlin era, when he killed his old alter ego, Ziggy Stardust, and was trying to invent his new one, the Thin White Duke, Bowie shows how he uses the cut-up technique with scissors:

This is the way I do cut-ups. I don't know if it's like the way Brion Gysin does his or Burroughs does his, but this is the way I do. I've used this method only on a couple of actual songs; what I've used it for more than anything else is igniting anything that might be in my imagination. I tried doing it with diaries and there were funny and amazing things about me and what I've done and where I was going. It seems that it would predict things about the future and tell me a lot about the past. It's really quite astonishing thing. I suppose it is a very Western Tarot.

Here Bowie nicely depicts the subjective, even mystic nature of the cut-up technique that originated with Burroughs's friend and collaborator Brion Gysin, and how one can use it for different purposes. In music, the cut-up technique has not only inspired artists to experiment with language in order to write lyrics, but also to produce the music itself. Michael Goddard argues how some of the techniques employed in the 70s electronic music, such as works of the avant-garde English band *Throbbing Gristle*, were in fact "an extension and elaboration of the cut-up theories" of Burroughs and Gysin, though it had also been used in the 1960s by Ginsberg's friend Bob Dylan (165). The sampling technique now commonly used in the music industry indicates the influence of the cut-up method in the field. Additionally, punk's DIY aesthetics, specifically in its visual promotion (album covers, zines, posters, etc.), has been influenced by

the cut-up method. The Sex Pistols' covers for *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* and *God Save the Queen* show that one does not need to be a painter to design a cover; a pair of scissors is enough to do the job.

The random, mystic aspect of the cut-up technique which Bowie describes as “a very Western Tarot” is the one Knight tries to employ in *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*, and like many other instances traces back its genealogy to not only the Beats and American counterculture but also medieval Islamic figures. He discusses how Ismailism (a branch of Shia Islam, one of whose followers was Sabbah) credits the Quran with simultaneously having a *zahir* (exoteric, outward) and a *batin* (esoteric, inward) meaning. While the *zahir* is apparent to everyone, only members of the elite can gain access to the *batin* of the Quran. For instance, *muqatta`at* (abbreviated letters) at the beginning of certain suras (chapters) of the Quran might sound like meaningless letters on the surface, but to the adept, it has a secret meaning. The esoteric *batin* is revealed to a person by means of personal inspiration and also the will of God; however, Knight seems to believe that a more concrete method can also uncover the secret. He affirms that “for Burroughs, every text had its own *batin* that could be revealed with a pair of scissors” (*William* 18); hence, “Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups” (*William* 239). Knight later asserts that “the Quran is *already* a cut-up: verses aren't arranged in the order of their revelation,” and that

It's all a cut-up: every sermon, every prayer in which verses are extracted and quoted out of their context... Arguments over the Quran and its meanings are scissor fights... We read what we want to read and then make a claim on what the Quran really says, while the Quran says nothing; it gives us only the means by

which we can say everything. You are the Quran that speaks. Nothing is true, everything is permitted, says Sabbah, says Burroughs. (*William* 240)

Thus, Knight finally tries to do a cut-up exercise with the Quran, mainly to establish his own personal, idiosyncratic version of the text and to undermine its authority, as he believes that “it’s democratic that way—no need for scholars spouting off about historical contexts and classical Arabic; I can cut into the *zahir* and grab my own *batin*, the special misreading that Allah intended just for me” (*William* 239). But why is there a need for Knight to write down and publish these experiments if they are all for his own sake? He argues that “a cut-up of the revelation saves me from ever having to be treated as a credible Islamic reformist again. I’ve surrendered... any reason to be propped up as a voice of the New Islam—it’s not here, *fuck off*” (*William* 239). However, after dedicating two pages to his cut-up version of the story of Musa (Moses) and calling it “a sura from my Quran,” he encourages readers to “make your own” (*William* 255). Recommending that readers make their own cut-ups reveals Knight’s own shifting approach to the Quran and demonstrates his willingness to become (or remain) the leader of a fringe version of Islam, though he might not happily wear the “reformist” label because of its mainstream connotations.

For Burroughs, the fragmentary cut-up is an exact representation of a fragmentary subjective experience; and these two are not separated in *Naked Lunch*. The text is broken into pieces since it is telling a fragmentary, unfinished, or in Bakhtin terms “unfinalized” story. But Knight’s case is different; his cut-up experiment is unsuccessful because his experience and story are complete and finished in a different way. The book is largely the story of Knight’s interrogation of Peter Lamborn Wilson’s authority and influence over him, and his clear decision to sever the connection, primarily due to his disgust with Wilson’s sanction of a type of spiritual



pedophilia. *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran* starts by telling the story of Wilson and his work, but later it turns into a competition and Knight declares “MMK > PLW” (186), meaning he is greater than Wilson. Knight has become stuck in his singular identity in this book, and he has departed from the multi-voiced, dialogic, open quality of his first fiction. Knight has also become increasingly doctrinaire and intolerant in his attitudes. If one had sympathy for *The Taqwacores*, that sympathy and appreciation may not extend to his recent works.

Yet another difficulty with Knight’s mystic, Fard-Burroughs-inspired approach as manifested in his two most recent works is his “double-demystifying of numbers” which goes back to his idiosyncratic use of systems of measurement and his obsession with drugs. Knight cites Fard’s statement that “Islam is mathematics” (*William* 213, *Tripping* 205), but both Knight and Fard use the system of imperial units as the basis of their sacred “Supreme Mathematics.” If one believes “the white man is devil,” why should one build his or her system of measurement on imperial units? This implies that “the Supreme Mathematics” is really a colonial system. Knight’s mystification of the numbers argues against his original intention, and it merely parodies the divine quality that is afforded to numbers in Islam. In addition, much of Knight’s appreciation of Burroughs as shown in his latest work relates to drugs. When discussing ayahuasca (a psychoactive vine native to Amazonian Peru), Knight stresses Burroughs’s expertise in the area (*Tripping* 15), later giving an account of Burroughs’s experience with ayahuasca: “Burroughs wrote that when you drink ayahuasca, ‘The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian—new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized—pass through your body.’ When Burroughs drank, he actually saw himself transformed into both a black man and a black woman” (*Tripping* 25). However, Knight’s interest in drugs differs from that of Burroughs. If

Burroughs was trying to show a utopian quest in his search for yage, and a dystopian endgame in his fascination with heroin addiction, Knight is obsessed with ayahuasca as a method to access mystical insight and the core of his own identity, though he is also promoting himself as “cool” in the pursuit.<sup>20</sup>

Among interpretations of junk as a metaphor in Burroughs’s writings, that of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze is the most evocative. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs notes, “You see control can never be a means to any practical end... It can never be a means to anything but more control... Like junk...” (137). According to Deleuze, Foucault’s concept of “control society” was based on Burroughs’s ideas. Deleuze and Foucault believed that we are entering into a new “control society” which is different from both “sovereign society” and “disciplinary society.” Here “control” refers to the decline in the need for confinement and institutions such as schools, factories, and hospitals. Instead, “control society” has an ever-increasing desire for control. Deleuze uses a tangible example to clarify this concept: “Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control... People can travel infinitely and ‘freely’ without being confined while being perfectly controlled. That is our future” (Deleuze, *Creative* 322). Although Knight asserts that “wherever there’s a story of control, there’s a story of resistance,” his obsession with drugs is less a critique of social control than a way of showing off his “coolness” (*Tripping* 21). The fact that Knight does not differentiate between junk and hallucinogens contrasts with Burroughs’s approach, and

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<sup>20</sup> Aleister Crowley is another figure who has written about the relation of drugs and mystical experiences. “The Psychology of Hashish” is an essay written in Madrid in 1908 (four years after his so-called prophetic trip to Egypt) where he calls hashish “[the] burning daughter of the Jinn [spiritual creatures mentioned in, for example, the Quran and the Arabian Nights]” (95). While Crowley does not see anything morally wrong with using the drug, he states “nobody will acquire the habit but the destined drug-slave; and he may just as well have the hashish habit as any other; he is sure to fall under the power of some enchantress” (117).

it reinforces how Knight equates resistance and “coolness.” In *Tripping with Allah*, Knight claims facetiously and provocatively that he wants to exchange coffee culture for the cult of ayahuasca. Referring to the pilgrimage to Mecca, he insists “you put the pilgrims on acid, all of the sinister Saudi shit would come falling down” (113). And later he adds, “we need fuckin’ *ayahuasca* at the Prophet’s tomb, not imperialist coffee” (114). In fact, Knight now indulges his tendency to be provocative and outrageous at any cost. He appears increasingly to be attracted to Islamic figures solely as long as they talk about sexuality or drugs. He opens *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*, for example, by telling the infamous story of a slave girl “who fucked a donkey” in Rumi’s Mathnawi (*William 3*), and later discusses how Ibn Arabi made his journey to Mecca: “he began to compose erotic poems about his teacher’s fourteen-year-old daughter, Nizam” (*William 8*).

### 3.3.2 How “Cool” is Islam?

“I am a recording instrument... I am not an entertainer...” (Burroughs, *Naked* 184)

Burroughs notes that “the Inscrutable East need[s] a heap of salt to get it down” (*Naked* 192), but does Burroughs, like Knight, really understand Islam as a “cool” tradition compatible with American life? *Naked Lunch*, for instance, is a dystopian novel about a world without God, a world in which “nothing is true and everything is permitted.” “Islam Incorporated,” of which its “exact objectives are obscure,” appears to be Burroughs’s version of Islam, an Islam of the future in which God is dead and Allah is merely a word (134). Knight suggests that Burroughs has introduced an element of fringe Islam into the American subconscious, but Burroughs’s Islamic references fall into three categories: those regarding violence, those addressing homosexuality,

or more exactly homosexual pedophilia, and finally those offering information, whether real or fantasized, about Islam and Arabs.

Arabs and violence are inseparable in *Naked Lunch*. “Arab rioters,” Burroughs writes, for example, “yip and howl, castrating, disemboweling, throw burning gasoline...” (33). He portrays Islam Inc.’s meetings attended by “a rout of Mullahs and Muftis and Muezzins and Caidis and Glaouis and Sheiks and Sultans and Holy Men and representatives of every conceivable Arab party” (122). These meetings end in riots:

Speakers are often doused with gasoline and burned to death, or some uncouth desert Sheik opens up on his opponents with a machine gun he had concealed in the belly of a pet sheep. Nationalist martyrs with grenades up the ass mingle with the assembled conferents and suddenly explode, occasioning heavy casualties... And there was the occasion when President Ra threw the British Prime Minister to the ground and forcibly sodomized him, the spectacle being televised to the entire Arab World... Interzone has an ordinance forbidding a meeting of Islam Inc. within five miles of the city limits. (122)

The fact that Burroughs wrote most of this novel in Tangier, in the period of the post-1948 Arab-Israeli War, seems to have inspired *Naked Lunch* in different ways and particularly its approach to violence. A.J., one of the major characters associated with Islam Inc., agitates for the destruction of Israel, and discusses the vital role of oil in the Near East (135). However, Arabs are not only the subject of violence; they are also its object. On one occasion, while the narrator has “a pitcher of boiling acid” in his hand in Hassan’s hospital, he sees a slight, short Arab, and then “seized by a convulsion of urgency” he throws it in the Arab’s face (47).

In addition to military violence, Burroughs associates Arabs with certain form of abusive, violent sexuality, a combination of homosexuality and pedophilia, or a fascination with what he calls Arabs' "young ass" (62). On one occasion, for instance, a character asks the narrator if he is interested in watching two Arab kids "screw each other" for fifty cents (50). His exploitative voyeurism is later reflected in many scenes in which he comments on the sexual availability of young Arab boys. He describes an Arab boy with his "pants tight over his lean young ass" (62), and later a group of Arab boys involved in "shit[ting] in the well and Rock and Roll across the sands of muscle beach eating hot-dogs" (84), as well as others who "play game with tarot cards on the bed to see who fuck who" (65). A major character in the novel, Dr. Benway, tells how "In Timbuktu I once saw an Arab boy who could play a flute with his ass" (113). In addition, during one of A.J.'s annual parties, the narrator seems to describe a scene from a movie. There is a girl and a presumably Arab boy trapped in an abject sexual relationship. The girl wants to wash the boy's ass, and, "He gets down on his knees and leans forward, with his chin on the bath mat. 'Allah,' he says" (76).<sup>21</sup> This obsessive anal interest leads to one of Burroughs's final statements in the book: "Gentle reader, we see God through our assholes in the flash bulb of orgasm... Through these orifices transmute your body... The way OUT is the way IN..." (191). The pedophilic voyeur appears to be declaring the start of a new age in history in which the human anus has learned to talk.

How are Knight's most recent works related to Burroughs's often violent, satirical version of Islam and Arab culture? Knight's last two books combine autobiography or personal diary, fiction, and scholarly commentary on esoteric cults. Apparently, both are products of

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<sup>21</sup> The "young ass" issue is not limited to *Naked Lunch* and can be found, for instance, in *The Western Lands* where, again in regard to Tangier, Burroughs writes "so many Arab boys about, Kim decides to take the cure and indulge in sex" (19).

Knight's Harvard period, and like Knight "Burroughs was a Harvard man" as Knight mentions in *Tripping with Allah* to show the affinities between his project and Burroughs's (8). Burroughs also gave scholarly lectures and he had a diverse, even quixotic educational background in anthropology, psychology, and medicine that enabled him to create a hybrid space for the real and the fictional to mingle. Besides telling stories, *Naked Lunch* includes the voice of a scholar in the fields of medicine or the philosophy of mind and body. For instance, "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," a passage he later added to the novel, is a scholarly, anthropologic essay, the result of his participant observation in North Africa on the topics of drugs and addiction, as well as their relation to the concept of control.

Knight is an aspiring academic at present, having earned a Master of Theological Studies at Harvard University, and being currently a PhD student of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is also a critic of the academy, deploring its restrictive effect on creativity. He discusses this anxiety in *Tripping with Allah*, pointing out regarding the academic study of religion: "the more I learn, the more it's all up for grabs. It's death by critical reading" (89). He appears to regret the shift in the focus of his writing, maintaining that "I used to be an artist, and now I write papers for seminars" (134). Knight addresses this issue further in *William Burroughs vs. the Quran* where he writes of his experience at a conference: "I don't care much for conferences, since I'm not a scholar or an activist and writing for me is just a matter of spilling guts" (25). However, contrarian that he is, Knight goes to the 2005 National Conference on Organized Resistance in D.C. at which he has been invited to join a panel on "Islamic Anarchism: Pipedream or Reality." He uses the opportunity to make a speech on the Five Percenters, but he maintains his position that work in academia is a "soul-murdering path," and "you can't fake your language. You write the way you speak, and school has ruined my words"

(*Tripping* 134). Life in the academy does not let Knight be as “cool” as he wants. He compares writing a book with “inviting readers to a party” where people examine “the guest list” before attending: “You put a quote from the right figure at the top of your chapter and it will draw readers in, because it makes them feel like they’re hanging with the cool kids” (*Tripping* 129). In fact, the academy and its professors are like security guards (or a collective super-ego) for Knight; they stand at the front door and do not let him invite in everyone.

Knight aspires to become another Burroughs in the sense of writing “cool” works of fiction which discuss serious matters, but these writers differ profoundly. Burroughs questions human language and subjectivity, but Knight appears to seek to be outrageous in terms of violating taboos merely for shock value or self-promotion, and his core subject shifts from reforming Islam to explaining his own neuroses. For Burroughs, language is a virus, and if it is something that has infected the brain, it may also infect the mouth, and even the asshole. However, when Knight writes about Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, his limitations are clear. He can only write about Fatima’s genitals in *Tripping with Allah*, as a direct, inflammatory response to readers who have criticized his patriarchal, sexist attitudes. Yet, Fatima is an incidental and mainly selfish concern for Knight and his discussion is focused on provoking shock for its own sake: “A messenger from myself to myself, Fatima provided the Fatima that I needed, with the Ali [Muhammad’s cousin and Fatima’s husband] that I needed, the Fatima and Ali that I witnessed for myself, in myself. Their roles in my vision were determined by my biography” (259).

Knight’s desire for “coolness” at any cost is reflected in a number of instances in *Tripping with Allah*. When Knight talks about negative theology in Derrida with Jehangir Allah, his friend responds: “who you choose to quote is a fuckin’ power play... It’s the power of

lording coolness over someone. You reference a certain band and that's how you perform your coolness. Or you reference a band that no one else has heard of, and you're automatically the coolest person in the room... Derrida's just a fucking T-shirt for you" (129). Jehangir, who is in a sense a reincarnation of Jehangir Tabari in *The Taqwacores*, also warns him about girls that are going to vanish when Knight becomes thirty, and especially when he is a boring academic. In addition, Knight's critique of New Age culture represents his view of "coolness" as well: "The indigenous cultures of South America are cool; ayahuasca is cool; the rain forests are cool. North America's indigenous peoples are also cool... India is cool... Tibetan Buddhism is cool; Japanese Zen is cool" (171-72). However, amid this ubiquitous "coolness," he is not criticizing the vague idea of "coolness" itself: "What you don't see in this New Age matrix of coolness is anything Islamic" (172). His goal was apparently to bring forward a "cool" version of Islam, but it is questionable whether it is ultimately realized.



## Chapter 4 Conclusion

“I’ve spent the decade after 9/11 writing with fair hope that I could pump out some defining work of the time... I thought that I could write a book about Islam for Muslims like me, since none of the pop intellectuals of post-9/11 American Islam, neither the pop reformers nor the pop apostates, held any interest in us odd ones.” (Knight, *Tripping* 133-34)

As a writing warrior who deems that “writers, like wrestlers, perform their suffering on a stage,” and a post-9/11 American knight inspired by Arab mystical cavalrymen like Hassan Sabbah, Michael Muhammad Knight is fighting on different fronts with different enemies (*Tripping* 144), as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate. On one level, Knight is involved in the lesser jihad, a war against those he considers to be the enemies of God. A fan of professional wrestling and American superheroes, Knight attacks governments of Muslim countries, such as the Saudis—“Everyone hates the Saudis” (*Osama* 120)—for permitting the “imperialist” Starbucks to open branches at Mecca and Medina, while he also criticizes many Islamic scholars around the world (*Tripping* 81). One target of his criticism is the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, an institution established prior to the Islamic revolution of 1979 to investigate a progressive version of Iranian Islam that fits the country’s ongoing process of modernization and goes beyond the Islam of the hawzas, the traditional school of in Shia Islam. Knight labels the Imperial school a “mystico-fascist cult” and argues that its associates like Henry Corbin “were bloodsucking, slavemaking Ten Percenters, court philosophers hired to do a job” (*William* 64), though he later refers to Corbin to support his quasi-scholarly arguments about, for example, Avicenna’s

hierarchy of ten intelligences, and the decoding of the figure of Fatima in Shiism (*Tripping* 57, 163-4). To a larger extent, Knight fights at other frontlines in North America, namely ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) which is known for its “progressive” perspectives. Knight believes the ISNA to be “a vision of smiling professionals in cotton white hijabs... politically moderate doctors, teenagers who keep their genitals clean and a perfectly sound way of life that all Americans will inevitably flock towards or at least concede an enlightened admiration” (*Blue-Eyed* 8). Knight accuses ISNA and conciliatory figures like the Pakistani-American writer Asma Gull Hasan of giving a false recognition of Islam in post-9/11 America; one he finds compatible with George Bush’s policies at the time. He mocks the inside jacket’s blurb of Hasan’s *Why I am a Muslim*<sup>22</sup> which begins with the phrase “In the wake of 9/11”; Knight elsewhere expresses his annoyance about how “to the media world, everything a Muslim did was in the wake of 9/11” (*Blue-Eyed* 122).

Knight supposes that mainstream, “progressive” American Muslims like Hasan are people who already know that “organized religion generally isn’t cool,” but they “lack the heart to admit it” (*Blue-Eyed* 185). This is symptomatic of how he, whether deliberately or unintentionally, generalizes his personal, subjective, vague understanding of spiritual “coolness” and asks everyone to use the same criteria. The post-9/11 Islam, for Knight, is portrayed by these “progressive” forces like “a drug, the new poisoning of the mind from which Americans must be protected” (*Tripping* 17); thus, he is functioning like a cathartic agent, someone who is writing “some defining work of the time” and purifying the American mind about what Islam is and is not, by forming his critique of all these discourses around their dismissal of “odd ones” like himself, “a Muslim, a writer, something of a scholar, the son of a schizophrenic, American,

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<sup>22</sup> The title of Knight’s *Why I Am A Five Percenter* has a direct reference to Hasan’s book.

white, male, and a chronic masturbator... with a head full of pro wrestling” (*Tripping* 133, 160). Knight problematizes a crucial point as he examines the racial and class struggles within Muslim communities, and how the progressive frameworks whether inside (e.g. ISNA) or outside (e.g. Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy) of North America reject the misfit, marginal Islam. Likewise, Knight’s sympathy for Khomeini (the leader of Iran’s 1979 revolution) and the reason for his having “a huge portrait” of the Ayatollah on his bedroom wall are not only a result of Khomeini’s emphasis on the Islam of the poor, but also his harsh rejection of many American values during and after the revolution, a time corresponding to Knight’s “Oedipal” childhood (*Blue-Eyed* 1). Knight sees in Khomeini, with whom he shares a birthday (September 24) the father he (metaphorically) never had. In his place, “the real Man of the house stared down at me from my bedroom wall,” a man whose “face had awesome power, like he was father enough not only for his house but a whole nation of people” (*Impossible* 334, 88). Knight appears to find “coolness” in almost everything opposing American mainstream culture, no matter what the consequences. Khomeini and Fard both represent the fatherly figures Knight has followed in different periods of his life, and his mother also encourages him to maintain his new Islamic affiliation: “You’re not hurting anyone, bud. You get into this, you get what you want out of it, and then it’s on to the next thing. It’s been like this since you were six years old” (*Impossible* 343). Knight’s mother protects her son from possible further consequences from interactions with his biological father, but she cannot foresee the direction of his increasingly eccentric faith. Knight refers to writers’ “suffering” as inevitable and to his audience’s lack of “concern for whether the suffering is real or not” (*Tripping* 144). However, both Knight and his mother miss the other side of the issue, the question of the potential damage Knight’s writing may do to his audience. Knight’s understanding of the “other” is egocentric and one-sided.

On another level, Knight is involved in the greater jihad, fighting his *nafs* or ego, one that is not completely disconnected from the lesser jihad. His obsession with autobiographical, self-promotional writing is no doubt a reflection of his battle with himself. Knight has intentionally tried to be an “odd one” or at least has reinforced a perception of himself as such, but his “alternative” Islam fails to give a fair account of other Islam(s) since his reformist tendency has become more and more personal and subjective during the last decade. The difficulty with accepting Knight’s “cool” (punk) Islam is that he himself does not offer a clear definition or way of understanding what in fact being spiritually “cool” means. While Knight interprets his own works as an exploration of “the neglected corners of American Islam,” which is correct in many senses, his books have the larger effect of setting himself up as an essential if not the essential figure of this neglected, fringe, controversial Islam (*William* 103). In his recent works, Knight does not miss a chance to quote anyone who has praised him: “I’m the ‘Godfather of Muslim punk,’ they say” (*William* 107); “Someone else tells me, ‘You should consider becoming an Imam,’” and this “puts me in the running with... Master Fard Muhammad as the greatest salesman of all time” (*William* 104); “I get compared to... any unconventional or controversial character from Islamic history, any Muslim outside the law” (*William* 105). Knight generally dismisses those who criticize him such as the girl who in her thesis problematizes Knight’s representation of gender roles; he even Googles himself and quotes negative comments on his works in order to make himself “the center of the critique” (*Tripping* 135, 184-85). Getting public attention as a controversial cult celebrity has some genuine appeal for Knight; he repeats that he has been called “the Hunter S. Thompson of Islamic literature” and that “the blurb has gotten so much mileage—like the ‘*Catcher in the Rye* for Muslim youth’ one from *The New York Times*—that journalists and researchers... always have to repeat it” (*Tripping* 136). Knight

is passionate about being the subject matter for researchers and he says he likes “writing adventure books for academics to chew on”: “Becoming an object of study isn’t that hard: just place yourself at the intersection of two categories and they’ll spend all day coming up with a name for your new place” (*Tripping* 30). This demonstrates that Knight is not unaware of his ongoing process of self-promotion.

At the same time, however, Knight cannot bear his ego shattering to pieces, so it is questionable how successful his greater jihad or battle against the mirror has been. In *The Taqwacores*, Rabeya asks a bunch of questions after a Friday prayer in the punk house, one of them being “Does wudhu [the procedure of washing parts of the body in preparation for prayers] break [invalidate the process of purification] if you look into a mirror?” (81). Though she offers “no comment” or answer to the question, Yusef Ali (the narrator) becomes uncomfortable about its implications: he “grew embarrassed of Islam... or at least of Muslims” because they are concerned with such insignificant issues and asks himself “Were these the essential concerns for our spiritual enhancement?” (80-81). In his later works, Knight does not come back to this ontological question about the mirror, as if it is no longer a part of his project. Knight’s indifference towards the magical, spiritual mirror and the fact that he sees himself simply through the reflection of others parsing or condemning him differs from his earlier interest in both Sufism and Burroughs’s ideas.

Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* indicates that the thirty birds finally saw God/Simurgh within themselves, and that their reflection in the material mirror merely misrepresents the true nature of body and soul as well as the unity of God and Being, by means of the tricky nafs or ego that tries to escape death. In his (or her) final statement in Attar’s poem, Simurgh explains the mystery of “I” and “Thou” to the birds:

The Sun of my Majesty is a mirror. Whoever beholds himself in this mirror, sees there his soul and his body, sees himself entire in it... Since you, thirty birds, have come here, you find thirty birds in the mirror... If you have succeeded in crossing the valley of the spiritual road, if you have been able to do good deeds, you have only acted under compulsion from Me and you have thus been able to see the face of My essence and of My perfections... As for me, I am more than thirty birds. I am the very essence of the Simurgh. Annihilate yourselves in Me joyfully and gloriously so that you find yourselves in Me. (*Conference* 118)

Attar reinforces the picture which is not compatible with identification cards and personal photos, one beyond time and space, one conceivable only after finishing a long journey to eliminate the ego. Knight, however, does not look at the mirror within and he strongly defines his character based on the reflection offered to him by his fans and critics. Though in a different context and a more dystopian manner, Burroughs occasionally addresses this mystical quality of the mirror and its relation to the ego:

The writer sees himself reading to the mirror as always... He must check now and again to reassure himself that The Crime Of Separate Action has not, is not, cannot occur... Anyone who has ever looked into a mirror knows what this crime is and what it means in terms of lost control when the reflection no longer obeys... Too late to dial *P o l i c e*... (*Naked* 186)

The game is called Find Your Adversary. The Adversary's game plan is to persuade you that he does not exist... That is only one of his game plans. You find out he exists, and you are still a long way from a confrontation, a long way. A dreary abrasive dull way, sad voices, dirtier, older. (*Western* 12)

The “Adversary” Burroughs refers to is the ego, and the mirror reflects the seemingly “real” picture that sometimes has a will of its own.

This thesis has attempted to show how Knight’s debut novel opens up a Bakhtinian space so that a version of misfit American Islam comes into dialogue with more orthodox, mainstream perspectives within both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. While it is not possible to read *The Taqwacore* outside of the contexts of 9/11, the novel being a powerful expression of the atmosphere of distrust between Islam and America, the novel appears to begin the process of propagating the author’s passion for becoming known as the spiritual father of the Taqwacore subculture and anything related to “cool” Islam. Knight’s recent works represent a shift in his approach and shed a different light on his debut novel which was originally published in DIY style. This shift cannot be separated from his recent expressions of dislike for *The Taqwacores*, as he notes in the “Acknowledgments” of his most recent book, “Peace to every professor who tells me, ‘I taught your book in my course,’ and that book is not *The Taqwacores*” (*Tripping* 263). Knight does not want to be known merely as the author of *The Taqwacores* but desires his other books to be read too. This is not because he does not want to write fiction. *William Burroughs vs. the Quran*, for example, in places becomes *The Great Zamel* (referring to a male who receives anal penetration), “the greatest Islamic science fiction of all time” within a new literary genre, “Radical Queer Islamo-Futurism,” and it introduces a brand of “Taqwa-Cola” in the story, presumably an imitation of Burroughs’s “Islam Inc.” in *Naked Lunch* (*William* 131-32). Likewise, *Tripping with Allah* starts as a story of Knight’s ayahuasca trip, but later becomes an essay-like collection discussing drugs and esotericism like the texts surrounding Burroughs’s *Junky*. Knight’s investment in the Beats, as discussed in the third chapter, functions as an ideal model for his re-reading(s) of Islam as representative of a “cool” non-White culture. Knight

follows the Beats' affection for the mysterious, esoteric East; if Kerouac uses Zen Buddhism as the spiritual map for his American journey and bebop jazz as its soundtrack, Knight does the same thing with Islam and punk. Burroughs's concern for drugs and homoeroticism as well as his interest in fringe, esoteric Islamic figures like Sabbah gives Knight license to violate Islamic norms which he personally finds "uncool." It is the violation of Islamic norms that Knight finds "cool," but it is debatable whether the reason for Islam's being an unreachable, incomprehensible, and, at the same time, violent, erotic, and intoxicated "other" for the West is merely because it is not a "cool" discourse or that it needs someone to make it "cooler."

Knight never clarifies what he means by "cool," and this weakens the rationale for many of his experiences and assertions with respect to Islam. The word "cool" in Knight's lexicon functions as an empty, unidentified signifier which simply justifies the authenticity of anything Knight believes to be correct. One may wonder how much his enthusiastic involvement in backyard, quasi-professional wrestling, a performance of fighting as spectacle or carnival, encapsulates such a notion of being outrageous and "cool," as Knight clearly sees affinities between writing and wrestling, which both blur the line between "fiction and nonfiction," and whose audiences have no concern whether the performers' "suffering" is real or not (*Tripping* 144). In *Impossible Man*, when talking about the relation between his early, pre-*Taqwacore* interest in dangerous wrestling-related stunts and "coolness," Knight says,

I knew it was crazy, and not just crazy in the dumb-college stunt way but a whole other darker level where you don't get to have a normal life later... It was just seriously fucking wrong, so wrong that it pushed you out of the sociological mainstream, and I couldn't figure out why that was so cool, but it was. (310)



The passage suggests that the only possible criterion for counting something as “cool” is its assault on mainstream norms, and its promotion of subcultural, marginal values. This is what “the White [American] Muslim (1%)” finally means to Knight (*Blue-Eyed 2*). He sets himself at the margins of American society, or in the “subculture within subcultures of a subculture,” to show how “cool,” “impossible,” and “unique” he is (*Taqwacores* 154). Knight’s writing is less engaged in reforming Islam or creating an American Islam than in using his provocative, idiosyncratic, unorthodox, intentionally blasphemous, “cool” Muslim persona to promote himself. Finally, there is too much “I”—cool or otherwise—in Knight’s recent works. The move to autobiographical obsessiveness in these volumes stands in direct contrast with Islamic Sufi allegations that consistently emphasize killing one’s ego when one is on the road to God.

In conclusion, Knight’s writing is worthy of critical consideration not because it challenges mainstream American Islam with different forms of violation towards “the sacred,” but rather because Knight is the object of his own criticism. He tries to reinforce the esoteric, fringe aspects of Islam and to criticise those approaches that seek a happy, conciliatory hybridity of Americanness and Muslimness, but his idea of “coolness” merely demystifies “the sacred” and prepares Islam to be consumed or commodified in a certain way according to American values. For instance, in *Osama Van Halen* Knight describes how Amazing Ayyub recites *Ya Sin* as an “invisibility spell” (66). A sura (chapter of the Quran), *Ya Sin* is known as the “Heart” of the Quran which Muslims read as a memorial for a person who has recently died, as it broadly speaks about matters of death and the afterlife. Reciting *Ya Sin* in English as an invisibility spell might not be as blasphemous as urinating on the Quran, but it shows a desire to interpret the holy book in translation by means of American popular culture, by creating superheroes with superpowers. However, while it is perhaps playful, it leads to a demystification of death (a

significant element of “the sacred” in the Quran) which is very different from Knight’s interest in mystical, esoteric experience. Knight’s writing not only expresses an anxiety about the crisis of meaning regarding the representation of the relation of Islam and America in the post-9/11 context, but it also conveys the difficulties and dangers of assuming a position in the foreground of American Islam.

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