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# Refraction: The Prism Of Cultural Identity And How It Is Impacted By Grief And Storytelling

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Refraction:

The Prism of Cultural Identity and How It Is Impacted by Grief and Storytelling


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# APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
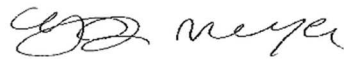the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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# ABSTRACT

These two essays explore the ways in which cultural identities are impacted by external forces within an environment, specifically grief and storytelling. In the first essay, the cultural identity of American Muslims is examined through the lens of the post-9/11 protests against the Córdoba House Muslim Community Center in New York City. The "grief-wrath" that was utilized against the Muslim Community by Islamophobic protesters is then explored in other instances within the United States, relating to the identity formation and expression that can happen in ways that refute discrimination and oppression. The second essay details the ways storytelling can express cultural identity through genre-specific decisions and the mode of blockbuster filmmaking, specifically in the Marvel film *Black Panther*. The marrying of Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist motifs within the film reveals diasporic nuances that reflect many experiences of those within the Black/African diaspora, in ways that have not been seen in large-scale productions in Hollywood.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Thesis is dedicated to my Amma, my person from the day I was born, thank you for always believing in me.

**Introduction: "Understanding the Prism and Exploring Refraction"**

When studying the effects that tangible events have on a difficult-to-measure concept like identity, I wanted to make sure that my examination of identities in this thesis especially engaged the ways in which labels and community serve those that use them. In the first chapter of this portfolio, my evidence also shows how identity categories can be coopted by groups that seek to reassign what they mean. However, for marginalized people who are required to build their identities in part around violences, microaggressions, and discrimination, these events can become formative for the community. Within the two chapters of my portfolio my approach to analyzing cultural identity differs from the conventional method of using examples as a "lens" onto the questions I pose. Instead, I am using the "cultural identity prism" as an approach through which to explain the specificities of my approach. Scholars often speak to using a "feminist" or "racial" lens in their examination of events or as an approach to understand the internal workings of the communities they study. In comparison, I felt that the prism was a better tool for what I was trying to do analytically. The prism allows me to more fully understand the events that I explore in my thesis portfolio, in a way that complicates the understandings of the communities that I discuss. Rather than a linear or general understanding of the identities I address in my portfolio, I sought to "trouble" or complicate these understandings through my analysis and explicate the multi-faceted nature of cultural identity.

I begin my first chapter with the example of the attempt by two Muslim U.S. Americans to create a community center they named the Córdoba House. The protests

of white and non-Muslim U.S Americans that met their attempt to establish this Community Center blocks away from the 9/11 Memorial, were angry and hate filled. In responding to the opposition to the construction of the Córdoba House some members of the U.S. Muslim American community re-evaluated and complicated what being Muslim American actually meant to themselves and to those that perceived them. Similarly, in chapter two of my portfolio, I analyze the sub-genre of black speculative fiction, and specifically use: Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism as analytical frameworks to examine the film *Black Panther.* Ryan Coogler created this filmic artwork by melding these two sub-genres; an approach that allowed him to communicate possible ways in which members of the Black/African diaspora, the black communities, viewed themselves. Coogler's blending of these two sub-genres allowed for a more complex articulation of the tensions within black communities – diasporic and non-diasporic – and for nuance in spaces that often do not allow it.

My first chapter is entitled, "The Córdoba House that Never Was: A Failure to Grieve After 9/11". In writing the initial paper that this chapter is based on for Professor Stow's class, "Mourning and Memory," what attracted me to the topic was that I thought it was an opportunity to examine how some members of U.S. Muslim American communities perceived themselves, especially in the context of the targeting of U.S. Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as reevaluating what "American" really meant to U.S. American citizens. Viewing the rebuilding and healing that those proposing the Córdoba House were trying to facilitate how non-Muslim people responded allowed me to bring in the theory of "untouchable circumferences," or spaces

within which disrespect should not be tolerated, an important part of my analysis, as well as more deeply interrogate the question of what rights are afforded to whom in this country. These questions were key to my identity analyses because cultural identity for Muslim Americans does not end at their religious and cultural Muslim identity, questions of identity also extend to definitions of citizenship and "belonging."

My second chapter is about the film Black Panther and is called "*Black Panther*: Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist Storytelling" which I wrote for Professor Hermine Pinson's "Black Speculative Fiction" class. Getting to see how identity could be articulated within the realm of fiction, was a wonderful experience for me. I learned how authors used tools like fabulation, or the act of creating and writing fictional stories, to envision and communicate new or different possibilities, while simultaneously expanding on the idea of the black imagination. In this chapter I focused on two subgenera within this field, Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. I specifically looked at Nnedi Okorafor's ideas of Africanfuturism, which she defines as distinct apart from Afrofuturism and the differences between the two. Okorafor writes that the two subgenera operated like bridges between one another and while different they were not completely separate. The main difference Okorafor sees between these genres is that Africanfuturism does not privilege Western ideas. She wanted to make sure that work like hers and those that are deeply invested in the African continent, its history, its peoples, and its traditions were not always lumped into Afrofuturism, which is mostly set in the West with Western ideas of a Black American experience. When viewing the film *Black Panther*, I thought that Ryan Coogler did a wonderful job of marrying these two subgenera in a way that is

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emblematic of conversations that happen at the ends of the diaspora. Conversations of colonial power, American intervention, and the glimpses of how an envisioned Africa might be without the burdens of colonialism. Referring back to the idea of a "cultural identity prism", I felt like the film itself was allowing a "mainstream audience," to witness internal understandings and conversations that are derived from this more nuanced understanding the Black/African diasporic prism provides.

## Chapter 1: "The Córdoba House that Never Was: A Failure to Grieve After 9/11"

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers took control of four commercial airplanes and targeted landmarks down the East Coast of the United States. During this attack both the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center were flown into and destroyed, leaving thousands dead and millions of U.S. Americans terrified. It was later revealed that the attack had been orchestrated by al-Qaeda, motivated by Osama bin-Laden (Al-Qaeda's leader) and his published 1996 fatwa, an Islamic ruling or decree. The felling of the World Trade Center by al-Qaeda terrorists completely changed life in the United States for all its citizens, especially those who were Muslim. Because of the perceived connection between Islam and al-Qaeda, many Muslim Americans were scapegoated and inaccurately deemed "Un-American."

Eight years later, in July 2009, Faisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan purchased 45-51 Park Place, a property blocks from Ground Zero in Manhattan, with the support of their financial backer Sharif El-Gamal. Rauf and Khan envisioned this location housing a new "Córdoba" referring to the ancient mosque that was built in the

ancient Roman city Tartesic Corduba after a Moorish conquest in the 8th century. The Historic Centre of Cordoba, as it is presently referred to, bears evidence of the many cultures "Roman, Visigoth, Islam, Judaism and Christian"[1] that lived in and around the structure. The Khan-Raufs wanted the new Córdoba to exemplify the unity possible when people of all faiths gather in community. Rauf, a practicing Imam in Manhattan, was very familiar with the physical and emotional needs of his community and those of the people surrounding them. Manhattan was not only nursing physical wounds from the 9/11 attacks, but the spirit of the city had also suffered. Simultaneously, Muslim Americans were experiencing the repercussions created by a series of local and state political and legal actions as well as the sense of outrage among many U.S. Americans that emerged in the wake of 9/11. These repercussions included, hate crimes directed at Muslim Americans, and the equation of Islam with terrorism by many white and non-Muslin U.S. Americans. Rauf and Khan wanted to break down these assumptions and allow all the people of New York City, as well as their own community members to access resources such as a basketball court and babysitting. They would call their community center the Córdoba House, and in shorthand Park51. Artist renderings of the proposed construction project illuminated Rauf and Khan's dream, with a white sky reaching exterior and the smooth lines of modern architecture, the Córdoba House was designed to be welcoming to all.

Sadly, Córdoba House/Park51 would never be able to be fully realized. During the aftermath of 9/11, much of the American public used "grief" as a way of perpetuating

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[1] UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Historic Centre of Cordoba," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/313/.

white nationalism and Islamophobia. The Córdoba House Islamic Community Center, which never came to be, is an example in which all these factors combined on a national scale. By understanding the discourse concerning the building of the Córdoba House through the idea of an untenable form of grief that has been allowed to fester and be used for political gains, we can understand how tragedy in the United States has often been co-opted as means to perpetuate bigotry.

In my analysis of grief as a rationale for or source of motivation and energy within bigoted segments of the U.S. American population. I built on the work of political theorist, Simon Stow, especially his article "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss," In his essay Stow writes about the phenomenon of "the grief-wrath of *mênis"* identified by Classicist Nicole Loraux, as one of the results of the Greek idea "*álaston pénthos*: mourning without end".[2] Much of the United States' population post-9/11 subscribed to the form of grieving that Stow references; a mourning without end and one that can bring destruction to a democracy because of hate inhibiting possible collaboration. The U.S. American public adopted a public mourning, versus the more private type of mourning preferred by the Greeks.

It is understandable that a nation attacked by a foreign group in such a public and violent way as the 9/11 attacks would be reeling, studies by the Pew Research Center suggest that this had been the most sudden and catastrophic event in most Americans' lives. Nearly every American polled felt depressed in the days following the

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[2] Simon Stow, "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): pp. 687-700, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592712001703, 688.

attacks and many people were reeling with the understanding that life in the United States did not mean inherent safety.[3] That some U.S. Americans had not felt threatened prior to 9/11 speaks to a specific experience; people who viewed the United States as a bastion of "freedom" and a place free from the "type of violence" that plagues "third world countries." These ideas of "American Exceptionalism" manifested in the complete disbelief many people felt that an attack on American soil was even possible. While this type of mourning, grief, and reprocessing lie on the spectrum of post-traumatic coping, many U.S. Americans used these feelings as a basis for expressing an American Exceptionalism that fit neatly into a type of extreme nationalism. "America First" rhetoric could be heard across the political spectrum and the 'who' and 'what' exactly Americans were defined as was thrust into the spotlight of American discourse.

Muslim people were the indicted group in the reckoning of "what American is not," because of the identities of the hijackers who had carried out the attack on September 11, 2001. What is important about this reevaluation occurring in the American psyche was that though the nineteen terrorists who were affiliated with al-Qaeda, were not American citizens, and had allegedly carried out the attack as an indictment of American military intervention and violence in the Middle East — many 'Muslim looking' people in the United States now felt suspicious eyes on them. The hijackers were from Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, meaning Islam had been racialized and associated with terroristic intent in one major event. Valarie Kaur

[3] Hannah Hartig and Carroll Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11," Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, April 1, 2022), http://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

writes of the experience of being a Sikh American in a post-9/11 America, "I felt that America was wide enough to embrace my diverse identity… Suddenly I saw myself and my family through the eyes of others—our brown skin and turbans marked us as perpetually foreign, automatically suspect, and potentially terrorist. I needed to reconcile the America I knew and loved with the fear hijacking my country."[4] In the course of this bigoted, convoluted logic the first hate crime committed after 9/11 was against Balbir Singh Sodhi, an American Sikh man. Suddenly brown skin, a turban, and a beard meant 'Muslim' and Muslim meant 'terrorist'. If this logic had needed any more questioning or more of an indictment on the 'wrath' that now was plaguing the country; the first revenge killing carried out because of this grief-wrath was on a person who was not Muslim, not part of al-Qaeda, but who was a U.S. American citizen. While being Muslim or a non-citizen does not preclude a person from the human right to safety, these were the characteristics that the hijackers held and the criteria that now defined individuals as 'enemies of the United States.'

In the years after 9/11, research has shown that the U.S federal government itself and its agencies discriminated against Muslims and 'Muslim-looking' people in the United States. This discrimination or targeting of particular people based on criteria emerging after the 9/11 attacks was made most visible through the passage and implementation of the Patriot Act. One lawsuit Turkmen vs. Ashcroft, against prison administrators and Bush administration officials, revealed that many South Asian and

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Arab men were arrested, held in solitary confinement, and tortured because they were

suspected of terrorism, solely because of their appearance. According to court

documents one of the plaintiffs, Akhil Sachdeva, "was said to have been speaking in

Arabic (although in fact, he is a Hindu from India), and to have talked about "flying and

flight simulators"[5]. Ahmer Abbasi, a Pakistani immigrant who was in the United States,

wrote of his horrifying experiences:

> Two weeks after the 9/11 attacks, I was arrested by the FBI and thrown in jail at
>
> the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. I wasn't told why... I was beaten
>
> and thrown into solitary confinement...they put me in handcuffs, chains, and
>
> shackles. They were so tight I would lose feeling in my fingers. I was strip-
>
> searched again and again, sometimes when I hadn't even left my cell...The
>
> guards called us 'f---ing Muslims' and 'terrorists.' Abbasi later learned that he and
>
> many of the other one thousand two hundred South Asian or Arab men arrested
>
> in the wake of September 11th were, "arrested after neighbors called the FBI
>
> about "Arabs" working long hours, or "Middle Eastern" men renting post office
>
> boxes...[6]

Only seven hundred and fifty of the men they arrested were charged with immigration

violations, overstaying their visas like Abbasi who was denied asylum from the violence

he experienced in Pakistan (Sachs).

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[5] " Muslim, Arab, South Asian Men Rounded up Post-9/11 Based on Racial, Religious Profiling with Knowledge of Ashcroft, Others," Center for Constitutional Rights, accessed May 9, 2022, https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/muslim-arab-south-asian-men-rounded-post-911-based-racial-religious.

[6] Ahmer Abbasi, "My Post-9/11 American Nightmare," New York Daily News, April 8, 2018, http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/post-9-11-american-nightmare-article-1.2948815.

The "crimes" these men were accused of committing were largely not felonies

and most were linked to their status as immigrants. That they were tortured in relation to

the "minor" crimes they were accused of clarifies the deeply embedded prejudices and

stereotypes held by U.S. state officials and their agents against particular groups after

9/11. As journalist Susan Sachs discovered, those arrested were, "kept in solitary

confinement with the lights on 24 hours a day; placed under a communications blackout

so that they could not seek the assistance of their attorneys, families, and friends;

subjected to physical and verbal abuse; forced to endure inhumane conditions… Some

of the abuse includes severe beatings and sleep deprivation...several defendants in the

case have recently been convicted on federal charges of beatings and cover-ups of

other prisoners around the same time period."  Most of the men were deported to their

home countries, this clarified that "belonging" in the United States was incredibly

precarious for those whose bodies fit into the "Un-American" mold.[7] The right to due

process guaranteed to all those who enter the United States, citizen or not, has often

been revoked from those who immigration or other law enforcement officials perceived

as the enemy. It is striking that in the twenty-first century federal and state policies that

were clearly racist and ethnocentric reinforced the popular attitudes among much of the

country.

This type of politically motivated racist nationalism as a reactionary force was not

unique to the United States or to this period in time. A brief survey of other historical

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[7] Susan Sachs, "U.S. Deports Most of Those Arrested in Sweeps after 9/11," The New York Times (The New York Times, July 11, 2002), https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/11/us/traces-terror-detainees-us-deports-most-those-arrested-sweeps-after-9-11.html.

examples does suggest, however, that this type of grief-wrath is a common occurrence

within U.S. American mourning. For example, violent attacks on Black communities by

white people in retribution for alleged sexual assaults that were said to have been

perpetrated by Black men[8] or the hate crimes that occurred toward Japanese

Americans after the Pearl Harbor bombings perpetrated by Japanese forces[9]. Most

modern social divides have political implications, it can be hard to pinpoint exactly why

certain ideas are furthered by media or legislative intervention. Erika Doss writes,

"Importantly, too, notions of American nationalism have not been abandoned in today's

memorial cultures but have been redefined to reflect particular assertions of

entitlement."[10] It can be seen within the treatment of the proposal for the Córdoba

House Islamic Community Center, that Ground Zero held a certain gravitas as a

memorial; an untouchable circumference within which the perpetuation of Islamophobia

was possible years after the attack. The outcry after Rauf, Khan, and El-Gamal's

proposal can only be adequately described by the concept of 'grief-wrath. There was

certainly vitriol and bigotry driving some of the opposition, but the underlying rationale

explicit in most opponents' statements was that the proposed Muslim center was being

built 'too close' to where the towers were felled.

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[8] Equal Justice Initiative, Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror (3d Ed., 2017).

[9] Leonard, Kevin Allen. "'Is That What We Fought for?' Japanese Americans and Racism in California, The Impact of World War II." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1990): 463–82.

[10] Erika Doss, "1, 2," in *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 48.

The racist politics that became visible after the  proposed creation of Córdoba House/Park51 painted the project as an evil symbol of terroristic encroachment into New York and  was most explicit when many mainstream media outlets began to refer to the proposed center as the "Ground Zero Mosque."[11] There are innumerable issues to engage with in relation this "title" for the Córdoba House, the media outlets using this term, and the refusal of the public to see the center for what it was trying to be. The media "renaming" implied that Rauf, Khan, and El-Gamal were trying to build a Muslim center for worship situated next to Ground Zero. Even if that were accurate there were a series of commercial enterprises like cigar shops, restaurants, shopping malls – as well as a Christian church all within walking distance of the National September 11 Memorial Museum. However, the grief-wrath targeted people like Balbir Singh Sodhi and manifested in other ways, Islam in many Americans' eyes was the 'non-American' identity they could pinpoint as being the root of the evil they perceived. Eboo Patel writes in his book Sacred Ground, "Those who opposed Cordoba House being at 51 Park Place puffed up their chests, let out their roars, and threw their spears every chance they got, which was pretty frequently, because for several weeks straight, it was the first question every journalist asked any politician."[12] Imam Rauf was subject to most of the attacks directed at the project, as he was its face and its most outspoken

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[11] Anne Barnard, "Painful Memory for Muslims: The Outrage over a Proposed Islamic Center.," "Painful Memory for Muslims: Outrage over a Proposed Islamic Center in Manhattan." (The New York Times, September 11, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/11/nyregion/muslim-islamic-center-9-11.html.
[12] Patel, Eboo. *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.

advocate. Attacks on Rauf came from conservative media analysts to Democratic Senator Harry Reid. Rauf was called a "terrorist sympathizer" and the project was cited as "an affront to American values."[13]

There is a perversion of memorializing an event like 9/11 with such a tremendous loss of life when the memorialization and the event itself is parlayed into a means of perpetuating hate. It forgets that Muslim Americans were killed in the attacks, that the worldwide population of Muslims had nothing to do with the alleged purpose behind the attack, and that blame cannot be exerted onto anyone but the perpetrators of the attack. One could hypothesize that scapegoating all U.S. American Muslims and 'Muslim-looking' people have had both political and social benefits for the majority of the country. It begs the question of whether or not this backlash, bigotry, and hate is a manifestation of grief at all; or if it was just an excuse to push blame onto an already marginalized group of people instead of an interventionist government. There is clear evidence to suggest that the 2001 attack by al-Qaeda was spurred on by Osama bin Laden's 1996 fatwa, which was an anti-western manifesto. While he did call for 'fighters in Allah' to object against 'fornication,' homosexuality and general perceived a-morality; he also specifically cited injustice against the Muslim population across the world conducted by United States allies. In no way can anyone endorse the method for "fixing" the perceived injustices bin Laden had laid out for the people who followed him, but what we can see is that he had a specific rationale in encouraging violence against the

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[13] Spencer Ackerman, "'The Scariest Thing I've Ever Seen in My Life': How the 'Ground Zero Mosque 'Meltdown Set the Table for Trump," Vanity Fair, August 9, 2021, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/08/how-the-ground-zero-mosque-meltdown-set-the-table-for-trump.

people of the United States. There was no reason to assign suspicion to Muslim individuals who elected to live in the United States, who did not associate with al-Qaeda, who were average citizens of or born in the United States.[14]

This brand of American exceptionalism and nationalism continues to be extremely frustrating to its critics, as a United States in which domestic terrorism never occurs is one of fantasy. The Oklahoma City bombing, the largest domestic terror attack on American soil, occurred only five years before 9/11. The fact that the broader white American public has such a short memory to assert that only Muslim, racialized, migrants could bring such a level of violence to the country, ignores the legacy of the United States. Timothy McVeigh, the architect of the Oklahoma City bombing was a U.S. military veteran and was particularly incensed by the federal government's treatment of civilians during the 1993 Waco standoff [15]. According to the FBI, "McVeigh, who visited Waco during the standoff, said that the government had declared war against the American people. He planned to fire the first shot in a new American revolution."[16] This is an incredibly empathetic view of a man who perpetrated specific ideological hate and tried to begin a civil war through a tremendous act of violence against the United States. There was no act of retribution against veterans or a

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[14] Newsdesk, "Bin Laden's Fatwa," PBS NewsHour, August 23, 1996, https://web.archive.org/web/20140419014901/http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/.

[15] The Waco standoff occurred on February 28, 1993 to April 19, 1993 and was between U.S. Federal agents, acting under the direction of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and David Koresh who was the leader of the religious cult Branch Davidians. The standoff lasted for approximately fifty days and ended when the Davidian compound caught fire, resulting in seventy-five dead, twenty-five of which were children.

[16] "The Oklahoma City Bombing 20 Years Later," FBI (FBI, 2015), https://stories.fbi.gov/oklahoma-bombing/.

racializing of terrorism in the United States, as a white man McVeigh was given the privilege of being viewed as an individual in his actions, representative of only himself.

We can use the concept of 'untouchables circumferences' to examine the idea of this specific grief-wrath as based on perpetuating hate instead of fostering healing, emerged. 'Untouchable circumferences or respected spaces offers a counterpoint to grief-wrath by encompassing spaces within which disrespect should not be tolerated. The term 'untouchable circumference' is used here instead of 'holy space' or 'place of honor' to emphasize the secular and nonsecular reality of the geography of respect as it comes to these places. The founders of the Córdoba House were told that their community center provoked the anger directed at them because it had brought a place of Muslim gathering into the untouchable circumference that was said to exist around the Ground Zero Memorial. This response indicates that the people who were angry about the Córdoba House being built within this circumference viewed Islam and the people who practice it as inherently disrespectful to the site of the memorial. This attitude spans beyond the perimeter of New York City or even New York state.

While Islamophobes often justify the individual hate crimes against perceived Muslim people as retribution for the action of the al-Qaeda terrorists, there is significant evidence that mosques across the United States are also continued targets. According to the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union, forty-four states have reported anti-mosque hate crimes since 2005. About ten percent of the two-thousand seven-hundred and sixty-nine mosques across the United States have reported hate crimes. This means at least two-hundred and seventy mosques have been attacked in the years since 9/11, this does not include information concerning repeat attacks or those that

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went unreported[17]. This is incredibly important because of the significance of the mosque within American Muslim communities, "Unlike mosques in Muslim countries, where their purpose is mainly for worship, mosques in the United States serve additional functions as places for social gatherings, community, and political involvement, community resources… legal, financial, social, cultural)"[18] The mosque is a symbol of belonging and safety for Muslim people in a country where they are not only a minority but actively vilified. Even if mosques did not carry such meaning, as a place of worship, their protection is of the utmost importance because of the United States' intent in protecting freedom of religion. The question of untouchable circumference, meaning a place of veneration or respect, can be seen to never be guaranteed for Muslim Americans. While the infringements that occur on the premises of mosques are often hate-filled, violent, and threatening; the only crime the creators of the Córdoba house committed was that of being Muslim.

It is interesting to parse out the exact limits of space within the untouchable circumference, the question of who exactly is guaranteed protection and respect within one goes to ideas of citizenship. "Un-Americanness" while assigned and ideological can have physically harmful effects when this lack of belonging transitions into a lack of citizenship within the country. Examples discussed previously, like Ahmed Abbasi's, abuse lend to the argument that perceived non-citizen Muslims were mistreated by the

[17]" Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity," American Civil Liberties Union, January 2022, https://www.aclu.org/issues/national-security/discriminatory-profiling/nationwide-anti-mosque-activity.

[18] Ann W. Nguyen et al., "Mosque-Based Emotional Support among Young Muslim Americans," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 4 (December 14, 2013): pp. 535-555, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-013-0119-0, 538.

government and not given due process to which they were entitled. However, when examining the treatment of Muslims who are entitled to all the benefits and protections of being an equal citizen under the law the understanding of the acute discrimination experienced by the community becomes clearer. The protection of space and perceived belonging are two factors that are directly related to the infringement of the untouchable circumferences around mosques across the United States. Sunaina Maira writes, "After 9/11, ties to Muslim communities and organizations outside the nation cast Muslim and Arab immigrants as potential security threats to the United States…or at least as immigrants whose political loyalties were suspect."[19] The 'double loyalty' trope has often been assigned to racialized groups that are perpetually othered within the United States, however, casting insular communities as being a sign of traitorous behavior among Muslim Americans betrays the belief that assimilation and isolation go hand-in-hand.

The white, Christian view of what Americanness is seeped into the expectations they have of others to become, not American, but like them. Maira also writes that "[Muslim immigrants'] desires for U.S. citizenship and permanent residency were not seen as conflicting with their affiliations with their home nation-states but layered in a flexible understanding of national belonging, embedded in mobility and migration."[20] This is an interesting nuance that greatly differs from the expectations that are

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[19] Sunaina Maira, "Flexible Citizenship/Flexible Empire: South Asian Muslim Youth in Post-9/11 America," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (September 2008): pp. 697-720, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0030, 712.

[20] Sunaina Maira, "Flexible Citizenship/Flexible Empire: South Asian Muslim Youth in Post-9/11 America," 704.

communicated by the expectation of what Americanness means and what would deem

a person to be safe from suspicion. Having different or nuanced understandings of what

citizenship means excludes many migrants from being held within a community that had

begun to grieve post-9/11. They were already differentiated from the American norm,

and the identities of the terrorists who committed the attacks compounded the othering

of Muslim and Muslim-perceived people in the United States.

The irony of the crowds that would come out in protest from the beginning of the

Córdoba House's proposal in 2009 until its cancellation in 2011, was that the Ground

Zero Memorial Museum had been built to foster a sense of oneness in the city and

provide an outlet for grieving. Simon Stow writes, "The hostility generated towards

Muslim Americans over the plans for the community center, including an outpouring of

violence and vitriol, suggests the ways in which the mode of mourning embodied in the

9/11 Memorial is dominated by the grief-wrath of *mênis* rather than the liberal values of

tolerance and respect" (690). Examining the reactions towards Rauf and the Córdoba

House project as rooted in this toxic type of remembrance and grieving allows a person

to glimpse into the democratic unrest the Greeks cited as a great fear of theirs. Stow

points to the failure of the memorial itself, or rather the mode of mourning it embodies,

to actually bring to fruition its mission statement to "…inspire an end to hatred,

ignorance and intolerance."[21]

Reading those words situated within the story of the Córdoba House, in a

political climate wherein the President of the United States' fitness to serve is being

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[21] Simon Stow, "From Upper Canal to Lower Manhattan: Memorialization and the Politics of Loss," 690.

questioned based on the fact that his father was a Muslim, is incredibly impactful and

expands our understanding of how this hate has been parlayed into the political arena.

In an ABC report reflecting on the twenty years since 9/11 it was cited:

> then-candidate Trump made the Islamic faith and Muslims targets of criticism
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> throughout his presidential campaign including proposing a ban on Muslims
>
> entering the country…. In March 2016, Trump claimed on CNN that hatred
>
> defined the Islam faith, saying 'I think Islam hates us. There's something there
>
> that — there's a tremendous hatred there. There's a tremendous hatred. We
>
> have to get to the bottom of it. There's an unbelievable hatred of us.'[22]

When examining the impact of the mainstreaming of Islamophobia on American

discourse and formations of identity, it is impossible to ignore the impact of words like

these. Donald Trump being elected successively to Barack Obama revealed a growing

sentiment in the United States in which statements that painted the entire religion of

Islam and every Muslim in the world, especially those in the United States, as moral

adversaries. We can see the burgeoning of these ideas within the backlash that the

Raufs experienced when proposing to simply helm a place of unity that would contain

the words 'Muslim' and 'community.' When ruminating on the actual function of

memorials in the processing of grief and providing a place of solace and peace, the

Ground Zero Memorial has categorically failed New York City and the United States at

large. The fact that those who perpetrated the terrorist attacks, that killed so many

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[22] Kiara Alfonseca, "20 Years after 9/11, Islamophobia Continues to Haunt Muslims," ABC News (ABC News Network, September 11, 2021), https://abcnews.go.com/US/20-years-911-islamophobia-continues-haunt-muslims/story?id=79732049.

innocent people, fell outside of the purview of the Anglo-American Christian norm separates this tragedy from others that may have similar memorials. Doss cites Alison Landsberg's work with 'prosthetic memory' and that experiencing and feeling, "sorrow and patriotism while standing above the rubble of Ground Zero—stems from the affectively enlarged dimensions of contemporary American culture."[23] In a sense, Doss indicates that the act of creating an immersive museum experience may not have been to foster the healing that was indicated in its mission statement but to constantly tear open an old wound by allowing visitors to constantly relive that greatest tragedy in many Americans lives.

The Córdoba House was a product of Muslim imagination. Imam and Daisy Rauf's dream was to have a safe place for everyone in New York City, to coalesce and find community in the peace and love they had found within their own religion. Because of the 'grief-wrath of *mênis,'* an unending rage-grief that consumed the American public, bigotry and violence became socially and politically advantageous against Muslim people in the United States. Ultimately processing any type of national devastation will take time and the ability to process the violence enacted. What is unique about the post-9/11 environment in the United States is that the nature of this grief allows for unending grief and unending hate simultaneously. While the exact purposes of the protests, arrests, deportations, and hate crimes may not be explicitly claimed to be carried out because of grief; we can see that the unending mourning around 9/11 and the demonization of an entire community because of it, these types of actions become

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[23] Erika Doss, "1, 2," *In Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, 51.

acceptable and enforced. Muslim people in the United States deserve the exact respect and rights of any other American, however, what continues to occur does not uphold any righteous treatment of the community. Allowing Muslim people, the ability to exist in peace, separate from the veil of terrorism that has continued to be thrust upon them, is the only way that healing can occur in the United States - both for the country as a whole and those who have been continued victims of unearned wrath.

## Chapter 2: "*Black Panther:* Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist Storytelling"

*Black Panther* was a groundbreaking film, within both the Marvel Cinematic Universe as well as the Hollywood machine that produced it. The film, based on the pre-existing comic book intellectual property, was co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler and went on to break box office records and surpass all expectations[24]. While the Chadwick Boseman-helmed feature could be considered little more than a 'superhero-flick,' I propose that the film's narrative and direction can be seen as a particular meeting of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism within an industry that does little to represent stories from diverse Black perspectives. *Black Panther* also has a larger cultural resonance around the globe, achieving some of the highest box office grosses

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[24] Alex Abad-Santos, "Black Panther's Massive Opening Weekend Made Marvel History," Vox (Vox, February 19, 2018), https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/2/19/17027428/black-panther-box-office-record.

in the worldwide market. This superhero film has brought aspects of Black diasporic

storytelling to audiences that would not have otherwise encountered it.

*Black Panther* is set in a fictional African nation called Wakanda, free from

colonial imposition, poverty, and Western intervention. To viewers, this vision of Africa is

seen as both futurist, imbued with science fiction, and also an effort to create the

possibility of a world without white colonial rule and interference. This is emblematic of

Black speculative fiction as a genre, and more specifically of Afrofuturism and

Africanfuturism. The distinction between the two subgenera is considered 'new,' while

the concepts and ideas behind the division are decades old. Nnedi Okorafor coined this

term within a blog post entitled, "Africanfuturism Defined." Okorafor expresses

frustration with the misunderstanding of her work and the boxes she feels that have

been placed around her. She writes, "Africanfuturism is not a wall, it's a

bridge…Africanfuturism is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that blacks on the

continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history, and

future" citing the understanding and grounded nature of Africanfuturism within the pre-

exciting realm of Afrofuturism. First coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in his essay "Black to

the Future," he defines Afrofuturism as African American speculative fiction[25].

Afrofuturism is rooted in expanding the Black imagination and emphasizes "blackness

rather than nationhood."[26] Nnedi Okorafor cites the lack of African-centeredness within

Afrofuturism as she  expands, "Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in

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[25] Sofia Samatar, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," Research in African Literatures 48, no. 4 (2017) https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.48.4.12.
[26] Samatar, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," 176.

African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West".[27] When viewing *Black Panther* through Okorafor's provided lens, we can see the different storytelling methods that Coogler utilized in both his direction and screenplay and explore the marrying of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism within the film, as well as the tensions both of these genres provide.

The 'Continent' being the focus of an Africanfuturist narrative framework fits neatly around Coogler's choice to center the world-building of the film centrally within Wakanda. Though we meet T'Challa the Black Panther, first in his role as visiting dignitary to the U.N. in *Captain America: Civil War* the audience is allowed to see him in his own environment for the first time as the movie begins. The tensions between the subgenera, Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, begins to arise as we acknowledge that the Wakandan prince's Xhosa-inspired accent was meticulously studied by American-born Chadwick Boseman who plays T'Challa in the movie. Casting an African American actor as the titular African superhero role is an interesting choice, while Coogler made an effort to include African actors in other roles within the film - the living Wakandan royal family are all played by British or American actors. Questions begin to be raised, is this de-centering an American narrative or complicating the portrayal of these very African characters?

Coogler broaches the idea of Pan-Africanism in many of his interviews about delving into the world of *Black Panther*. It is abundantly clear that Coogler's intention in

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[27] Nnedi Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined. "https://nnedi.blogspot/2019/10/africanfuturism

co-writing the script was to be an American eye understanding various African traditions and familial understandings and then connecting them to African American cultural realities. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Coogler says, "'I was very honest about the idea I wanted to explore in this film, which is what it means to be African…In the diaspora, the Africa we tend to hear about is this fantasy place…" Coogler's description of what he was told living in Africa was like for his ancestors is an incredibly African American experience[28]. Because of who he is and where he grew up, *Black Panther*'s arc oscillates between the tentpoles of Wakanda and Oakland, California - T'Challa and his cousin Killmonger. The tension between the two men, North America and Africa, and interventionism and protectionism are emblematic of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism within this work. Coogler cites his understanding of his ancestry was colored by an inherently Western view of history, he says "'Because it's hard to tell a child about slavery – it's so dire and so awful that you kind of have to balance it with something. So we get this fairy-tale version of Africa. 'We were kings and queens, and we walked around and ate perfect food, and everyone was free….It becomes kind of like Wakanda.'"[29] This view of African history and reality is centered around the kidnapping of the ancestors of African Americans and the histories their descendants create and pass down. African communities might take issue with their histories being boiled down

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[28] Eells, Josh. "Ryan Coogler: Why I Needed to Make 'Black Panther'." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 25 June 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/ryan-coogler-why-i-needed-to-make-black-panther-203737/

[29] Eells, "Ryan Coogler: Why I Needed to Make 'Black Panther'."

to the Atlantic slave trade, acknowledging the plurality in these experiences makes for more holistic storytelling.

However, there is a unity that is apparent among the diaspora as revealed in the film. Though T'Challa often represents an oppositional view to interventionist ideas, he feels a kinship with people in the African diaspora. A striking scene within the film when Zuri reveals to T'Challa how his cousin Eric Killmonger came to be and reinforces how deeply his roots are intertwined within a larger community, "ZURI: Your uncle took a War Dog assignment in America. Your father placed me there to observe unbeknownst to him. Your uncle fell in love with an American woman. They had a child. The hardships he saw there radicalized your uncle."[30] Within this dialogue, Coogler marries the two communities, both American and African, in blood. He draws biological connections, though separated by time, to each end of the African diaspora. While T'Challa and Eric (Killmonger) may have ideological differences they are family, Eric's revelation of his Wakandan lip tattoo is impactful as it cements his 'belonging,' though others may try to tell him it is not his home.

The tension between these characters is one marked by a discourse of privilege, global politics, violence, and marginalization. T'Challa being royalty skews towards the idealized fictitious history that Coogler referred to, the idea that "we were once kings and queens." In reality, many people who were kidnapped to be sold within the slave trade were normal citizens, enslaved themselves, or were sometimes from high-ranking

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[30] Ryan Coogler et al, *Black Panther*. *Black Panther*, Marvel Studios, Disney Corporation.

families in political opposition to those in power at the time[31]. Aligning 'Africanness' with flowing wealth and privilege is resonant for some African people, but most encounter the issues that an average person in the United States would face (disregarding the political upheaval that occurs in Africa as a result of historical colonialist intervention). Because Wakanda is removed from the reality of many African countries it becomes both an escape and a lie because in this universe Wakanda is the utopia and the United States retains all its inequality issues.

While having the United States' history of racism being represented on the big screen in such a way that explains the trauma that turned Eric into Killmonger is especially important, it doesn't seem truthful to the effort of African-futurists to only briefly touch on the issues facing many Africans across the continent. Militarization and kidnapping are referenced at the beginning of the film as a way of reintroducing T'Challa's heroic efforts and his love interest Nakia's role as a spy, it is a very simplistic way of perceiving the diverse economic, social, and political issues that manifest differently across the African continent. Of course, Coogler does not have to bear the responsibility of an entire continent of history, but he could have drawn a connection to neighboring nations and what they may face. Most Wakandans in the film spoke Xhosa, a dialect mainly originating in South Africa, a place rife with many of the same socio-political issues that the United States faces as a result of being a settler-colonial nation that built itself on the labor and torture of Indigenous and Black people.

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[31] J. D Fage, "African Societies and the Atlantic Slave Trade." *Past & Present*, no. 125 (1989): 97–115. http://www.jstor.org/stable/650862.

When examining the potential of representing a diaspora connected by more than only blood, carrying the through lines of these issues would have been an impactful way to marry the efforts of Afro-futurists and African-futurists. While the representation of these issues does not have to be historically accurate, they can be alluded to through fabulation, as these genres are more often than not didactic. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza writes of his examination of diasporic formation, "Diaspora, I would suggest, simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself…"[32] This definition allows for the possibility of nuanced storytelling that can trace the complexity of culture growing and forming simultaneously and in response to outside forces that seek to come into contact (maliciously or not) with the people within the community.

It can be seen that Coogler endeavored to try and represent these depths to the best of his ability within the constraints he had in producing a film for Disney. The placement of Agent Everett K. Ross, played by Martin Freeman, as a white operative of the CIA as a positive representative of the United States government's intervention is suspect. Especially considering the fact that Wakanda's success is often contributed to its distance from colonial forces and intervention from the global West. It would be irresponsible for any analysis of the film *Black Panther* to ignore the impact that Marvel Studios, owned by the Disney corporation, had on the final product. Because of the nature of the production of a film on this scale being commissioned as a larger part of

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[32] Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic." *African Affairs*, vol. 104, no. 414, 2005, pp. 35–68, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518632.

the "MCU" or Marvel Cinematic Universe, studios have a greater amount of control over the content within the film. Importantly, Marvel and Disney are also concerned with cultural relevancy - but more importantly, box-office impact. Famously, Hollywood has long neglected to produce a blockbuster picture with a majority Black cast. During the promotion of *Black Panther,* it was often cited by critics that the major studios were 'gambling' on the film as there were assumptions that global markets may not be receptive. One can only extrapolate the changes that were made to the script and during production to make sure non-Black viewers felt catered to by the production, and how these changes may have obscured the initial vision of the intellectual property creators or even Coogler himself.

Okorafor's definition is important to remember as we fabulate what could have been and the necessity for distinctions between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. She is quoted in an article for Comic Years, "distinguishing between the sub-genres of 'African fiction' allow space for Black creators to work outside of a white western perspective."[33] Ultimately the goal of these works is to expand the Black imaginary, regardless of where in the diaspora they may reside. However, it is also imperative to understand that there lies a wealth of creativity and storytelling beyond a North American perspective. While Ryan Coogler endeavors to marry the two subgenera in *Black Panther*, the film reveals an expansion that allows for a more nuanced understanding of colonial imposition into African nations and the kinship among nations would have been worth delving into in place of singularly relying on marginalized African American groups as a motivating

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[33] Comic Years Staff. "Black History Month Spotlight: Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism." Comic Years, Feb. 2022, https://comicyears.com/books/africanfuturism-and-afrofuturism/.

force for Wakandan charity. One scene that caught the attention of many moviegoers across the world was the museum scene that introduced Eric Killmonger. It was an inspired choice by Coogler to establish his 'anti-hero' as having qualities that were sympathetic to the viewers in a way that was immediately recognizable to an audience that had been affected by colonization - most of the racialized people in the world. Eric strolls into a museum and flags down an attendant:

Now, tell me about this one. *Killmonger points to a MINING TOOL off to the side.* MUSEUM DIRECTOR. Also from Benin. 7th Century. Fula tribe I believe. KILLMONGER. Nah. MUSEUM DIRECTOR *(AMUSED)* I beg your pardon? KILLMONGER. It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it's from Wakanda and it's made out of vibranium. Don't trip, I'mma take it off your hands for you. *She looks at Killmonger like he's crazy.* MUSEUM DIRECTOR. These items aren't for sale. KILLMONGER. How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else.[34]

This scene has taken on a life of its own, representing a feeling and a place of existence that is not only relevant to the African diaspora but to many colonized and racialized people around the world. The understanding of 'taking back' and 'reclamation' is present within struggles of identity within a world of marginalization and violence. Eric Killmonger, at this moment, represents an idea of self-determination and resistance that is not often looked highly upon, hence his anti-hero status, but is familiar to many audiences and allows for empathy. In this way, Coogler takes elements of Afrofuturist

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[34] Coogler, et al. *Black Panther*.

and Africanfuturist intent of fabulating circumstances that highlight and allow for the

representation of issues that pertain to the Black diasporic experience and combines

them into a format digestible to a worldwide audience.

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