Zareena Grewal

In March 1996, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson), Muslim guard of the Denver Nuggets, caused a stir when the NBA suspended him for refusing to stand during the national anthem. His stance, although consistent with the political orientation of many African-American Muslims, perplexed many immigrant Muslims unfamiliar with the long history of American dissent. By reexamining this controversy and the centrality of the media as the stage where the competition for religious authority was enacted, Abdul-Rauf’s life serves as an ethnographic window into Muslim American communities and into competing constructions of race and patriotism.

Keywords: African-American Islam, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson), patriotism, race

Introduction

In March 1996, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf of the Denver Nuggets caused a national stir when the National Basketball Association (NBA) suspended him for refusing to stand during the national anthem before games. Across the country, Americans responded to Abdul-Rauf in a variety of ways, ranging from patriotic outrage to sympathy and admiration for his principled stance. Abdul-Rauf characterized his dissent as an act of his “Muslim conscience.” As the story of the NBA suspension broke in the national media, Muslim Americans were put on the defensive: Did their belief in Islam compromise their ability to be loyal American citizens? The reaction of Muslim-American spokespeople interviewed by the media (most of whom were immigrant Muslims) was striking; they approached the controversy as a public relations disaster and responded to the requests to explain Abdul-Rauf’s position with an embarrassed disavowal.2
Muslim-American spokespeople’s desire to distance themselves from Abdul-Rauf’s stance reflects the climate of political fear in American mosques, the routine scrutinization of these populations, as well as their internal structures of ethnic/racial hierarchy. It is difficult to know how many Muslims live in the U.S. since the U.S. Census Bureau collects no information on religion but there may be as many as five to eight million, making Islam the second religion in the U.S. after Christianity. Today, most Muslim Americans are first-and second-generation immigrants from over sixty nations in South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Far East, and the Balkans who came in the largest numbers after the 1965 appeal of the Immigration Act, although some immigrant communities date back to the turn of the century. For most of the twentieth century, most Muslims in the U.S. were Black and Blacks still make up the largest sub-set of Muslim Americans, with estimates ranging from thirty to forty percent. Muslim-American communities are the most diverse in the world and mosques attract more heterogeneous congregations than any other houses of worship in the U.S. The fact that Muslim Americans from different walks of life regularly pray next to one another, however, does not mean that they necessarily understand one another. Typically led by highly-educated, upwardly mobile immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia, Muslim-American mosque communities and national religious organizations are riddled with racial and class tensions and cultural misunderstandings.

One particularly strong culture gap that crystallized in the Abdul-Rauf controversy is the markedly different historical trajectories of African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims and their often radically different orientations to the state. The immigrants, often political and economic refugees, are torn between their loyalty to the U.S. for privileges and freedoms (including religious freedom) often denied in their home countries, the intense pressures to assimilate to the dominant American culture, their social marginalization due to rampant prejudices, and their sense of alienation from the U.S. government’s often brutal foreign policies in the Muslim world. For many African-American Muslims, Islam serves as a tablet on which to inscribe their painful history in the U.S. as well as their radical political desires for reshaping the structure of American society such that it is more egalitarian and just. Abdul-Rauf’s stance, although consistent with the political orientation of many African-American Muslims (few of whom were interviewed in the mainstream media), perplexed many immigrant Muslims consumed by a different set of political issues, an international rather than domestic focus, and who, in large part, do not possess the cultural reference to understand Abdul-Rauf’s decision in the context of a long history of American dissent.

In this article, I reexamine the Abdul-Rauf-anthem controversy and the accompanying representations of Islam, Muslim Americans, and African-American political consciousness. The media became the stage where the competition for religious authority between Blacks and immigrants was enacted, revealing the fractures within Muslim American communities as well as the particular secular and racial logics that structure mainstream media representations of Islam, constructions of race, and national debates about patriotism, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. By placing this moment in a broader historical context of national discourses, we see the ways Islam is both raced and erased in the business of making Black Muslim athletes into national heroes or villains.

By the “Mississippi Son’s” Life: American Dream or American Nightmare?

In the fall of 2000, as a graduate student in anthropology and history at the University of Michigan, I decided to make a short documentary film about Muslims in the U.S. in lieu of a seminar paper. Although my memories of the Abdul-Rauf-anthem controversy were fuzzy, I came across a recently-published article that quickly brought them into
focus. Daniel Pipes, a neo-conservative columnist, author, and frequent media terrorism analyst often accused of being an “Islamaphobe” had written yet another one of his alarmist essays on the threat of Islam to Americans, arguing that Islam undermined the culture, customs, laws, and polices of the U.S. in more fundamental ways than fascist or Marxist-Leninist ideologies. In this particular piece, he focused on the special threat to the U.S. posed by African American converts to Islam because their “protest” temperaments and special susceptibility to the contempt for America imported by Muslim immigrants made them dangerous. As evidence of the ways Islam turned American converts against their own country, Pipes cited the example of the 1996 suspension of Abdul-Rauf by the NBA for not standing for the national anthem. He also applauded the opposition to Abdul-Rauf voiced by the Muslim spokespeople as a rare expression of moderate Islam.

Pipe’s representation of Abdul-Rauf as the proto-typical “un-American” Muslim became one point of departure for my film, By the Dawn’s Early Light: Chris Jackson’s Journey to Islam, which quickly snowballed from a class project into a feature-length educational documentary. By taking Abdul-Rauf’s life and career as a case study and the anthem controversy as the climax, the film provides an ethnographic window into Muslim-American communities, particularly the cultural misunderstandings and rifts between immigrants and Blacks. As a documentary in the true sense, the film documents multiple and competing perspectives by drawing on a wide range of archival footage sources, personal interviews, and expert analyses by Muslim-American public intellectuals and scholars. Rather than relying on a one-dimensional narration through a voice-over, the film’s montage of voices provides a rich, complex picture that weaves together Abdul-Rauf’s biography, analyses of the different histories and fractures in Muslim-American communities, and various debates about the nature of patriotism, freedom of speech, and the complexities of racial politics in the U.S. at the turn of the century. Yet the film remains a simple story of one man’s spiritual journey. The argument I develop here offers a more sustained analysis of the coverage of the controversy than I was able to explore in the film. Here I draw on the narrative arc of Abdul-Rauf’s life in order to highlight how he went from being an icon of the American dream to the embodiment of Pipe’s American nightmare.

Long before the anthem controversy made him a national news story, Abdul-Rauf was an established favorite as a human-interest story for sports journalists with a penchant for
“American dream” angles. Born Chris Jackson to a single mother juggling two jobs to keep food on the table for her three boys, Jackson’s humble beginnings in the crime-ridden, drug-infested slums of Gulfport, Mississippi are almost an “up from your bootstraps” cliché. Journalists eagerly reproduced Jackson’s gripping descriptions of his loneliness as a child and his hungry desperation to change his family’s condition which drove him to spend countless, mean hours perfecting his skills on the basketball court, playing against an “invisible man” who was always one step quicker, perhaps the father he had never known and who could never be mentioned or a kind of phantom manifestation of his own unforgiving perfectionism. His perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive practicing was indirectly tied to an undiagnosed neurological condition he suffered from, Tourette’s syndrome, which also caused involuntary grunting and body spasms that could become so intense he would collapse in speechless exhaustion. Jackson’s condition went neglected and untreated for most of his childhood (in fact, he was even wrongly placed in the special education track for a period). His high school coach referred him to a physician who finally diagnosed him properly and started him on a drug therapy. Despite suffering a disease that sometimes made it difficult to carry on a conversation or read a book let alone thread a bounce pass through a crowd of looming opponents, Jackson’s remarkable skill made him a local legend and Mississippi’s Player of the Year for two years (earning him the nickname “The Mississippi Son”) as well as a recruiting magnet for college talent scouts from around the country.9

At Louisiana State University, “Action Jackson” set three NCAA records for freshman, averaged 30.2 points per game, and made nearly every postseason All-America first team, landing him on the cover of Sports Illustrated as a freshman. The next year he averaged 27.8 points per game, led the Southeastern conference in scoring, and once again earned Player of the Year honors in the conference despite the looming presence of his teammate and friend Shaquille O’Neal. He was the third pick in the 1990 NBA draft and in his rookie season with the Denver Nuggets he averaged an impressive 14.1 points in 22.1 minutes coming off of the bench. It is as if by sheer will alone he rose from his humble conditions in the face of his debilitating disease, the crushing poverty, and the entrenched racism of Gulfport, Mississippi to awe crowds as an NBA star, and journalist after journalist remarked on how he was “a perfect example of the American dream.” His soft-spoken and unassuming manner and his lean six foot, one inch frame almost conveyed frailty in the world of NBA giants, yet time and time again Jackson proved himself on the court with his explosive first step past defenders and his incredibly accurate shooting record. By the 1992–93 season he was the beloved, fan-favorite starting point guard of the Denver Nuggets and scored a career-high 19.2 points per game.

In addition to his remarkable athletic talent, Jackson had always been reflective and deeply religious. Although Jackson was first exposed to Islam through the Autobiography of Malcolm X as a student at LSU, the stresses of the transition to the NBA ignited his desire to learn more about Islam and to read the Qu’ran. In 1991, he quietly converted but his new faith only became a news story once he legally changed his name from Chris Jackson to Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf in 1993. Although he was repeatedly warned that his new name would hurt his career since it was Chris Jackson that was the established house-hold name and that an Arabic name might be difficult for Americans to pronounce, fans and sports commentators adjusted to the change relatively easily, chanting “Rauf, Rauf, Rauf is on fire!” Although generally invisible to spectators, Islam radically transformed Abdul-Rauf. He began to see his life, his disease, and his passion for basketball in a new light. Bruce Schoenfeld in The Sporting News February 14, 1994 quotes Abdul-Rauf: “God has given me, through His blessing, Tourette’s, and he has given me basketball and Islam to cope with Tourette’s. Through basketball, I get a little peace. And through Islam I get total peace.” In this period, he also began reading voraciously,
everything from religious literature to history and global politics. His decision in 1995 to remain in the locker room during the national anthem developed out of his growing social consciousness, political awareness, and sense of global responsibility, all products of his new religious sensibility.\textsuperscript{10}

For over sixty games, Abdul-Rauf remained in the locker room or hallway to the stadium while the national anthem was being played and then walked silently onto the court for the starting line-up. Although his practice was recognized without objection by the Denver Nuggets and the Players Association for the entire season, in early March 1996 fans called a local radio station and complained on air. This led to a newspaper story and a court-side television news interview the following Tuesday (March 12) during a morning shoot-around in Denver which produced the sound-byte that spread like wild-fire in the national media. Abdul-Rauf explained to a reporter that the United States flag is “also a symbol of oppression, of tyranny, so it depends on how you look at it. I think this country has a long history of that. If you look at history, I don’t think you can argue the facts.” Later the same day, the NBA suspended Abdul-Rauf indefinitely without pay (a loss of $31,707 per game) for being in violation of a clause in the league’s rule book that states: “Players, coaches and trainers are to stand and line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or the foul line during the playing of the national anthem.” The Players Association disputed the suspension on the grounds that the rule “was not one agreed to in collective bargaining, but was imposed by the league unilaterally in an operations manual, without any input from the players.” The league countered by arguing that there is a standard clause in all player contracts stipulating league rules must be abided by. In a Denver Post poll, 72 percent of Denver-area adults took issue with Abdul-Rauf, many arguing his $2.6 million salary made it incumbent upon him to be appreciative and grateful to the United States. Abdul-Rauf remained firm in his conviction in face of the suspension and his critics: “My beliefs are more important than anything. If I have to give up basketball, I will.”

\section*{The Politics of Confusion}

Despite the widespread media attention garnered by the Abdul-Rauf–anthem controversy, the coverage of the story was marked by inaccuracies, contradictory reports, and a sense of confusion. I argue that the cloud of confusion around the controversy reflects particular secular assumptions and racial logics regularly employed in the mainstream media’s representations of Islam and Muslims. First, there are the problematic false equivalences between Islam and the Middle East and Muslims and Arabs, which in this case led to a great deal of confusion about Abdul-Rauf’s racial, national, and religious identity. Second, much of the coverage was structured by a false opposition between Abdul-Rauf’s religious and political beliefs. Since Abdul-Rauf’s statements did not fit neatly into a secular division of religion and politics, his reasons for not standing sometimes seemed incoherent or even contradictory in the coverage. Islam was represented as a static body of beliefs and practices and an “eastern” religion. As a result, Abdul-Rauf was often rendered an inauthentic or misguided religious novice in these reports.

The coverage of the Abdul-Rauf–anthem controversy reproduced a number of common misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. Americans often wrongly use the ethnic category of Arab and the religious category of Muslim interchangeably (in fact, Arabs only make up about 17\% of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world). This commonly held but incorrect view of Islam undermines the universality of the tradition and implies that Islam is not and cannot be an indigenous, American religion. This fixing of Islam to the Middle East as an “eastern religion” elides a number of important facts: African Americans
comprise the largest single Muslim-American population, Americans are converting to Islam at a faster rate than any other religion, and Islam has a long history in the U.S. beginning with the arrival of the African slaves, many of whom were Muslim.

In fact, the assumption that Muslims are a foreign population from somewhere else led many to assume that Abdul-Rauf was an immigrant. He received two garbage bags full of hate mail in the fallout from the controversy and many of the letters instructed him to “Go home!” or “Go back to Africa!” In fact, even fans that came to his defense sometimes assumed he was from another country; one African-American woman interviewed by a local Denver TV news reporter suggested, “Maybe that’s what they do where he comes from.” Part of the public’s failure to recognize Abdul-Rauf as African American may also be attributed to the general and striking silence on the part of African-American Christian leaders during the controversy, which, like the embarrassed disavowal of Muslim immigrant spokespeople, reflects the fractures within the African-American community along religious lines. At one point, Jesse Jackson told a journalist he had offered to mediate the dispute, however, Abdul-Rauf’s camp dismissed this gesture as a media stunt since Jackson never contacted Abdul-Rauf or his representatives. There was such confusion about Abdul-Rauf’s identity that he felt the need to identify as an African-American as a premise to his official statement to the press: “I am an African-American, a citizen of this country, and one who respects freedom of speech and freedom of expression.”

In other instances, the representation of Abdul-Rauf as a Middle-Eastern immigrant was purposeful and political. Cartoonist Drew Litton of the Rocky Mountain News satirized Abdul-Rauf (see Figure 1) by “Arabizing” his features, giving him a simetic nose, heavy-lidded, sunken eyes, and by lengthening his beard. A satire of Abdul-Rauf as a Sambo figure certainly would have offended readers and immediately drawn criticism; however, racial caricatures of Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims as villains in the mainstream media are so common they rarely draw attention or objections. Interestingly, Litton replicated the patterns of coverage of the Middle East, which so often represents political conflicts in the region as spontaneous, inexplicable, and without history.

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Figure 1. Abdul-Rauf’s suspension was the topic of numerous political cartoons, as in this example from the Rock Mountain News’ “Win, Lose, & Drew” series. Courtesy of Drew Litton.
By depicting Abdul-Rauf as casually tossing the flag in a dirty towel bin, Litton suggests that Abdul-Rauf’s decision was spontaneous rather than considered; that his “Muslim features” are explanation enough for his “un-American” disdain. We are perhaps most familiar with this narrative formula from the coverage of the terrorist attacks of September 11. For example, the incredulous and ubiquitous question and headline “Why do they hate us?” represents the terrorist attacks in the American media and the official discourse of the state as a spontaneous, a-historical, and incomprehensible act of evil (“Because they hate freedom.”), rather than a calculated political action (or reaction) with a long (and modern) history tied to the shifting and complex political and economic relationship between the U.S. and the Middle East.

In addition to the confusion about Abdul-Rauf’s identity, his reasons for not standing for the anthem were also often presented in an unclear way in the media because they did not fit neatly into a clean secular division of religion and politics. In order to conform to secular categories more neatly, Abdul-Rauf’s explanation of his stance was distilled into two separate sound bytes. The first was coded as religious: “I’m a Muslim first and a Muslim last. My duty is to my creator, not to nationalistic ideology.” This “theological” explanation of Abdul-Rauf’s dissent referenced the strong emphasis on God’s oneness and exclusive right to be worshipped, which distinguishes expressions of monotheism in Islam from the other Abrahamic faiths. The second (and much more frequently aired sound byte) was coded as political rather than religious: [The flag is] “also a symbol of oppression, of tyranny, so it depends on how you look at it. I think this country has a long history of that. If you look at history, I don’t think you can argue the facts.” The sentence immediately following this quote was usually left out the clip: “You can’t be for God and for oppression. It’s clear in the Qu’ran.” The excluded sentence makes it quite clear that for Abdul-Rauf his political and religious beliefs cannot be so neatly bifurcated.

The interpenetration of religion and politics in Abdul-Rauf’s explanation characterizes not only African-American Islam but what a number of scholars have referred to as the specifically American tradition of Black Religion.\textsuperscript{16} Black Religion should not be confused with the Black Church nor mistaken as a synonym for the total category of “African-American religion.”\textsuperscript{17} A more instructive definition of Black Religion is as an aggregate of Black American religious experience whose most enduring feature is its radical, “holy protest against … the material and psychological effects” of racism.\textsuperscript{18} The secular binary opposition between political and religious beliefs obscures more than it illuminates in the coverage of Abdul-Rauf’s case, just as in the early scholarly analyses of African-American Islam the same secular logic was invoked to dismiss communities like the Nation of Islam as thinly-guised ideological socio-political movements beyond the pale of genuine religious experience.

Interestingly, several newspaper articles covering the NBA suspension mistakenly identified Abdul-Rauf as a member of the Nation of Islam. The representation of Abdul-Rauf as an inauthentic Muslim was propelled in part by contrasting him with Hakeem Olajuwon, a Nigerian Muslim who played for the Houston Rockets. He explained: “In general, Islamic teachings require every Muslim to obey and respect the law of the countries they live in. You know, that is—that is Islamic teachings. You know, to be a good Muslim is to be a good citizen.” As an immigrant with a heavy accent, Olajuwon was assumed to be the authentic Muslim with authentic religious authority. In addition, in the New York Times, Olajuwon even reproduced the clean binary opposition between religion and politics. “The difference must be distinguished between worship and respect,” he said. “Islam orders you to obey and respect, as long as you are not worshiping anything other than God. The Koran teaches respect for all people. That’s why it’s so important that people understand that there is a difference between respect and worship. People that worship the flag should also understand that there is a difference. Islam is a religion of
peace. You don’t attack. You explain.” Olajuwon’s two sound bytes corresponded to Abdul-Rauf’s as correctives. In one, Abdul-Rauf’s “theological” logic was represented as a confusion of respect and worship. In the other, Abdul-Rauf’s politics were represented as a radical departure from a religion that requires the faithful to be good law-abiding citizens. Despite the frequent references to Olajuwon in the national press, his acknowledgement of Abdul-Rauf’s ability to have a valid religious interpretation that diverged from his own was not included in their coverage. On March 14, only Ed Fowler of the Houston Chronicle reported that Olajuwon said: “[If] Abdul-Rauf is certain his interpretation is the only acceptable one, he should be applauded for taking that stand at the cost of a magnificent livelihood.”

The same insistence on the clean division between political and religious beliefs came out in the equally confused legal analyses of the NBA’s suspension. Experts were called on to determine whether Abdul-Rauf was legally bound by his NBA contract to stand for the anthem or whether the NBA had violated Abdul-Rauf’s Title VII right not to be discriminated against as an employee due to his religion. In Jason Diamos’ March 14 New York Times article, legal expert Martin Garbus cast doubt not only on Abdul-Rauf’s potential legal case but also on his religious integrity. He explained: “There is a difference between religious and political beliefs. It’s religious, he has an absolute right to do it. He’s saying religious, but a lot of the language is political. And to the extent that the religious and political become intertwined, you may find yourself in a situation where there is a clear and present danger.” Garbus’ alarm about the “clear and present danger” posed by Abdul-Rauf anticipates Pipes’ claims. There was also another incorrect assumption at work here: that Islam is a monolithic and static body of beliefs and practices and that there is only one possible “correct” Islamic position on any given issue. Garbus’ analysis seems particularly odd given that the U.S. legal system recognizes the diversity of opinions within any community of believers and, therefore, the legal system only requires that litigants establish that they hold “a sincere religious belief” and that they prove that they communicated their beliefs to their employer.19

When determining if one’s religious beliefs are protected under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment as opposed to Title VII, courts conclude that “[interfaith differences . . . are not uncommon among followers of a particular creed, and the judicial process is singularly ill-equipped to resolve such differences in relation to the Religion Clauses . . . The guarantee of free exercise is not limited to beliefs which are shared by all of the members of a religious sect . . . Courts are not arbiters of scriptural interpretation.”20

Yet again and again, in legal analyses of the potential case, Muslim immigrants’ claims that standing for the flag did not contravene Islam was presented as evidence that Abdul-Rauf was either trying to hide his political beliefs in the guise of religion in order to acquire some kind of legal protection (a kind of perversion of Islam) or that he, as a Black convert, failed to understand Islam the “right” way, as authentic, eastern Muslims could.

The same assumption about a singular “correct” or “authentic” understanding of Islam emerged in the coverage of the resolution of the suspension. Abdul-Rauf was blasted in the media first for his refusal to stand and then for finding a way to reconcile his religious beliefs and honor his contract. The suspension was lifted after one game because Abdul-Rauf agreed to be on the court during the anthem ceremony and to stand and the NBA agreed to let him pray silently rather than sing the anthem. He told a reporter: “This is what I believe, and, and, I’m not wrong for the stance that I took, and in no way am I compromising, but I’m saying I understand and recognize that there is a better approach and in Islam . . . after making a decision, if you see that which is better, you do
that.” He also emphasized that his religious feeling and opposition to injustice transcended racial, national, and religious lines: “I’ll stand but I’ll offer a prayer, my own prayer, for those who are suffering. Muslim. Caucasian. African-American. Asian. Whoever is in that position, whoever is experiencing difficulties.”

Abdul-Rauf’s willingness to adjust his practice did not satisfy his critics (see Figure 2). In his first game back on the court following the suspension, the Chicago crowd showered him with boos as he scored 19 points. According to Roscoe Nance’s March 14 article in USA Today, the Denver Nuggets had already received more than two hundred phone calls from fans threatening to boycott games if Abdul-Rauf remained with the team or threatening to cancel their season tickets. The league decision to suspend him was influenced by the fear that the economic consequences of dissatisfied fans might translate into a reduction in support from advertisers like Nike and television networks like NBC. Michael Hiestand in the October 22 USA Today in 1996 revealed that Nike was also considering buying Ascent Entertainment, which owned the Denver Nuggets, in the same period. Given these circumstances, it is not particularly surprising that Abdul-Rauf was traded to the Sacramento Kings the following season, despite being the Nuggets’ play-maker and lead scorer and one of the better free-throw shooters in NBA history. His basketball career never fully recovered from the damage of the controversy and he eventually began playing in Europe.

**Racing and Erasing Islam: Religion in the World of Sports**

Of course, Abdul-Rauf is not the first professional athlete to bring religion into the sacred space of the stadium. As depicted in the Academy Award winning movie Chariots of Fire (1981), Eric Liddell, a member of Great Britain’s track team at the 1924 Paris Olympics, opted out of the 100-meter race once he learned he would have to run a heat
on the Sabbath. His stance shocked the sports world and he eventually won a gold medal in the 400-meter race. In 1965, Sandy Koufax, a pitcher for the Dodgers, refused to play on opening day of the World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. The League accommodated Koufax by shifting the series by a day. Steven Maranz of *The Sporting News* detailed on November 28, 1994 how Shawn Bradley, a Mormon basketball player, delayed his potential earnings from a lucrative professional basketball career with the Philadelphia 76ers in order to fulfill his obligation to his faith to carry out a two-year mission. While all of these athletes should be admired for the strength of their convictions in the face of enormous pressure, what makes them different from Abdul-Rauf is that their religious beliefs did not interrupt the secular division between religious and political beliefs the way Abdul-Rauf's did. Arguably, their ability to fit easily within secular discursive frames facilitated both the processes of accommodating them as well as representing them as principled heroes. There is another important iconic athlete who challenged the division between religion and politics in much more profound and radical ways than Abdul-Rauf: Muhammad Ali. In the name of Islam Ali had refused to serve America in the time of war and as a result was nearly imprisoned, lost his title, was banned from competing, and was condemned by the national media. In 1967 Ali refused to step forward to be inducted into Vietnam and within the hour, before being charged with any crime, the New York State Athletic Commission suspended his boxing license and stripped him of his title as heavyweight champion, with all other jurisdictions in the U.S. quickly following suit. Yet, today Ali is a national icon, the quintessential American. Louisville, the city that once legally renounced him, now boasts a highway in his name.

I am not invoking Muhammad Ali only because he is the most famous example of a dissenting athlete or because, like Abdul-Rauf, he is Black and Muslim. Rather, the comparison to Ali brings Abdul-Rauf's case into relief because Ali's image was reinvented in 1996, overlapping with the Abdul-Rauf-anthem controversy. In the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympics, Muhammad Ali raised a trembling arm to light the fuse to the Olympic cauldron, followed by an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington speech. The widely-broadcast image suggested a kind of fulfillment of King's dream in the national embrace of Ali as an icon of harmony and goodwill. Outside the stadium, Hosea Williams, a former colleague of King's, led a small protest against the Georgia state flag's Confederate stars and bars fluttering over games that celebrated human equality, but few reporters covered her demonstration. At half-time during the Olympic basketball final, Ali was presented with a replacement gold medal for the one he had purportedly flung into the Ohio River thirty-six years earlier precisely because of the gaps between the Olympic ideals and American social realities. USA Today credited Ali's Olympic cameo with sparking "a renaissance for the Greatest" and he took Sports Illustrated's cover for a record-breaking thirty-fourth time.

For all the sudden interest in Ali's legacy, the fact that in his heyday he had always been more popular abroad than at home was seemingly forgotten. After all, his anti-American defiance is what made him an international hero in much of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe in that period. Equally significant, Ali's Islam seemed to be erased from collective memory as well or at least irrelevant in the new coverage, which rarely focused on his Muslim identity except as a biographical detail. Analysts of the Black Power movement of the 1960s frequently divide the radicalism of the movement between the elements that were co-opted and sanitized and those that were destroyed. Muhammad Ali embodies both of those processes; he has been co-opted and depoliticized as a national icon decades after being the most reviled figure in American sports and, in some sense, physically destroyed. The stripping of his title and his resultant lengthy absence from
the ring meant that when Ali finally returned to the ring he was slower and had to rely on his ability to absorb punches which is undoubtedly related to his current medical condition.\textsuperscript{22}

The Ali offered up for veneration in the 1990s is not the Ali of the 1960s, and the image of the 1960s that is celebrated or damned in the 1990s is a mere caricature of the original. In both cases, a complex and contradictory reality has been homogenized and repackaged for sale in an ever-burgeoning marketplace for cultural commodities. In the nineties we have been told that the causes and complaints of the sixties are redundant, that the conflicts that once surrounded Ali have been resolved. Somehow the rights and wrongs of the hard choices he made have been declared peripheral to his legacy—as if racism and warfare, Islam and the West, personal identity, black leadership and the use of US military might in the poorer, darker countries were yesterday’s issues, no longer pertinent, no longer divisive.\textsuperscript{23}

Ali’s fame was renewed and reinterpreted in such a way that his Islam was either erased or represented as benign, apolitical in order for him to be converted into a symbol of national identity. Since being reborn as a benign, national icon, Ali’s image has been used to sell everything from Sprite to Microsoft to the war on terror in the Muslim world by the state department. In this sense, the story of the evolution of Abdul-Rauf’s image is the inverse of Ali’s. Ali, once demonized for his Islam, has been transformed into a national icon through the muting of his religious identity. Abdul-Rauf, on the other hand, once heralded as an icon of the American dream, as the “Mississippi Son,” has come to represent all that is wrong, threatening, and dangerous about Islam by muting his identity as an African American.

Before the anthem controversy, Abdul-Rauf was involved in another minor controversy that made sports page news briefly when he went head to head with Nike who had initially given him a shoe contract. As recounted by John Mossman of The Baton Rouge Advocate on March 15, 1996, following a scuffle with Nike early in his career that led to the loss of his contract, Abdul-Rauf began covering the logos on his shoes with masking tape and refused to identify the brand when asked by journalists. In this regard, Abdul-Rauf is the inverse of that other American icon so often compared to Muhammad Ali: Michael Jordan. Jordan, however, is no Muhammad Ali. Where Ali refused “to carry a sign,” Jordan only carries the signs he gets paid for and his patriotic feelings seem to be inseparable from his capitalist acumen. During the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Jordan and fellow face of Nike Charles Barkley used the American flag to cover a Reebok logo on the Olympic medal stand, as a symbol to their commitment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of endorsements, and when Nike was blasted in the media over its Indonesian sweatshops controversy it was the patriotic “CEO Jordan” ad campaign that salvaged the company’s image.\textsuperscript{24} Where Ali was the idealistic hero carrying the banner of humanitarian internationalism in the global struggles against inequality, poverty, and injustice, Jordan is the American emblem of globalization. Jordan is a symbol of “corporate America and its winner-takes-all ethic. His blackness has been deliberately submerged within his Americanness, which is reduced, in the end, to his individual wealth and success.”\textsuperscript{25} In contrast to Jordan, Abdul-Rauf no longer has the option to submerge his Blackness with his Americanness because, in a sense, his Islam negates both his Blackness and his Americanness. If the transformations of Ali’s image are any indication, it seems Black Muslim athletes can either be represented as (Black) American heroes or as Muslim villains.
Figure 3. Abdul-Rauf’s new home in Gulfport was set afire on July 30, 2001. No one was hurt in the incident but the house, which was under construction, was significantly damaged. Courtesy WAPT.

Conclusion

On July 30, 2001, on a few days after my camera crew had packed up and left Gulfport, Abdul-Rauf’s home, which was under construction, was burned to the ground. Abdul-Rauf reported finding KKK graffiti on his property, and although the arson investigation is ongoing, the FBI’s prime suspect in the case remains the KKK. The documentary ends on the image of Abdul-Rauf’s burning house (see Figure 3), anticipating another burning building and another terrorist attack that would take place just over a month later. Since September 11, the culture of hyper-patriotism, the suppression of dissent, and the scrutinization of Muslim Americans has been dramatically increased, although all of these elements were present in the Abdul-Rauf-anthem controversy as well.

Perhaps most disturbing, before September 11, racial profiling had largely been dismissed as an “inefficient, ineffective, and unfair” policy and, in fact, it was explicitly condemned by President Bush and John Ashcroft, but in the months after September 11, polls indicated that the American public consensus was that racial profiling was not only a good thing but essential for the nation’s survival. A Gallup poll found that one-third of New Yorkers supported the internment of Arab Americans. Another Gallup poll surveying African Americans in the weeks after September 11 found the majority (71%) supported racial profiling of Middle Easterners and Arabs. The endorsement of racial profiling for Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims by other minorities Americanizes them and consolidates the new configuration of a singular, multicultural nation.

[Although] racial policing continues apace in all communities of color, and we can anticipate that this new multiculturalist national identity is a momentary phenomenon, whites, African Americans, East Asian Americans, and Latinas and Latinos are in a certain sense now deemed safe and not required to prove their allegiance. In contrast, those who inhabit the vulnerable category of looking “Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim,” and who are thus subject to potential profiling, have had to, as a matter of personal safety, drape their dwellings, workplaces, and bodies with flags in an often futile attempt at demonstrating their loyalty.

The exaggerated appearance of American flags in Arab and Muslim-American communities is predictable because flags are so often the means of normalizing and disciplining Others. Like marginal communities before them, Muslims have a range of motivations
in displaying them, from defiant assertions of patriotism to talismanic shields protecting them from hostility.\(^{28}\)

It becomes obvious very quickly that pressures are not being applied evenly across Muslim-American communities. Veiled women, as the most visible and, therefore, vulnerable segment of the community, have suffered the brunt of hate crimes and harassment. Arab and Middle-Eastern Muslims are profiled much more frequently than African-American Muslims. Blackness often acts as a layer of insulation for African-American Muslims and guarantees their status as social citizens in ways not shared by their immigrant co-religionists. Certainly the American public would respond with outrage were the attorney general to round up hundreds of African-American Muslims and hold them for months without charges the way Arab and Middle-Eastern Muslims have been. Even in the 2003 case of domestic terrorism, the “DC Sniper” John Muhammad’s ties to the Nation of Islam received little comment in the press. Had he been a Middle-Eastern Muslim, however, his religious identity would have certainly come under heavy scrutiny and been causally linked to his crimes.\(^{29}\)

Since the association of Islam with Arabs and the Middle East in the American imagination is so blindingly strong, Blacks continue to remain an invisible part of the Muslim-American community and are often immune from social stigma and exclusions. This racial insulation was reflected in an incident some labeled a hate crime, which followed the anthem controversy. Shortly after Abdul-Rauf’s suspension, in what was intended as a response to Abdul-Rauf, employees of Denver’s KBPI radio station interrupted prayer services at a local Denver mosque by bursting into the prayer hall and playing “The Star Spangled Banner” on brass instruments. Interestingly, rather than showing up at the Denver mosque Abdul-Rauf most frequently attended (where most worshippers are African American), the KBPI employees chose the Denver Islamic Center for their “prank,” a mosque comprised primarily of immigrant worshippers. Like the satirical “Arabizing” of Abdul-Rauf, the deejays’ choice of which community to target belies the kinds of racial logics at work in the exclusion of Muslims in the U.S. Yet Abdul-Rauf’s case demonstrates that the layer of social insulation Blackness provided to African-American Muslims could easily slip. In this sense, Abdul-Rauf’s case is both an important historical moment that takes on greater relevance in a post–September 11 America as well as a cautionary tale about the fluidity and the brutality of race in the U.S.

**Notes**


2. National Muslim organizations made public statements insisting that standing for the national anthem did not contravene Islam; only the Islamic Society of North America’s (ISNA) statement was neutral. Jason Diamos reported in *The New York Times* on March 15, that ISNA’s secretary general Sayeed M. Syeed told the Associated Press that the decision to stand for the anthem or the flag is a subjective one, and believers are responsible to their own consciences.


5. Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Towards the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Jackson notes that the arrival of the post ’65 immigrants transformed religious discourse in American mosques and that “the West” became the new “counter-category” of American Islam (72). Black Muslims often mistook immigrants’ resentment and disdain for the West as a common opposition to white supremacy. The pursuit of the (racial) American dream that brought the immigrants to the U.S. often led them to distinguish whiteness (a status many immigrants coveted) from Western-ness (81). And thus, the anti-Western sentiments expressed in impassioned Friday sermons rarely connected to domestic social and political problems or to explicitly racial politics. Issues like police brutality, unemployment, drugs, and domestic abuse were
overlooked because, in the eyes of immigrants, they paled as social justice concerns compared to oppressive Western policies in the Muslim world (72).

7. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. ibid.
17. Jackson, Islam and the Blackamerican. Jackson argues that although Black Religion is one among many Black religious traditions in the U.S., its hegemonic (but not universal) influence has been unparalleled in the U.S. over the past two centuries (25, 29).
18. ibid.
26. In my documentary the incident is mistakenly reported as occurring on August 1, 2001.