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Asif Majid

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Entangling the British Muslim Woman Satirizing Whiteness and Punking the State in Afsaneh Gray's *ctopus*

Asif Majid 

Imagine an octopus. Not one that is moving through water, but one traveling across land. The animal slides its way along the terrain before it, its arms pulling an unsuspecting head in their wake. It slithers and creeps, over boulders and under bushes. Yet throughout, the arms of the animal are its lead, operating independent of one another while retaining a uniform slipperiness. The octopus is a strange, unsettling creature because of its contrary style of movement. Now imagine that octopus as a play about the British state. The shifting of the beast makes the play structurally and topically fluid. Its characters operate independent of one another while responding to the controlling machinations of the overarching structure, in this case the British state. Some of the arms try to use their own minds to subvert the objective of the brain. The stereotypes of individuals undesired by the state – people on benefits, immigrants, Muslims, and so on – are satirised. At the same time, a sense of unease sets in for the audience as the state's attempts at control operate through the arms of the characters, even as those arms take their own initiative and entangle one another within the play.

Though imperfect, this metaphor highlights some of the key dimensions of *Octopus*, a satirical three-hander written by Afsaneh Gray that debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2016 and undertook a UK tour in 2017.¹ The play is set in a fictional government agency responsible for interviewing individuals of non-English heritage to determine their Britishness. An unnamed agency implements the policy of determining people's Britishness through interview based on a newly elected government's campaign pledge. This policy questions any person living in the UK who is of non-English ethnic heritage about their Britishness.

1. I saw *Octopus* during its UK tour at London's Poplar Union in July 2017, a year after it was at Edinburgh. As far as conceptual metaphors are concerned, cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson recognise that metaphors both highlight and hide meaning. This balance does not render a metaphor imperfect if it fails to capture all aspects of the phenomenon it is trying to describe, but rather recognises that conceptual metaphors are tools to frame understandings and can offer new insights even as they hide others. For more, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2. Afsaneh Gray, *Octopus* (London: Oberon Books, 2017), 8. All further references to *Octopus* are from this text.
3. Ibid.
4. This echoes increased British stigma around the use of social housing and healthcare, recalling the systematic and neoliberal destruction of such benefits during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher that has continued under subsequent governments. An ongoing consequence of this is the struggle by the National Health Service to retain its funding (for more, see Alex Scott-Samuel et al., 'The Impact of Thatcherism on Health and Well-Being in Britain', *International Journal of Health Services* 44, no. 1 (2014): 53–71). More recent manifestations of this stigma include decisions by the government of Theresa May, such as the widely reported Windrush scandal of spring 2018 that created a so-called 'hostile environment' for those of Afro-Caribbean heritage. Many were denied pensions, health care, and citizenship after landing cards that documented their membership in the Commonwealth were destroyed by the Home Office.

Scotland has left the UK while the status of Wales and Northern Ireland are unknown, tying Britishness to a racialised rather than linguistic Englishness. Those who cannot prove English heritage through to their grandparents are summoned for an interview. After the interview is over, interviewees receive a state entitlement form that details information such as ethnic background and what state benefits can be accessed under what conditions. Each of the play's three protagonists has received an interview summons, with the play's character list specifying their appearance: Sara is a high-strung accountant in her mid-30s who is 'sort of Asian looking', Scheherazade is a starving tapestry artist in her mid-20s who is 'sort of Middle Eastern looking', and Sarah is a well-intentioned but naïve NGO worker who is 'sort of white'. A fourth character is Interviewer, who is alternately played by the other three actors. Interviewer's only character-list descriptor is that she 'wears a headscarf' – her ethnicity is never specified.² Crucially, the character list does not mention any character's religion, and later dialogue confirms only that Interviewer is Muslim.

Beyond its satire, *Octopus* invokes music and the ethos of punk throughout. There are numerous moments when interviewees break into song, whether in the waiting room among themselves or in their individual interviews when trying to convince Interviewer of their Britishness. With only 13 scenes, the play's setting alternates between the interview room and the waiting room. Gray's 'Note on the play' indicates that *Octopus* should be understood as 'a bit like a concept album that can include 'hardcore punk and other musical interludes going on in the scene changes', because the play is 'a bit 90s' and 'a bit riot grrl'.³ During the play's 2017 tour, director Pia Furtado reflected this intent by incorporating a stand-up microphone into the set, which actors sang into during scene transitions. The remainder of the production's staging invoked punk's ethic of self-reliance, with actors shifting the minimalist set of chairs and desks to change between interview and waiting room scenes.

Interview questions recall British anxieties around race and nation while highlighting the so-called 'one-drop rule' that continues to be used to assign minority status to individuals of mixed ethnic background. Examples of questions include: where were your parents born, where were your grandparents born, what's your religion, and what do you consider to be British values. In addition, financial contributions to British society are queried: how much do you make, what's your occupation, and whether or not you are on benefits.⁴ The background of the characters shows how the policy assumes that loyalty to non-British communities is embedded in ethnicity. Sara, for example, insists on her Britishness and claims to have voted for the new government based on this policy. However, her non-English heritage is revealed as Indian by way of Singapore. She is handed a form that incorrectly characterises her background as Afghani. Similarly, Sarah is shown to have one non-English grandfather and ends up being considered for deportation. In financial terms, Sara is allowed to remain in the country as long as her income stays above £45,000 per year. Scheherazade, on the other hand,

5. Gray, *Octopus*, 12.
6. HM Government, 'Prevent Strategy', 2011. I put the term 'radicalization' in scare quotes because it is unclear exactly why someone is drawn into violence after adopting an extreme political position. The use of the term 'radicalization' implies a uniform and cogent process that can be interrupted, a law in logic that underpins the design and implementation of the Prevent agenda. Political writer Arun Kundnani has criticized Prevent for serving as 'an experiment in new forms of countersubversion that uses 'young Muslims as a convenient testing ground' (170). For more, see Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014); and Paul Thomas, *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).
7. On media linkages between Islam and terrorism, see Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos, and Tony McEnery, *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On media linkages between young black men and crime, see Stephen Cushion, Kerry Moore, and John Jewell, 'Media Representations of Young Black Men and Boys', *REACH Media Monitoring Project* (London: Department for Communities and

loses access to benefits after her interview reveals that she has yet to sell one of her elaborate tapestries.

Questioning throughout the interview process is couched in the threat of interviewees entering 'pre-criminal space' if they fail to comply with the process.⁵ This language recalls the controversial Prevent strategy, one of four strands of the current British government's counterterrorism policy known as Contest. Prevent 'aims to stop people [from] becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' by giving training to public officials such as NHS staff, teachers, and youth workers to spot signs of 'radicalization' in young people and report them as at-risk to the government.⁶ In *Octopus*, the 'pre-criminal space' links non-English heritage to a propensity to commit crimes and threaten the state by virtue of one's heritage, echoing links made in the British media between Muslims and terrorism, and young black men and crime.⁷

If an interviewee is deemed unable to leave the 'pre-criminal space', she has to complete the state entitlement form's 'Section D', which is administered by immigration authorities and carries a maximum penalty of deportation. Sarah's interview takes an unexpected turn when she learns that one of her late grandfathers was Jamaican, information of which she was previously unaware. This subjects her to the looming spectre of deportation. Sara, too, enters 'pre-criminal' and then 'criminal space' when she yells at Interviewer, claims that 'this whole system is racist', and tears up her state entitlement form.⁸ Despite these high stakes, the satirical tone of the play is set early on when Interviewer slips in establishing the rules of interview: 'all interviews will be recorded for quality control and may be used against you – sorry all interviews will be recorded for quality control and may be accessed by you.'⁹

Octopus concludes with all three interviewees ripping up their state entitlement form in an anti-establishment and pro-punk gesture that contests the nature of the policy itself and attempts to 'fight the system'.¹⁰ The entire play is dotted with references to punk and the subversive power of music more broadly; the final moment of the piece confirms this when all three women stand united in song. Having torn up their forms, each sings music with which they identify – Scheherazade sings 'God Save The Queen' by The Sex Pistols, Sarah sings 'Vindaloo' by Fat Les, and Sara sings a Mary Poppins medley – before joining together in a unified rendition of The Sex Pistols' 'God Save The Queen'. The play ends with sirens announcing the arrival of police that will arrest all three women for resisting the system.

Sara, Sarah, and Scheherazade represent the thrust of *Octopus*'s narrative. But I am most interested in their relationship with Interviewer, who is a British Muslim agent of the state. Interviewer comes into existence when one of the other actors puts on a headscarf. She serves as the faceless bureaucracy of the fictional government agency, and her main purpose is to be the antagonist opposing the three main protagonists' attempts to get back to their lives away from state intrusion. Bureaucracy thus underpins the headscarf's visibility, recalling anthropologist Emma Tarlo's depiction of the ways in which British young women who are visibly Muslim

- Local Government, 2011), <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/28559/1/2113275.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2018).
8. Gray, *Octopus*, 58.
 9. *Ibid.*, 11, italics in original.
 10. *Ibid.*, 62.
 11. Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 11.
 12. I am referring here to the British government's December 2016 report about opportunity and integration authored by social worker Dame Louise Casey, 'The Casey Review', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration> (accessed May 17, 2018). The report argues that British Muslim women 'are facing a double onslaught of gender inequality, combined with religious, cultural and social barriers preventing them from accessing even their basic rights as British residents' (14). A number of critiques have been leveled at the report, particularly in terms of how the review fails to take into account the structural racism and discrimination that British Muslim women face in being hired and accessing social services. Instead, it places blame for a perceived lack of integration on British Muslim communities themselves. For more, see Ben Gidley, 'Absent Experts and Public Debates About Integration', *The Sociological Review*,

handle the 'representational challenge they face as Muslims.¹¹ Interviewer s publicly performed Islamic identity marks her and makes her hyper-visible. Little attention is afforded to exactly how the headscarf is worn: when becoming Interviewer, each of the actors casually slings the scarf over her head and shoulders in a personal style. Yet, the act uniformly marks Interviewer as separate from the other characters: in appearance, religion, and comfort at being in her own office. There is even irony in Interviewer being portrayed as a liberated British Muslim convert who is representative of the British state, given that characterizations of British Muslim women as marginalised and oppressed have been peddled at the highest levels of governmental discourse.¹²

This irony is the main point of departure for my analysis: how is it that something as seemingly foreign to the British psyche as Islam can come to be the face of the British state? In what follows, I argue that Gray makes this move in an effort to critique the relationship between state-sponsored Britishness, multiculturalism, and contemporary British Muslimness, a critique that is forwarded through the play's two main entanglements: Whiteness and the state, and satire and punk. Muddying these entanglements further is the figure of the British Muslim woman.¹³ In this essay, I will first contextualise *Octopus* through sociological theory on British multiculturalism and two prominent plays asking related questions. Then, the subsequent section titled 'Entangling Whiteness and the State' addresses how Interviewer as an agent of the state relates to the other characters through Whiteness. Finally, 'Intertwining Satire and Punk' examines the play's use of witticisms and song to challenge (mis)perceptions about Islam in Britain's public imagination. What ultimately emerges is the play's rendering of British multiculturalism and visible Islam in unstable, unpredictable, and – at times – playful tension with state-sponsored Britishness, challenging contemporary discussions of British national identity and Islam that lack nuance.

British Multiculturalism and Performance

I want to position *Octopus* in the context of sociological debates on British multiculturalism and related performance work.¹⁴ Cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy frames Britain as based on empire, in which race is a process that connects multiple social modalities. Racism in Britain 'link[s] discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism, and gender difference into a complex system, which requires attention to 'racisms in the plural'.¹⁵ Britishness as attached to memories of imperial greatness connects discourses around the British nation to Whiteness, rendering the inclusion of its opposite – Blackness – impossible to theorise 'without developing a new perspective on British culture *as a whole*'.¹⁶ The syncretism that enables Blackness in Britain reframes notions of Britishness while stepping outside the 'oscillation between black as problem and black as victim'.¹⁷ The racism

Blog, December 19, 2016, <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/blog/absent-experts-and-public-debates-about-integration.html> (accessed May 17, 2018); Salma Haidrani, 'What Do British Muslim Women Think About the Casey Review?' *Vice*, December 12, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/vvdyqm/what-do-british-muslim-women-think-about-casey-review (accessed May 17, 2018); and Matthew Taylor, 'Casey Report Criticised for Focus on UK Muslim Communities', *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/05/casey-report-criticised-for-focus-on-uk-muslim-communities> (accessed May 17, 2018).

13. As an object of analysis, the figure of the Muslim woman – and particularly whether or not she needs saving – has been examined from a global anthropological perspective by Lila Abu-Lughod and a British sociological lens by Fauzia Ahmad. For more, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Fauzia Ahmad, 'Do Young British Muslim Women Need Rescuing?' in *Young British Muslims: Between Rhetoric and Realities*, ed. Sadek Hamid (London: Routledge, 2017), 39–59.
14. Note that the literature I discuss here emphasises race rather than ethnicity, even if *Octopus* interview process focuses

suffered by black individuals and communities emerges from a British nationhood that is formed by historical loss of empire.

Sociologist Tariq Modood has a similar theoretical project, but from the perspective of multiculturalism, which he defines as 'the political accommodation of minorities formed by immigration to western countries from outside the prosperous West'.¹⁸ Modood also finds race to be multiple, but argues that it comes in three rather than two forms: 'colour, class, and culture'.¹⁹ The addition of culture reflects Modood's argument that contemporary British race relations are informed by ethnic communities as much as by communities of colour and class. For Modood, theorizing minorities of all types in Britain should occur based on difference rather than 'culture', taking into consideration internal and external constructions of a group. That is, any articulation of race that does not account for a group's ethnic or other self-definition is incomplete. The notion of difference incorporates the multiplicity of minority groups, an institutionalization of 'equal dignity and equal respect for difference without undertaking 'moral evaluation of it'.²⁰ As a result, Modood argues that Britishness 'should be woven in debate and discussion rather than 'reduced to a list', as occurs in the Prevent agenda.²¹

Gilroy and Modood agree on much, including that minorities in the UK are embedded in British society: black individuals who have been 'born, nurtured, and schooled in the UK are 'British even as their presence redefines the meaning of the term', matching those 'young Asian people who have grown up in the UK and 'know how thoroughly they are a product of British society, outside of which they would be lost'.²² Both also read multicultural Britain in the context of memories of empire, hoping to do away with British nationalism that is 'stained with the memory of imperial greatness by 'dismantl[ing] the legacy of imperial racism'.²³ But their difference is most apparent when juxtaposing interpretations of the term 'black'. For Gilroy, 'black' is a broad and politically inclusive label for all non-white minorities that uses colour to forward 'the possibility of Afro-Asian unity', but for Modood, using 'black' as a catchall obscures the importance of ethnicity and religion while allowing 'the dominant group of white society to set the terms of debate regarding race and ethnicity, ignoring 'the dialectical relationship between what a racial group thinks it is and how others treat it'.²⁴ What's important here is that relationships between and among minorities shift within huge social labels. Constant negotiation is required when considering multicultural Britain, given that the same framing can alternately be viewed as inclusive and exclusive.

Such negotiation is evident in the controversies around two prominent performances associated with British Muslims: *England People Very Nice* and *Homegrown*.²⁵ Written by Richard Bean, *England People Very Nice* was first staged at the National Theatre in 2009. The play is a 400-year gallop through England's migration history, featuring a four-part cycle of multi-ethnic characters that are played by asylum-seeking performers waiting to learn if they have been granted asylum. While waiting, the performers put on a play that uses comedic stereotypes to consider the arrival of various

primarily on ethnicity: the two have a complex relationship.

15. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 38, 43.
16. *Ibid.*, 156, italics in original.
17. *Ibid.*, 11. Here, Gilroy borrows from sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois who, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: AC McClurg and Co, 1903), asks readers to think about the ways in which dominant Western society makes black individuals wonder: 'How does it feel to be a problem?' (quoted in Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 11).
18. Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 5.
19. Modood, *Not Easy Being British* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books Ltd, 1992), 54.
20. Modood, *Multiculturalism*, 53, 66.
21. *Ibid.*, 153. The Prevent agenda lists British values as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (HM Government, 107).
22. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 155; and Modood, *Multiculturalism*, 23.
23. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 69; and Modood, *Not Easy Being British*, 24.
24. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union*

migrant communities to London's working-class neighborhood of Bethnal Green: seventeenth-century French Huguenots, post-famine Irish, late nineteenth-century Jews, and mid twentieth-century Bangladeshis. Each group comes to despise new arrivals while being despised by their predecessors for a combination of different religious, political, and cultural behaviours. The conclusion of the piece continues this theme, in that the Bangladeshi Muslims adopt extreme political viewpoints while looking down on Muslims who arrive from Somalia as a result of war and famine in the late twentieth century.

Bean's work suffers from a number of issues. The cyclical form of the piece intends to show all immigrants to Britain suffering from similar oppressions, but it has the effect of neglecting 'the complex dynamics of colonialism and decolonization in favour of a narrative that flattens and homogenises the migrant experience'.²⁶ The piece also willfully ignores differences in skin colour and majoritarian perceptions of non-Christian religions that come with stereotyping these groups, adopting a problematic colourblind approach over one that embraces intricate sociopolitical dynamics. As a result, the play was controversial. At one post-show discussion with the playwright, audience members of both Bengali and Irish heritage stormed the stage and called Bean a 'racist and 'demoniser' before being escorted out of the theatre.²⁷ Here, I reference *England People Very Nice* not to endorse its lack of nuance or even label it as effective multicultural theatre, but rather to recognise it as an example of work attempting to negotiate Britain's diversity.

A different form of this negotiation is evidenced by *Homegrown*. Created by Omar El-Khairi and Nadia Latif, *Homegrown* was commissioned by the National Youth Theatre (NYT) in 2015 and devised in collaboration with 100+ youth aged 15–25 in London. The play attempts to have a nuanced discussion about extremism with youth, amid a climate of fear. Set in a school in Bethnal Green, *Homegrown* highlights the unheard conversations that go on in school corridors between young people and involves three sets of tour guides leading groups of audience members from room to room as they experience scenes with games, rap battles, classroom vignettes, and snippets of conversation. The scenes range in topic from Islamophobia to radicalization to youth disaffection to interracial relationships to British Muslim role models. After walking around the school and encountering these scenes, the tour guides lead their audiences to a final performance, which brings into consideration the multiple factors that can lead a young person to become involved in terrorism. The final performance airs opinions about Muslims from everyday individuals such as strippers, buskers, family members, pub owners, housing association managers, and so on. It concludes with a call to action against the ways in which British media, society, and politicians have demonised Islam and Muslims.

Homegrown has never been performed.²⁸ Without consulting the writer and director, NYT cancelled the piece two weeks before it was scheduled to open. At the time, it was unclear why, though NYT had doubted El-Khairi and Latif earlier on in the process. In their first

Jack, 39; Modood, *Not Easy Being British*, 52; and *Ibid.*, 58.

25. Richard Bean, *England People Very Nice* (London: Oberon Books, 2009); and Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif, *Homegrown* (London: Fly Prates, 2017). Among myriad performances that consider the intersection of British multiculturalism and Islam, I have selected these two because of their prominence in different ways. *England People Very Nice* received major media attention and had notable performances at the National, while *Homegrown*'s lack of performance enlivened debates about censorship as well as the intersection of performance with British Muslims' lived experience. Their approaches are also decidedly different, with *England People* using a historical lens that attests difference and *Homegrown* using a contemporary lens that animates multiplicity.
26. James Moran, 'Reactions on the First Onstage Protest at the Royal National Theatre: What is the Problem with Richard Bean's Recent Work?', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, no. 1 (2012): 15–28 (15).
27. Kate Muir, 'England People Very Nice Causes a Very English Fuss', *The Times*, March 7, 2009, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/england-people-very-nice-causes-a-very-english-fuss-77gsg5lwctq> (accessed May 17, 2018).
28. For a more detailed analysis of the

production meeting, El-Khairy and Latif were told of a conversation between NYT and the police that resulted in police wanting 'to read the script, attend the first three shows, plant plain clothes policemen in the audience and sweep daily with the bomb squad'. NYT backed down after El-Khairy and Latif protested, and it would later emerge that NYT pulled the piece because – per an email from NYT's artistic director Paul Roseby to the Arts Council – they felt that the creative team had 'failed to justify their extremist agenda'.²⁹ El-Khairy and Latif deny any such agenda and indicate that they were in constant dialogue with NYT about the content of the piece, as well as being ahead of their development schedule. They have questioned why it is that the state intervenes when Muslim artists create work that criticises radicalization, but no such treatment is afforded to non-Muslim artists.³⁰ The playscript of *Homegrown* was self-published after devisers and the creative team finished rehearsing in secret. Latif sums up the situation well:

this show was about having an intelligent conversation around an issue that has hysteria attached [...] instead, voices have been silenced with no explanation and without the content ever being seen because of this landscape of fear that we live in.³¹

It is in this context – of the sociopolitical securitization of multicultural British theatre that considers foreignness, extremism, and conservatism – that *Octopus* must be read.

Entangling Whiteness and the State

Most references to Islam in *Octopus* relate to Interviewer, who wears a headscarf and is alternately doubled by the three actors. Sara, in particular, takes issue with the way that Interviewer treats the three main characters in the play. When interviewed, Sara tries to get Interviewer to sympathise with her plight. Interviewer asks about Sara's ethnicity, but Sara switches the conversation's focus:

SARA: Where were you born?
 INTER: What?
 SARA: I assume you're Muslim. Were you born here or did you come over?
 INTER: What has that got to/do with –
 SARA: Exactly. You're doing a job. Contributing. You work for the government –
 INTER: I work for a subcontractor.
 SARA: Still.³²

This exchange is the earliest interrogation of Interviewer's position. In it, audiences begin to see Interviewer from Sara's perspective, as someone who should understand the circumstances that the interviewees find themselves in due to her religion. Sara uses Interviewer's performed

- censorship of *Homegrown*, see Roaa Ali, 'Homegrown Censored Voices and the Discursive British Muslim Representation', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 23, no. 3 (2018): 373–88.
29. El-Khairy and Latif, *Homegrown*, 13–4.
30. El-Khairy and Latif, 'Drama in the Age of Prevent: Why Can't We Move beyond Good Muslim versus Bad Muslim?' *The Guardian*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/13/drama-in-the-age-of-prevent-why-cant-we-move-beyond-good-muslim-v-bad-muslim> (accessed May 17, 2018).
31. Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Controversial Isis-Related Play Cancelled Two Weeks before Opening Night', *The Guardian*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/04/controversial-isis-related-play-cancelled-two-weeks-before-opening-night> (accessed May 17, 2018).
32. Gray, *Octopus*, 19.
33. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 124.
34. Gray, *Octopus*, 56.

identity as a visibly Muslim woman to dispute the policy of asking people where they are from. A slippage occurs here in Sara's speech, between Interviewer as Muslim and Interviewer as foreign. For Sara, anybody who is different is part of the policy's dragnet.

It is worth attending to the assumption that Sara makes about Interviewer in this exchange. Sara connotes a visible marker of Muslimness – Interviewer's headscarf – with being foreign and thus subjected to the policy. The physical marker of the headscarf becomes linked to a non-British and non-English identity, regardless of the wearer's actual ethnicity. In the first half of the above exchange, Sara clarifies the social stakes of being Muslim: Interviewer either has to have been 'born here' or 'come over'. The fact that this 'com[ing] over' is mentioned in the same breath as being 'born here' indicates the ease with which being Muslim slips into being foreign and non-British, echoing Gilroy's 'persistent slippage between British and white'.³³ Interviewer is marked as a religious outsider by her headscarf, and Sara's questioning links that religiosity to Interviewer possibly being an ethnic outsider. Interviewer's response – 'What has that got to/do with' – upends the fluidity of Sara's move, challenging the assumption that being visibly Muslim is related to an individual's ethnicity. Sara's subsequent 'Exactly' confirms Interviewer's sentiment, but only because Interviewer has the power to make Sara's life difficult. In any case, there is a distinction to be made between their positions: while Interviewer wants to separate two of her identities – public ethnicity and personal religiosity – Sara wants to bring them together.

To Sara, the headscarf makes an obvious statement about the heritage – and therefore, politics – of its wearer. Sara believes that Interviewer being Muslim means that she can be related to as a peer in the sisterhood of racialised oppression. Surely Interviewer must have undergone this interview process herself: how could she not? By intertwining Islam with a non-British heritage, Sara ethnicises the religion and sees it subjected to the machinations of the British state. But there is an irony here. Despite being marked as potentially non-British by her headscarf – and thus potentially relatable to Sara – Interviewer is the one responsible for determining *other* people's Britishness. To Interviewer, there is no connection between religion and ethnicity: they are separable. Her position, therefore, is quintessential Whiteness: an assumption that personal identity does not and should not affect public politics. It matters not, in this instance, that Interviewer is portrayed by the 'sort of Middle Eastern looking' actor playing Scheherazade. The insidious nature of Whiteness is much like the creeping octopus: it slithers and slides its way into whatever it can. Interviewer's religious hypocrisy is confirmed later on, when audiences learn how she came to be Muslim. She indicates that she and her husband 'wanted to bring up our kids to believe in some kind of God and I didn't have one handy and he did'.³⁴ Here, Islam is likened to a change of clothes that can be tried on and discarded at will, rather than a way of life requiring wilful submission and constant negotiation.

In addition to marking Interviewer as separate, the headscarf also serves to emphasise the faceless nature of bureaucracy. In Scene 12, Sara storms into Interviewer's office after Interviewer calls immigration on Sarah. Interviewer, finally having 'a nice cup of tea', breaks open a packet of crisps. Sara is incensed:

INTERVIEWER *empties the rest of the contents of the crisp packet into her mouth.*

SARA: You haven't even offered me a crisp. You are a person aren't you – underneath that – you are a person.

INTERVIEWER *takes her feet off the desk*

INTER: Underneath that what?

Beat.

SARA: Yes, because the thing is, the thing that really gets me is, you must have been through all this too/so –

INTER: No.³⁵

35. *Ibid.*, 55–6.

Here, Sara seeks a relationship beyond bureaucracy. She desires a connection with Interviewer that is not forthcoming. The human-to-human bond is not reciprocated in any socially mediated form: not as woman to woman, citizen to agent of the state, or Muslim to person of colour. There is no solidarity. Social theorist Michael Warner sums up Sara's situation well: 'imagine how powerless people would feel if their commonality and participation were simply defined by pre-given frameworks, by institutions and law [...] Such is the image of totalitarianism: nonkin society organised by bureaucracy and the law.'³⁶

36. Michael Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90 (52).

Thus, when Interviewer reveals that she converted, Sara's confusion is no surprise: 'you converted? To Islam? But nobody likes Muslims at the moment.'³⁷ Interviewer then uses this statement against Sara. Once Sara rips up her form and that of another interviewee not seen in the play, Interviewer tells her that she has moved from 'pre-criminal' to 'criminal' space. It's an offence to vandalise government property and to threaten a member of staff. Not to mention the nasty racial element: "nobody likes Muslims at the moment" [...] the police are on their way.'³⁸ Here, Interviewer uses the power of the state to limit Sara's discussion of the degree to which personal identification implies political orientation. Destroying government property is the final straw that moves Sara from pre-criminal to criminal space, but it is her 'threaten[ing] a member of staff' by claiming that 'nobody likes Muslims at the moment' and questioning Interviewer's humanity 'underneath that' that is the initial offence. The irony of Interviewer as a state agent emerges again: according to the British state, it is racially problematic to say that 'nobody likes Muslims at the moment' but not to use interviews to determine the Britishness of people with non-English heritage. Through Interviewer's visible Muslimness, Islam

37. Gray, *Octopus*, 56.

38. *Ibid.*, 58.

39. At the end of Scene 12, Interviewer says that it is an offence to 'threaten a member of staff' and calls the police on Sara. Not waiting for the police and on her way out of Interviewer's office, Sara counters with a 'fuck you'. In the subsequent and final scene, Sara admits that 'I did threaten her. I told her to ... eff off'. If the threat in Sara's mind is telling Interviewer to 'eff off', which happens after Interviewer calls the police, then it must be that the threat in Interviewer's mind is when Sara attacks the perceived inconsistency between her politics and religion. Though what Interviewer is 'threaten[ed]' by is not explicitly named, it is alluded to when she calls attention to the 'nasty racial element' of Sara's comment (58–9).

40. Generally, wearing a hijab involves the donning of a headscarf, a niqab refers to a headscarf and a face covering that leaves eyes exposed, and a burqa incorporates a full body cloak covering face, head, and eyes.

41. Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim*, 2–5.

is put in complex and fragile tension with state-sponsored Britishness.³⁹

Throughout Scene 12, Interviewer's lack of solidarity with Sara on a gendered, political, and racialised front entangles Whiteness and the project of the state through the figure of the visibly British Muslim woman. It is not Interviewer's wearing of a headscarf that renders her part of the British state, but rather her bureaucratic position. The disconnection between concerned citizen seeking understanding and uncaring state agent doing her job is already gaping. That void turns into a chasm because Interviewer is visibly Muslim and delinks her religious identity from the ethnicised politics that Sara reads onto her. In the figure of Interviewer as a visibly British Muslim woman, Whiteness structures the relationship between Islam and the British state by assuming Interviewer to be a blank canvas. This simultaneously marks Interviewer out as religiously other, ethnically British, and bureaucratically faceless.

Rotating the differently coloured bodies that portray Interviewer – alternately 'sort of Middle Eastern looking', 'sort of Asian looking', and 'sort of white' – furthers this facelessness, isolating Interviewer and bureaucratizing her performance. But there is a danger in doing so. In making Interviewer someone who wears a headscarf, Gray risks recalling Orientalist themes of faceless and veiled women who become symbols of perceived oppressions rather than diverse individuals from unique contexts in their own right. Anthropologist Emma Tarlo's discussion of the relationship between Orientalism and 'veiling' is helpful here. She argues that the common practice of categorizing a range of dress choices such as wearing *hijab*, a *niqab*, or a *burqa* as 'veiling' belies a complex question that has numerous classed, ethnonational, familial, generational, gendered, historical, political, religious, sociocultural, and transnational resonances.⁴⁰ For her, the term is a simplification that recalls 'a long legacy of Orientalist images and texts, integrated within the canons of Western art history, literature, and colonial writings that reproduce male-dominated gazes of women in various Asian and North African countries.'⁴¹ Not only does this entrench an Orientalist link, but it also associates the category of being Muslim with only those women who are visibly Muslim. Those who do not wear a headscarf are elided and dismissed. In this context, the facelessness of Interviewer – a character who does not exist except for when an actor wears a headscarf – is troubling.

Such facelessness is even trickier because the language of Scene 12, in which Interviewer links discrimination against Muslims to racism, promotes a discourse about the British state *not being* racist by employing a headscarf-wearing British Muslim woman to determine others' Britishness. This is despite that same state deploying a racist policy that is enforced by a woman whose interviewees understand her as religiously other. The perceived neutrality of Whiteness and its entanglement with the state ensnares Interviewer as a visibly British Muslim woman who, as an agent of the state, must uphold a racist policy and logic. In her last interaction with Interviewer, Sarah confirms this: 'You don't have to

- wear that headscarf, you know. If you're feeling under pressure to ... there are organizations – because it's not actually very empowering to/ wander around with a . Interviewer's retort is swift: 'You've just entered Section D .'⁴²
42. Gray, *Octopus*, 47.
- And yet, as a dramatic device, rotating different bodies through Interviewer's position allows the audience to see the figure of the British Muslim woman in different ethnic configurations. In this move, Gray attempts to subvert the ethnonational slippage that often occurs in Britain as a result of the country's migration histories, between being Muslim and of South Asian heritage.⁴³ Gray's Interviewer is not tied to a particular ethnicity. Therefore, the choice to have the 'sort of white' actor to play Interviewer in the climactic Scene 12 is not accidental. She is the one who reveals Interviewer as a convert. And, her final portrayal of Interviewer is also the only time that Interviewer has 'a nice cup of tea', a symbol that recalls Britain's colonial past and neo-imperial present.⁴⁴ Whiteness is thus reinscribed as normative and linked to the state, while be(com)ing Muslim is confirmed as different and linked to foreignness. Making Interviewer 'sort of white' during her revelatory scene can reinforce problematic discourses about being Muslim in Britain, even as other parts of *Octopus* subvert them.
43. Without specifying a Muslim/Asian slippage, Kundnani confirms the possibility of such racialization: 'since all racisms are socially and politically constructed rather than reliant on the reality of any biological race, it is perfectly possible for cultural markers associated with Muslimness (forms of dress, rituals, languages, etc.) to be turned into racial signifiers' (11).
44. Gray, *Octopus*, 55.
- Starting and ending the play with the 'sort of white' actor portraying Interviewer has a further effect, when united with the metaphor of the octopus. Octopi are multi-armed creatures with soft bodies belonging to the *mollusca* phylum. Among other characteristics, this means that their nervous system is diffuse. Two-thirds of an octopus' neurons are in its arms, which can operate independent of input from the brain.⁴⁵ An octopus feels its way through its surroundings, using the adhesive suckers that line the inside of its arms to move around and manipulate objects. But it does so without integrating this tactile knowledge with knowledge in its brain, in the way that a human can close her eyes and differentiate a book from a ball by touch. Instead, an octopus has to *visually observe* its arms' actions to recognise that what an arm feels corresponds to different objects.⁴⁶
45. Yoram Yekutieli et al., 'Dynamic Model of the Octopus Arm. I. Biomechanics of the Octopus Reaching Movement', *Journal of Neurophysiology* 94, no. 2 (2005): 1443–58.
46. Martin John Wells, *Octopus: Physiology and Behaviour of an Advanced Invertebrate* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1978), 228.
- In terms of the play, the implications of an octopus' nervous system are simultaneously fascinating and creepy. The arms of the state, one sucker of which is Interviewer, reach out to a number of interviewees, including the three that the audience witnesses. The sucker, and indeed the arm to which it is attached, can operate independent of instruction from the central nervous system that established the overall parameters of the process. In this case, that nervous system is the government that developed the policy requiring those of 'non-indigenous heritage' to be interviewed.⁴⁷ Indeed, information is interpreted and understood at ground level by Interviewer before she alerts another segment of the multi-armed beast as needed. Outside forces only interfere at Interviewer's request: immigration for those who enter 'pre-criminal space' and the police for those who enter 'criminal space'. In *Octopus*, the arms of the state are perhaps more threatening than the central state itself.
47. Gray, *Octopus*, 56.

48. Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1894/1962).
49. Gray, *Octopus*, 52, 60.
50. *Ibid.*, 53.
- Despite this, the state has information on those who come to interview. Like philosopher Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison in which a central point allows a single guard tower to observe what is happening in any offshoot hallways,⁴⁸ the state informs Interviewer of personal information that interviewees themselves do not know. When Sarah goes to the interview room, she learns why she has been called in: her Jamaican grandfather failed to volunteer for World War II, stole his brother's identity, fraudulently accepted the Victoria Cross, and became the first black man in the Scots Guard. This information contrasts with what Sarah knows about her family, upending her understanding of her own identity and making her believe that she has to 'represent' and that 'I can't be racist now [that] I'm black.'⁴⁹ The octopus that is the state mixes up not only its own processes by enabling its multiple arms to function independent of one another and independent of a central nervous system, but it also confuses those with whom it interacts about who they are and their place in the world. Scheherazade's comparison of an octopus to a human clarifies the stakes: 'In humans the genes are in clusters ... but in octopuses they're all over the place, which means an octopus can like smell with its leg.'⁵⁰ The state's entanglements, including with Whiteness, are as confused as the octopus genome.

All this is to say that the British state in the form of Interviewer uses Whiteness to disassociate Islam from ethnicity, religion from culture. This occurs as a subordination of one internally diverse group that is othered on the basis of its non-Whiteness (those of non-English ethnic heritage) and a superordination of another internally diverse group that is ostracised on the basis of its religion (British Muslims). British colonial logic, and indeed the prevailing logic of oppressors everywhere, is at work here: divide and conquer. Favor one group at the expense of another, despite their potential to overlap, such that all minorities continue fighting among themselves for the nation-state's and majority group's favor. Octopus, it turns out, is more than just the play's title. It is the insidious multi-pronged machinations of the British state that create an invisible hierarchy of identities inducted by Whiteness, against which resistance is weak and change nearly impossible. Moving its arms of its own volition, the octopus sneaks up on its prey, wraps around it, and toys with it, beginning the slow but certain process of snuffing out hope.

51. Here, the production echoes sociologist Asef Bayat and anthropologist Linda Herrera's call to move beyond characterizations of Muslims that focus only on 'religiosity, conservative cultural politics, and extremism' (4). See Bayat and Herrera, 'Introduction', in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–24.

Intertwining Satire and Punk

At the same time as *Octopus*'s entanglement of Whiteness and the state is moderated by the figure of the visibly British Muslim woman, the play also intertwines a punking of the state with a satirization of social (mis)perceptions about Islam. It does so by pushing against three narratives – Muslims as foreign, conservative, and extremist⁵¹ – and contesting the hypervisibility of British Muslim women linked to these narratives. Simultaneously, it invokes the resistant and countercultural ethos of

punk, drawing on an ethic of self-reliance and anti-establishment politics while emphasizing music as a subversive force. This intertwining of satire and punk in *Octopus* manifests throughout the play, and my interest in this section is how these two formal choices contribute to the critique that Gray levels at the relationship between state-sponsored Britishness, multiculturalism, and contemporary British Muslimness. Throughout this section, I use Bayat and Herrera's three narratives as a guide, structuring analysis of the ways that punk and satire are intertwined in *Octopus*.

To begin, one of the key narratives about Muslims and Islam that *Octopus* satirises is that of Muslim as foreign. Gray's critique of this is evident in reference to Interviewer's relationship to her cup of tea. First, when played by the 'sort of white actor, the tea is too hot. Second, when played by the 'sort of Middle Eastern looking actor, the tea is too cold. Third, when played by the 'sort of Asian looking actor, she spills tea all over her desk. Fourth, when played again by the 'sort of Middle Eastern looking actor, she forgets her tea somewhere else, presumably in the break room. Fifth, when played again by the 'sort of white actor, she finally 'downs a 'decent cup of tea while stuffing some crisps in her mouth.⁵² There are myriad ways to read this progression: that of a government worker who sees her job as a paycheck and lives for her breaks; the state as satiated only when it executes its policies with wanton disregard for individuality; and a white, English body as the only one that is 'decent and worth normalcy. The synchronicity of Scene 12 – in which Interviewer is played by a white actor, enjoys a cup of tea, and justifies why she wears a headscarf – all contest the slippage between being Muslim and being foreign that Gilroy's 'complex system of racially 'link[ed] discourses undertakes.⁵³

If the state as manifest by Interviewer has a range of difficulties with its cup of tea, its response to music is more uniform. Throughout *Octopus*, all interviewees sing when interviewed. The earliest incarnation of this is when Scheherazade hums 'a bastardised, punky version of "Football's Coming Home", to which Interviewer responds with: 'What are you doing? You can't do that here. Later, Scheherazade 'hums a short snatch of "Common People" by post-punk band Pulp before 'INTERVIEWER puts up a hand to tell her to stop. Sarah, in her first and only interaction with Interviewer, sings 'They're Changing Guard at Buckingham Palace before Interviewer cuts her off with a curt 'No singing. At the end of the scene, Sarah tries to overwhelm Interviewer with music: 'Football's Coming Home, 'Common People, and 'They're Changing Guard at Buckingham Palace are all heard. Interviewer responds by reiterating her request for Sarah to 'step out of the room and wait for immigration. Finally, Sara gets in on the act in the climactic penultimate scene, with excerpts from Mary Poppins. She does so twice, eliciting sarcastic responses from Interviewer: 'Why do you people keep singing at me? and 'Finally get a nice cup of tea. I didn't ask for a soundtrack. As the conflict builds between the three interviewees and Interviewer, the musical outbreaks increase. Most of them occur in the second half of the 13 scenes that make up *Octopus*.⁵⁴

52. Gray, *Octopus*, 53–6.

53. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 43.

54. Gray, *Octopus*, 12, 34, 44, 48, 55.

Interviewer's line, in which the troubles of tea and the subversion of music are united, draws a link between how Britain's colonial past – in liquid form – keeps reappearing in a manner that is never quite digestible, and how the interviewees – out of nerves, subversion, irritation, or all three – keep singing in a manner that is never quite harmonious. Both trouble Interviewer, and the state, juxtaposing the satirical farce of Interviewer's failure to access an acceptable cup of tea against the musical intrusions of the interviewees. When Interviewer dismisses the 'soundtrack' after finally 'get[ting] a nice cup of tea', she is likely hoping for a break from her job. But in a wider sense, the British state is seeking to not be bothered by those it deems are upsetting the project of developing a unified sense of state-sponsored Britishness. Of course, there is a substantial literature on the subversive nature of music as threatening to the state as well as its use as a weapon by the state.⁵⁵

But when the interviewees use it, they are unable to overturn the state's oppressive system and interference in its entirety. Thus, their fight is limited to everyday resistances like singing at Interviewer, exemplifying anthropologist James Scott's 'weapons of the weak' in which the deployment of commonplace actions can constitute defiance in and of itself.⁵⁶

Moving beyond the Muslim-as-foreign narrative, attempts at bureaucratic control of sound must also be understood in terms of who delivers them: a headscarf-wearing woman. The public performance of Interviewer's faith means that her continued dismissal of music recalls the second of Bayat and Herrera's narratives: Muslim as conservative. Read one way, Interviewer as a visibly Muslim woman dismissing music feeds into stereotypes of Muslims as backward people without any interest in culture. Read another way, Interviewer as a visibly Muslim bureaucrat dismissing music recognises the historically subversive role that music has played relative to authoritarian regimes. Read a third way, Interviewer as a visibly Muslim office worker dismissing music implies someone who wants peace and quiet to complete her work. The ambiguity of these differing rationales is confounded further, because it is unclear whether Interviewer takes issue with any and all music, or with the lyrics of particular songs that are sung. Nonetheless, the person who is doing the dismissing of this music is visibly Muslim.

This, of course, brings up a whole politics around the contested position of music in Islam. As anthropologists Lara Deeb and Mona Harb recognise, 'interpretations about music's permissibility have fluctuated throughout the history of Islamic jurisprudence ... [such that] many religious scholars place as much importance, if not more, on the context and accompanying behaviours as on the music itself'.⁵⁷ Historically, there have been anti-music Islamic governmental regimes, such as Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran and Osama bin Laden's Taliban, just as there have been pro-music Islamic practices, like Turkish and Moroccan Sufis entering into trance. The issue continues to be debated, and I am not interested in commenting on these positions here. What is relevant to this discussion is that Interviewer as a visibly Muslim woman who is rejecting music as part of the British state's project becomes enmeshed in that debate. Her visibility becomes a hyper-visibility in these moments of dismissal. If, for instance, Interviewer had

55. Rather than offer an exhaustive overview of this literature, I will point readers to two important texts in relation to the intersection of Islam, music, and the state: Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); and Hisham Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

56. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

57. Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shiite South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 136–7.

been described as Muslim in *Octopus* character list but did not wear a headscarf, audiences would only learn of her religion in the penultimate scene, even though she dismisses music at numerous points in the play. By being visibly Muslim *and* within the state's project, her position as a Muslim woman – and thus the audience's reading of Islam in *Octopus* – is confused *because* of music's contested place within Islam. It becomes difficult to know whether Interviewer is rejecting music because she is Muslim, buys into the government's project, or simply wants quiet. That puzzlement is essential to Gray's satirization of the Muslim-as-conservative narrative. Audiences can't quite tell where the truth lies.

Octopus satire of the Muslim-as-conservative narrative also appears elsewhere, mostly through the hapless Sarah. After Sara goes on her initial tirade about the audacity that Interviewer has to judge her parents, Sarah demurs: 'You know I don't think you can say that. About the headscarf. I mean there are moderate Islamic people. Sometimes you can't even tell who's Islamic and who's just a hipster these days – the beards, you know.'⁵⁸ In these lines, Gray's satire is double-edged. At once, she pokes fun at links made between beards and Islam, and at claims to an all-knowing and well-informed liberal politics. Sarah's observation about beards intentionally obfuscates visibly Muslim men with their visibly hipster counterparts. The end result is a joke that heightens the core message of these lines: moderate Muslims challenge perceptions of all Muslims as conservative, and physical markers are not an indicator of religiosity. Yet simultaneously, in terms of liberal politics, Gray undercuts those who believe themselves well-informed on the matter. Sarah's use of the term 'Islamic' rather than 'Muslim' to describe people is a common linguistic error made by those who understand that the term 'Christian', for instance, can refer to both people and things: 'a Christian woman' and 'a Christian painting' equally ring true, whereas only 'a Muslim woman' and 'an Islamic painting' make sense.⁵⁹ Put together, these dimensions upend and confuse common perceptions of Muslims as conservative.

Finally, there is the narrative of Muslim as extremist terrorist. Though not subverted directly through punk or music, Gray's use of satire is nonetheless notable in terms of this narrative. After revealing that Sarah is mixed race, Interviewer tells Sarah that the state is required to send her state entitlement form to her landlord, employer, and doctor. Sarah asks about whether passport control will be informed and wonders if they'll 'look at me funny' or 'search my bags'. Interviewer then asks, 'What would they find/if they did', after which this exchange ensues:

SARAH: What do you mean what would they find? They wouldn't find anything

INTER: ...

SARAH: You're already treating me differently – no wonder she [that is, Scheherazade] said all that stuff about Islamic State – it's enough to make anyone want to join a caphilatte

Beat.

58. Gray, *Octopus*, 30.

59. This is because both terms, Islam and Muslim, originate in Arabic. As a language, Arabic is based on root verbs of three or four letters that are slotted into any of 14 standard grammatical forms to convey different meanings: the first ten forms can be applied to three-letter root words, and the subsequent four forms can be applied to four-letter root words. (These are only the basic forms, and more meanings can be derived from other, less commonly used forms.) For example, the 'm' sound at the beginning of 'Muslim' refers to someone who engages in the root verb S-L-M, which in this case means 'to submit'. Therefore, a Muslim is someone who submits. But, the 'm' sound can also refer to a place where someone can engage in the relevant root verb. In the case of the word *masjid*, for instance – where the root word S-J-D means 'to prostrate' – a *masjid* is a place where someone prostrates. When this system is translated in English, a language in which letters are often superfluous to the meaning of a given word, the terminological confusion that Sarah experiences remains.

INTER: Do you mean a caliphate?

SARA: Well I mean, I don't know, you would know wouldn't you?

60. Gray, *Octopus*, 47.

INTERVIEWER *stretches, yawns*.⁶⁰

Sarah's mistake – slipping between 'caphilatte' and 'caliphate' – offers comedic relief in the charged moment of Sarah beginning to wrestle with the implications of being a minority in Britain. In her anger, she assumes a link between Interviewer and extremist terrorists, due to Interviewer's performed identity. However, the dialogue frames this in a conversation that satirises Sarah's willful ignorance about the experience of ethnic minorities and her prejudiced bigotry towards the experience of religious ones. Simultaneously, she taps into a further stereotype: young millennials obsessed with their café lattes. The joke embeds *Octopus* counter-narrative statements about Islam by lightening the mood of the scene.

Scheherazade employs a similar tactic in her second interaction with Interviewer:

INTER: You said you were ... Persian? I don't see it here.

SCHEH: Are you looking for it under 'P'?

INTER: ...

SCHEH: Everyone thinks Iranians are crazy nutjob religious freak terrorists so my mum always said, say Persian.

61. *Ibid.*, 30–1.

INTER: Oh, Iran ...⁶¹

Scheherazade's disidentification with a country because of its extremist *and* religious connotations is positioned in the context of her questioning Interviewer's competence. It is possible to imagine Interviewer's internal monologue in response to Scheherazade's question as 'where else would I be looking for it? Here, Gray's satire critiques a system that forces individuals to use state-specific identifiers that may not match their self-identification. Gray then presents an alternate labeling, contesting the narrative of Iran as full of 'crazy nutjob religious freak terrorists'.

In the remainder of the interview, Scheherazade learns that her benefits are being cut because she does not meet a minimum income threshold and is of non-English heritage. Afterwards, in the waiting room with Sara and Sarah, she makes a decision:

SCHEH: I'm joining Islamic State.

SARAH: What?

SCHEH: That's what they're called now. They keep changing their name like The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, RIP.⁶²

62. *Ibid.*, 40.

Sarah's 'What?' is an astonished response to Scheherazade's declaration. However, Scheherazade takes it to mean that Sarah doesn't know what 'Islamic State' is. The reference to Prince's name-changing and death takes the edge off of Scheherazade's statement, which leads Sarah and Sara to think she is joking. The satire critiques not only Da'esh itself, but also the notion that it self-identifies as a coherent entity on par with any

established country. Instead, Scheherazade renders the group malleable and incoherent.

But Scheherazade's invocation of Prince is not accidental. The reference to his name change reminds audiences of an important anti-corporate history. In the early 1990s, Prince changed his stage name to an unpronounceable symbol, later dubbed the 'Love Symbol', after Warner Brothers failed to release his music at a steady pace. At the same time, he began producing albums at a faster rate to liberate himself from contract obligations. Though not part of the British punk movement of the 1970s, Prince's actions were anti-corporate and sought to avoid selling out; both of these are key punk values. They connect Scheherazade's lines that satirise Daesh to the ethos that punk has and the future it imagines. Heard towards the end of the play, these references intertwine punk and satire in a complex critique.

Ultimately, this critique – combined with the earlier subversions of Bayat and Herrera's narratives about Muslims – challenges contemporary imaginations of Britain as a community that can include Islam but renders non-Whiteness suspect. Here, political scientist Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation is at work: 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.⁶³ The limits that the British state draws allow for a complex interpellation of Islam relative to those boundaries. Crucially though, it is a particular type of Islam that is not engaged in social justice work or tied to a particular ethnic heritage, a form that puts Islam in volatile and fragile tension with the British state. Interviewer's *raison d'être* throughout *Octopus* is to enforce the limits of this imagined community, one that the three interviewees are desperate to remain part of. The play's satirisation of that role and the interviewees' punkish protests are part and parcel of how this imagined community is contested. Indeed, their final resistance constitutes 'weapons of the weak' that have no hope of changing the system as a whole. The interviewees tear up their forms and sing together in 'glorious chaos' as police sirens are heard, foreshadowing their presumed arrest for defying the interview process, which the audience does not see.⁶⁴ Despite being hopeless, these modes of resistance show the internal variations within Anderson's imagined community, at the same time as the interviewees' togetherness reconstitutes the state's 'limited imaginings' of who belongs in it and who does not.⁶⁵

In the interviewees' final act of singing The Sex Pistols' 'God Save The Queen', audiences hear Anderson's 'contemporaneous community' that is created through singing a country's national anthem as 'an experience of simultaneity'.⁶⁶ But at the end of *Octopus*, it is '*their* National Anthem', a punk and anti-royalist version of Britain's actual national anthem.⁶⁷ The interviewees create, for a brief moment, a counterpublic community of their own that is a subset and contestation of the broader nation-state, recalling punk's anti-establishment and countercultural themes. The three women are 'all mixed up' about who and what they are, but only because the British state has made a policy of attempting to enforce *its particular imaginings*.⁶⁸ In actual fact, the interviewees' multiplicity is what makes the state and the imagined community it

63. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

64. Gray, *Octopus*, 64.

65. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

66. *Ibid.*, 145.

67. Gray, *Octopus*, 64, italics in original.

68. *Ibid.*, 52.

seeks to solidify multifaceted and multifarious. To satirise the state, singing punk becomes a unifying and resistant act, solidifying the relationship that Sara, Sarah, and Scheherazade forge in the fires of the waiting room. They form a minoritarian link of resistance connected to the wider chain of anti-establishment, non-white, British counter-culture. Their music links them to translocal and trans-temporal voices of anti-establishment discourse that refuse to sell out to the system, ‘choruses [that] are joinable in time’.⁶⁹

69. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

Conclusion

Throughout this piece, my efforts have been at using *Octopus* as a case study to demonstrate the complex relationship between state-sponsored Britishness, multiculturalism, and British Muslimness. In her writing, Gray offers a critique of this interpellation through two key entanglements: Whiteness and the state, and satire and punk. These four components are mediated by the figure of a visibly Muslim British woman, problematizing and complicating the relationship between Islam, the British state, and multiculturalism. Though the slippage between Whiteness and the British state remains largely intact, Islam is put in unpredictable, unstable, and playful tension with both structures. *Octopus* presents a complex relationship between ethnicity, religion, and the state that complicates current formations of multicultural and racial politics.

In so doing, the play calls on audiences to privilege the minoritarian subject who uses her racialised and ethnicised position to contest the state's reach. From within the metaphorical octopus lair, Sara, Sarah, and Scheherazade challenge its intrusion into their lives and attempts at defining national identity. Their resistances are small but significant, mixed up with the negotiations that constitute the living of their lives. Ultimately, these negotiations are both structural and interpersonal, such that their sisterhood is seeded in the shared experience they have. The space of the waiting room becomes a space of community, forwarding a politics of everyday relationships that produces networks that work against British state coercion. In this way and through these everyday resistances, perhaps the octopus does not slither as easily as it otherwise might.

ORCID

Asif Majid  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0765-9583>