Watching Me, Watching You:

Discovering and Interacting with Muslimah YouTubers

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Abstract

In an era of ‘you-do-you’ Internet – where amateurs can become minor celebrities from their bedrooms – the political, cultural, and technological weight of turning on the camera warrants study. This is especially the case for young Muslim women who live in a world where the government surveillance of diasporic Muslims in Western countries is at an all-time high. For my thesis, I have created an interactive video installation project focusing on Tasneem and Saima: two YouTube broadcasters who identify simultaneously as diasporic Muslimahs, as citizens of the United States and the United Kingdom, and as comics.

Through the installation, which combines Kundnani’s take on the ‘moderate’ Muslim, Senft’s work on Internet ‘micro-celebrity,’ MacDonald’s theories on ethnographic film and StoryCode’s research on transmedia, I argue that Tasneem and Saima build YouTube viewership by regularly publishing videos featuring three sometimes conflicting elements: humor, “relatability,” and a commitment to engaging a spectrum of misinformed opinions about Islam. Their work allows feminist scholars to broaden the currently constrained discussions around Muslims online and investigate the pleasures and dangers of Muslimah visibility politics on the Web.

In addition to the installation, a written document provides a review of pertinent literature, outlines my research methodology, documents my pre-, mid- and post-production processes, and details my lessons learned regarding the practices of filmmaking, feminist ethnography, and installation-making.

Keywords: YouTube, Muslim, women, vlog, parody, transmedia, installation, feminist, ethnography, visibility, micro-celebrity, moderate, Orientalism, Islam, West
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Introduction. Surfing the Cyberworld

At the moment, two technologically enhanced waves are on the rise. One wave – fueled by a Western fear that Muslims with ‘moderate’ ideologies (as defined by the West) are on the decline – involves heightened government surveillance on diasporic Muslim communities.¹ The other wave – fueled by entrepreneurial spirit, a desire to tell one’s own story, and a genuine aspiration to communicate with those beyond one’s everyday social circle – involves the rise of participants on personal broadcasting channels like YouTube. For my thesis, I have chosen to create a project that focuses on the intersection of these two waves in the lives of Tasneem and Saima, two young females who identify simultaneously as diasporic women Muslims (hereafter, “Muslimahs”); as citizens of the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively; as YouTube performers (hereafter, “YouTubers”); and as comedians.²

For me, it all started with a video. “I don’t hate white people,” opened Tasneem (known online as Tazzy Phe), adjusting her hijab. “I just don’t understand them.”³ Tasneem was speaking from the comfort of her room, which I later learned is in Colorado. From her tone, it was clear from the onset that she meant her confession to be funny. That video was made in 2010. Four years later, it has 184,441 views and counting. Upon

¹ The distinction between West and East is intentionally cautious and is further defined and discussed in Chapter 1.
² A note on the names. In this written portion, I have done my best to be consistent with the names I use for the YouTubers. When I am talking about them as people, I refer to them by their first names: Tasneem and Saima. When I am talking about them as YouTubers or when I discuss the ways in which their audiences perceive them, I refer to them by their YouTube names: Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike (not capitalized on YouTube). While Saima also has a fashion channel, saimastyleslike, and a vlogging channel, saimavlogslike, I chose not to specifically distinguish the three because it was not a key component of my argument.
³ “I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHITE PEOPLE,” published online on December 27, 2011, is accessible on Tazzy Phe’s channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuY9ZO16eVY.
discovering Tazzy Phe, I found myself searching other Muslimah YouTubers. After watching my fair share of hijab tutorials, I came across Saima, a young UK-based Muslimah with 75,160 subscribers: three times as many as Tazzy Phe. Well-known by her YouTube name, saimasmileslike, she was busy pre-empting strong reactions to her news that at eighteen years old, she was getting ready to be married. Casting a strong look into the camera, she deadpanned: “I know what you’re going to say … and no, I wasn’t forced. I mean, seriously, could you ever imagine someone trying to force me to do something?”

Both Tasneem and Saima are diasporic Muslimahs, coming from middle- to upper-class families. Tasneem was born in Saudi Arabia, but her parents are Pakistani and she was raised in Colorado. On her end, Saima has Bengali roots, but was born and grew up in the UK. She also spent parts of her childhood in Bangladesh, Hong Kong and the US. Tasneem and Saima make a variety of videos. Their portfolios include video logs (hereafter, “vlogs”) about their personal lives and struggles. Both also create parody videos, such as Tazzy Phe’s “Types of Hijabis,” in which she comically acts out the different personalities of hijab-wearing women, and saimasmileslike’s “How to get a big booty,” in which she pokes fun at the idea of getting a ‘perfect’ beach body. Occasionally, the two will make more serious or informative videos in which they discuss issues in Islam, like perceptions of the hijab or the meaning of Ramadan.

4 “IM ENGAGED,” published online on August 26, 2012, is accessible on saimasmilelike’s channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_5ttA4rk9o.
5 “TYPES OF HIJABIS,” published online on March 12, 2014, is accessible on Tazzy Phe’s channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VOjaod8RfM.
6 “HOW TO GET A BIG BOOTY,” published online on May 28, 2014, is accessible on saimasmileslike’s channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDUKj5sKpn4.
Within the scope of comedy and satire, each has a specific tone and focus. Saimasmileslike’s go-to format tends to be long, vlog-like videos. She always opens with an excited “hey guys!” and ends by asking her viewers to subscribe and give the video a ‘thumbs-up’ if they enjoyed it. In comparison, Tazzy Phe is more detached and instead concentrates on short skits. Tazzy Phe recently created an introductory video on her channel, which sums up the tone of her channel:

Salaams, hello! I'm Tazzy Phe, welcome to my channel. Here you'll find a whole bunch of weirdness […] I make fun of people … Make even more fun of myself … and I try to find humor in things that are honestly not funny at all. This trailer was probably extremely unhelpful in trying to figure out what kind of videos I make and what my channel is about. […] Take a look for yourself and go ahead and subscribe – or else. I won't do anything because I have priorities, to be completely honest. But you really should subscribe…

Their particular approaches distinguish them from many other Muslimah YouTubers, whose videos focus mainly on demonstrating different hijab styles or discussing new trends in Muslimah fashion.

Watching Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike, I realized how much work needed to be done to achieve an accurate understanding of the popular culture surrounding the Muslimahs work. An attempt has been made by the emerging field of study called ‘Islam 2.0,’ which is mostly generated by Western, non-Muslim, non-Arab scholars and analyzes the consequences of Muslims and Islam integrating into the new mediasphere. After a careful reading of the most prolific authors on the subject – including Gary Bunt, author of *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, and miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, editors of *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* – I realized that the theories of ‘Islam 2.0’ constituted but one approach of understanding

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7 As a clarification, “salaams” is an abbreviation of ‘as-salaamu alaykum,’ a typical greeting amongst Muslims and across Arab and some Asian countries. Literally, it translates to ‘peace be unto you,’ but in regular use, it means ‘hello.’

8 “WELCOME TO TAZZYPHE’S CHANNEL!” was published online on February 12, 2015, and is accessible on Tazzy Phe’s channel: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrP1i4ZHTqQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrP1i4ZHTqQ).

9 miriam cooke prefers not to capitalize her name. For more information, please refer to her website: [http://miriamcooke.apostrophenow.com](http://miriamcooke.apostrophenow.com).
Islam within today’s era of globalization. As activist and scholar Sanaz Raji put it during an interview with me, “‘Islam 2.0’ highlights online Muslims as outliers, instead of contextualizing them as part of the billions of people now active online and struggling to understand the mediasphere.”

After doing researching and conversing with the YouTubers and relevant experts, it became clear to me Tasneem and Saima did not see themselves as “outliers,” but rather as full participants in YouTube’s ecosphere. I believe Tasneem and Saima build online viewership by regularly publishing YouTube videos featuring three key elements. First, they use humor, which allows their work a greater possibility to reach Muslim and non-Muslim viewers, and separates them from other Muslimah vloggers, whose work naturally cultivates largely Muslim viewership. Second, both Tasneem and Saima deploy notions of the ‘relatable’ in ways that have the potential to challenge the dominance of male Muslim vloggers who have historically had greater access to a diverse audience than Muslimahs have.

However, the YouTubers’ aim of being relatable, which on the surface seems to be about celebrating one’s quirky individuality, can simultaneously act as a hindrance. This is especially true when one is a diasporic Muslim faced with a societal pressure to appear ‘moderate,’ as defined by the West. This leads to my third observation: although both Tasneem and Saima are comics who like to attract viewers, they are also committed to engaging a spectrum of misinformed opinions about Islam. Here, I am particularly interested in the pleasures and pitfalls of visibility politics for Muslimahs in the West.

Overall, my thesis has been designed around a series of questions that consider the YouTubers’ online personas, their audiences’ perceptions, and the methodology necessary to

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10 I interviewed Sanaz Raji via Skype on September 24, 2014. I will continue to refer to Raji’s comments throughout this document.
deconstruct their work. I will detail these further in the following chapters, drawing on the scholarly work of Theresa Senft, Arun Kundnani, and Scott MacDonald, among others.

Methodology & Presentation

The primary presentation of my thesis is an interactive video installation composed of four short-form documentaries: one in which the YouTubers expound upon their online presence; two about the political and theoretical contexts surrounding the YouTubers’ works; and one about the audience’s interaction with the YouTubers. The first documentary aims to bring the audience behind the scenes of a YouTube micro-celebrity, revealing the challenges they face and their intentions with their work. It is composed of snippets of my interviews with the YouTubers; in other words, it is told entirely from their perspective. The second documentary is principally guided by an interview with Senft (Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks), in which she deconstructs visibility politics and the intricacies of being vulnerable online. The third video, narrated by Kundnani (The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror), focuses on the political roots of Islamophobia and the West’s contradictory definition of ‘moderate’ Muslims. The fourth film maps audience conversations to the YouTubers’ videos and discusses the viewers’ demographics.

In a single room, these four short films will be screened simultaneously – some on iPads, others on laptops, and the YouTubers one on a television screen. In one corner, a curtain will lead to an interactive feature, where the viewers will be able to explore how the YouTubers and the audience interact online. Specifically, a Google+ Hangout will be set up so viewers can leave a selfie video. However, the other cameras in the chat will be black, so the viewer does not know to whom they are talking. These anonymous people will, in turn, leave instantaneous comments
about the viewers’ performance. This hands-on component aims to simulate the decisions, performance, and detractions that form the experience of a YouTuber. A live Twitter stream will also be running throughout the duration of the installation, as a way of simultaneously connecting the exhibit-goers with the YouTubers.

The rationale behind this installation is twofold. The first relates to thematic of cyberspace, which guides my entire thesis. I aim to simulate an immersion into the world of YouTube through the simultaneous projections and the hands-on component. On YouTube, viewers pay attention to the person on screen and then choose whether to engage with the video’s content through YouTube comments or social media. My installation aims to recreate a similar participatory experience, intertwined with a theoretical grounding of the issues behind Saima and Tasneem’s YouTube presence.

The second point relates to Islamophobia, which is alive and well in today’s world. As renown scholar Haleh Afshar writes, Islam is often understood

as being monolithic, separate and other without any common values with other cultures and as being essentially barbaric and sexist. Muslims are therefore essentialized, otherized and imagined as being fundamentally uncivilized and unwilling to conform to the values of the West (413-414).

With heightened awareness of being a Western scholar studying Muslim women, my installation is an attempt to steer away from both this framework and that of ‘Islam 2.0.’ As Raji made clear to me, Saima and Tasneem “are trying to be individuals, just like any other person online. And they’re showing their individual feelings, their thoughts, about a wide variety of things.”

Drawing from these important lessons, my work aims to introduce Saima and Tasneem as two individuals – not as representatives of all Muslims living in the US and the UK – and encourage the audience to engage with them as informed and analytical YouTube viewers.
About this Document

The document you are reading is best thought of as a ‘production book,’ which is a typical component of a director’s work. In it, a director must analyze the process, the intention of the film and its final version. My production book details my practice as a filmmaker, as a feminist ethnographer, and as an installation-creator. In the first chapter, I discuss my pre-production process and expand on my research questions. I outline the theoretical resources that have become the backbone to my creative project. I also describe the challenges I have faced as a non-Muslim researcher studying Muslim subjects and the difficulties that surfaced in creating an interactive media project.

In the second chapter, I detail my process during the production phase, focusing on both the technical and theoretical hurdles that emerged when I filmed the interviews. I also explain the footage I wish I had, and how this impacted my final edit. The third chapter is entirely dedicated to the post-production phase and the conceptualization of the installation. As in the previous chapter, I explain the technical issues I had while editing and creating the interactive components of the project. I also discuss the intentions and decisions made throughout the process, and how they influenced the final product. I write about my satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the project, and how my thinking about the project progressively transformed.

The fifth chapter presents a conclusion for both my process and my creative project. I return to the theoretical foundation to my work, and reflect on the successes and weaknesses of the project and the format chosen to grapple with my initial questions. Lastly, I present a series of appendices that include the scripts for the videos, feedback from the YouTube audiences, and my installation plan.
Chapter 1. Envisioning the Project: Pre-Production

I do not know why, over the past two years, I have become immensely eager to understand and engage with the Middle East and North Africa (hereafter, “MENA”). I go back to the roots: perhaps due to my childhood as an Italian immigrant in the United States, I became accustomed at an early age with the idea of being an outsider looking in. In fact, as a teenager, I even read up on the theory of Third Culture Kids – the children that grow up in a different cultural context than their parents did.

As I began studying abroad after high school, I ended up concerning myself with immigrant populations everywhere I lived in Western Europe – be it France, Spain or Italy. My eyes took note of the ‘outsiders looking in,’ or rather, those that the community and societal norms extradited and marginalized. In Western Europe, these were most often North African and sub-Saharan African immigrants. Despite sharing the experience of being outsiders in a foreign country, there were fundamental economic, racial and cultural differences that emphasized the chasm of understanding between us.

I had to dig deeper and understand these differences fully. While I was in the MENA region between August 2013 and 2014, I focused on talking with young people. I was ultimately surprised at our similarities and, at times, questioned my own openness to the perspectives I was encountering. Not that one needs to necessarily agree with other opinions and lifestyles. But listening and reflecting – this is crucial.

Islam is not the only religion present in the MENA region, and there are millions of Muslims living in non-Arab countries. However, during my travels, I was most drawn to learning about Islam, because I quickly realized that my perceptions of the religion carried complex layers of prejudice. I also justify my curiosity with an observation. When I was eight years old,
just two years after emigrating to the United States from Italy, I came home after a confusing day at school. Our teachers had gathered us on the rug of our third grade classroom and given us a white envelope, saying curtly, “Open this with your parents.” The TV was on at home, an image of destruction replaying over and over again. I do not remember the conversations I had with my parents that day or the ensuing ones further down the road. Yet the most notable omission in my memory is a black hole of education – somehow, years later as a teenager, I knew that Muslims were dangerous, that the MENA was a risky place, and that Islam was a violent religion.

In college, the realization of this gentle indoctrination smacked me in the face. It was a badly-needed slap. Spending time in the MENA region meant coming to terms with a spectrum of realities that confused me, challenged my opinions, and invited conversation. It is concerning to me that in the United States, polls show that 41% of US Americans know neither an Arab nor a Muslim person. Moreover, 52% and 57% respectively say they wish they knew more about Islam and, more generally, about the Arab world (Zogby Analytics). I grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb of Philadelphia. During high school, I knew two Muslims. They were sisters and we never spoke about their religion. They did not wear the hijab; I never encountered a hijabi until I lived in Paris years later.

A year in the MENA region gave me enough inspiration to keep challenging my beliefs and opening my mind. In fact, I was determined to bring this knowledge and my experiences back to the US. Conversations with my liberal, educated, progressive father were equally provoking. “Where are the moderate Muslims?” he said, angered by more violent news of ISIL. “Why don’t we ever hear their voices on the news? Why don’t they speak up?” Enter: thesis.

Coming into my senior year, I knew immediately that I wanted to make a documentary project about a Muslim community. This project immediately became both a personal and an
investigative journey. As Scott MacDonald explains, cinema has been used since the early 1970s as a way to ethnographically explore the Other and, by an organic extension, reveal new insights into the cinematographer’s own life (MacDonald 4). While I understood the difficulties of studying another population as an ‘outsider’ researcher, I thought that after my experiences in the region, I was prepared to take on this role. I thought my mind was open enough, my awareness sharp enough, to avoid frameworks like ‘Islam 2.0.’ I did not want to exoticize, stereotypize or tokenize the Muslim subjects of my thesis. I divided my research into three categories: discovering the YouTubers; watching the YouTubers; and interacting with the YouTubers.

Discovering the YouTubers

Early on in my research process, I interviewed Tasneem and Saima via Skype. I was very nervous because I wanted to make sure to be as ‘politically correct’ as possible and refrain from stereotypizing them. Slightly amused and flattered by my interest in them, each patiently spent an hour with me. Their insightful responses launched me into my next line of research and analysis. I had difficulty keeping in touch with the YouTubers after the interview, mostly because of their busy schedules. In fact, for a while, I thought one of the YouTubers had dropped out of the project. Only after two months of silence did I regain contact with her and finalized the details of her participation.

In my interviews with them, they both explained that they felt the burden and power of their identity as hijab-wearing Muslim women YouTubers. They also discussed their strategies in dealing with online hatred, which came from both Islamophobes and Muslims. Both said that in

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11 I interviewed Saima on September 30, 2014, and Tasneem on October 3, 2014. Both interviews happened via Skype. I will continue to refer to these interviews throughout this document. The footage from these interviews was used in one of the videos of my creative project. Please refer to Chapter 4 for my process regarding this video and to Appendix A for the video script.
order to spread more information on Islam and Muslims through their videos, they prioritized productive debate amongst their viewers. However, they tended to shy away from making content that was explicitly political or solely directed at Muslims. In fact, they stressed that they were determined to make comedy that was “relatable” to everyone. Both stated that they aimed to show their audiences that they are “normal” people who happen to be Muslim.

My interview questions for the YouTubers were guided by several foundational research queries. First and foremost, I was interested in the theoretical framework of being women online. What is the trajectory that constitutes a female online celebrity and what are the limitations or risks involved? In her work, Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks, Theresa Senft coined the term “micro-celebrity,” or an individual that launches original, ‘indie’ material online, publicizes it, and creates a personal following (24). Senft explains that while micro-celebrities admittedly have a small audience when compared to real celebrities, there is a certain pleasure felt by the individual in recognizing that they are well-known online. Indeed, micro-celebrities do not tend to identify as ‘normal’ people, since they share intimate details of their lives with an online audience (25-28). Additionally, Senft states that a cyber-presence encourages questions of authenticity and surveillance online, considering that micro-celebrities choose to turn on the camera in their domestic spheres and maintain a specific image (25).

YouTube is a particularly difficult platform for women, as demonstrated by Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan’s research on the gendered limitations of this broadcast channel. The scholars consider that while the YouTube audience may be equally diverse in terms of gender, the top YouTubers tend to be male. By comparing the case studies of top YouTubers Jenna Marbles (female) and Nigahiga (male), Wotanis and McMillan find that Jenna Marbles receives a much higher percentage of comments categorized as cyber-harassment (920).
Furthermore, Jenna Marbles herself sometimes performs traditional gender stereotypes, even though she constantly discusses them in her videos (921). While YouTube has Community Guidelines and a Creator Playbook (for user-creators), neither document addresses the cyber-harassment that occurs in the comment sections. The consequences of these negative responses, however, can deter women from reporting these cases and exclude women entirely from the online community (914-915). Thus, Wotanis and McMillan argue that YouTube is both a space to “reinscribe and challenge gender inequities” (913).

Both of these works are critical to my project in terms of subject and methodology. My research is parallel to that of Senft, although with the more current focus of YouTube. Indeed, this is one of the reasons I decided to interview her for my video installation. Wotanis and McMillan, on the other hand, provide a background for the analysis of women YouTubers. Yet because my focus is specifically on Muslimahs on YouTube, I am adding a new level of complexity to the topic. Not only are my subjects women on YouTube, and micro-celebrities in the making, they are also diasporic members of a faith that is highly stereotyped and surveilled in the West.

In deconstructing the YouTubers’ work, it is important to acknowledge and analyze their use of vlogging. How can women’s modern-day narratives of self – in other words, vlogging – be a political matter even if they are not outwardly political? In her research, Mia Lövheim deconstructs blogs as a means of understanding the politics behind them. She argues that blogs are spaces for “collective reflections and negotiations of changing values and norms for self-expression and social relations” (Lövheim 339), which challenge the idea of a separation between private and public realms. This is also important when considering that blogs allow the

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12 Please refer to Appendix B for the script of the video in which Senft plays a large role.
writers to reach an audience that would normally not be accessible to them. Lövheim explains that blogs should be regarded as performative, since they elaborate on general societal values but do not directly affect the morality of the participants (340). Secondly, blogs should be considered collaborative spaces, because their elaboration and lifespan is a combination of the relationship between the audience, the producers, and the written words (340). Lastly, Lövheim outlines three strategies that bloggers use to engage their audiences: they can invite readers to comment on a specific topic; they can make a statement, so as to provoke reactions; or they can talk about personal experiences (348-350).

Further exploration of the gender divide on YouTube also highlights the political consequences behind ‘non-political’ vlogs. Heather Molyneaux, Susan O’Donnell, Kerri Gibson and Janice Singer found that there is a gendered inequality of vloggers on YouTube (2-3). For example, while women vloggers post less frequently than men do, they are just as technologically-savvy (4). In fact, women vloggers even receive more views than male vloggers do. Moreover, women vloggers are more prone to ask and respond to questions online, even though they are less likely to go on YouTube (6). Additionally, amongst the audience, men are more likely than women to write comments about the vlogger’s physique (8). Thus, the online video space that women are carving is gaining importance, albeit still being in development.

Both Lövheim and Molyneaux’s studies emphasize a significant point in terms of my project: even though Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike actively claim not to be political, their videos and decisions are inherently political, especially when given the context around their work. Nonetheless, while Lövheim’s work provides both a methodological and theoretical foundation for my research, it only considers written blogs. Instead, I am approaching the topic of video blogging. Indeed, I have not found a large number of scholarly texts on vlogging,
perhaps due to the novelty of the medium. However, it appears to be a trending passion nowadays amongst youth worldwide, and, as such, necessitates analysis. Molyneaux’s study takes a random sampling of four YouTube vlogs, using a dataset to analyze the audience, the ratings and the vlogger. This is an important methodological step, although its limitations include a small dataset and a lack of theoretical background. My work takes the objects of this study further, focusing on individual vloggers with a specific cultural background and engaging with the question of politics in this particular context.

Furthermore, the YouTubers’ videos lean heavily on parody and humor. How does this type of comedy allow female comedians to produce social change? How is this particularly a facet of Muslims’ lives when residing in countries in which they constitute the minority faith? Using Ellen as a case study, Helene Shugart explains that Ellen DeGeneres’ parodic performances can be considered political acts because they take up space and invite attention. Moreover, humor is naturally tied to gender because it frequently takes the reigns in situations of dominance (98). Shugart outlines the three main characteristics of performing gendered & subversive parody: a conspicuous entering of performance; incongruity, where the performer’s real character is far different from the one that she is performing; and excess, where the performance emphasizes a certain point of femininity to exaggerate the idea (101-107). Ultimately, Shugart argues that parody can successfully push the audience’s socially constructed perceptions and offer an alternative way of thinking (108).

Parodies have been an important part of the Muslim experience in the United States. In particular, Jaclyn Michael explains that 9/11 sparked the development of Muslim American stand-up comedy. Muslim stand-up comedians use their acts as points of access to spread awareness about Islam, and often tell jokes “from the perspective of a Muslim insider to a non-
Muslim outsider” (139). The rise and continuance of Muslim American stand-up comedy has a similar history and characteristics to that of the black American. As a result, Michael argues that the existence of Muslim American comedy is a sign of a minority entering and integrating with U.S. American society (131).

In light of these readings, my project focuses on amateur videos that are not overtly political, but do take up virtual space, and thus, according to Shugart, are political. While Shugart’s case study is a famous celebrity sitcom, Ellen, my project focuses on YouTube – a medium accessible to all – and two young small-scale celebrities, who are far from Ellen DeGeneres’ fame and success. As such, my work advances the study of subversive, gendered performance to involve ‘off-Broadway’ medias and actors. Moreover, my project expands on Michael’s research, which categorizes Muslim American parody as entirely political. Analyzing Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike offers a different perspective on the subject, because their videos are rarely openly political. Indeed, as previously mentioned, both adamantly said they aimed to make “relatable” content in order to speak to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion.

Having found the two Muslimah YouTubers and having decided on studying them for my thesis, I began with the hypothesis that these women were making a type of media that was breaking the stereotype of Muslims. I also thought that they were creating an alternative media for Muslims. Yet when I presented this idea to Sanaz Raji, a scholar and activist living in Leeds, she told me, in less humiliating words, that I was exoticizing these women. She explained that Saima and Tasneem “are trying to be individuals, just like any other person online. And they’re showing their individual feelings, their thoughts, about a wide variety of things.” I almost wanted to reject her reading of my hypothesis. I had worked so hard to make sure my approach to the
topic was as open-minded as possible. Yet NYU’s Imam, Khaled Latif, responded similarly. Another NYU Arab-American professor had the same reaction.\textsuperscript{13} I had to rethink. However, interestingly enough, when I discussed my project with several older, non-Muslim, white Westerners, they thought it was extremely intriguing. “This is just what Muslims need right now,” exclaimed one of them.\textsuperscript{14} That raised a red flag to me – I was not interpreting the story correctly. I went back to the drawing board and continued my research.

\textit{Watching the YouTubers}

Better understanding the context surrounding the YouTubers’ work necessitates not only an analysis of Islamophobia in the US and the UK, but also a definition of the ‘West versus East’ construction. In his research, Mohammad Samiei revisits Edward Said’s foundational work, \textit{Orientalism}, and evaluates the validity of neo-Orientalism, an emerging field that situates Said’s commentary in a more contemporary context. In \textit{Orientalism}, Said posits that the geographical, cultural, ideological, and political concepts of the “Orient” and the “Occident” were manufactured by Europeans and US Americans, as a way of dealing with a visibly different world. Thus, the two are sustained reflections of one another and, ultimately, are propagated by a series of interests and unequal powers (1145-1147). Recontextualizing Said’s work, Samiei rejects the notion that globalization has led to a dissipation of the ‘West and East’ paradigm. Instead, Samiei describes today’s world as both an interconnected and divided world (1148). He qualifies it as a crossroads: either the positive effects of globalization push us forward to a more tolerant future, or its downsides continue to reshape the paradigm of Orientalism and thus reproduce a version of the destructive dualism recognized by Said (1155).

\textsuperscript{13} Throughout the fall 2014, I spoke at length with Imam Latif and several NYU professors about my project, asking for advice.

\textsuperscript{14} This was a personal comment, told to me in November 2014.
As another perspective on the contemporary experience of diasporic Muslims, the authors of the 2011 study, “Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America,” argue that Islamophobia in the United States is systematically developed by a network of players (4-5). First, anti-Islamic foundations fund the “misinformation experts,” as termed in the study, who consequently release myths and misconceptions about Muslims in the diaspora (13, 27). Then, the false information is spread by “the Islamophobia echo chamber,” composed of the religious right, anti-Islamic politicians and organizations, and right-leaning media sources (85).

However, trending videos online, like those of the two YouTubers, also participate in the discourse on Islamophobia. Yet, being non-mainstream, non-political sources, they are easily – but mistakenly – overlooked. In fact, the 2011 study does not take online communities into account. My project turns to the cyberworld as a space where the Islamophobia is being redefined on a daily basis. Furthermore, while the foundational understanding of Orientalism and its newer developments are key to situating the YouTubers’ work, so is an in-depth analysis of the popular culture itself. Indeed, Samiei categorizes diasporic movements and online circulation as positive elements of globalization. My research furthers his analysis by identifying the ways in which the YouTubers are dealing with their version of the crossroads Samiei identified. Overall, my study contributes to filling a gap in the modern-day conceptualization of Islamophobia and Orientalism.

Within this framework, it is important to acknowledge the role and presence of so-called ‘moderate’ Muslims in the West. What are the ways by which this term is defined, and how might this be affecting the identity of Muslims in the diaspora? In their research, Tariq Modood and Fauzia Ahmad expand on the definition of ‘moderate’ Muslims. They explain that since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a push by so-called ‘moderate’ Muslims to speak up, criticize the
more radical Muslims, and defend Islam as a peaceful faith (190). Better understanding these actions means recognizing that the ‘moderate’ Muslim only exists in relation to non-moderate Muslims and as a mediator between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ (191-192). Indeed, Modood and Ahmad suggest that the “‘moderate Muslim’ can be seen as an explicitly and reasoned struggle to create a hybrid position” (192). Ultimately, the authors argue that instead of a “clash of civilizations,” there are commonalities amongst cultures that can be resolved through conversation and negotiation (207).

Arun Kundnani, author of *The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*, adds that the West has contradictory expectations of ‘moderate’ Muslims. On the one hand, they are expected to forget the history in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan and support the narrative of the war on terror. They must practice their religion privately and identify as liberals, but they must also publicly denounce Islamic extremism and empathize with the Western collective. Yet they cannot criticize the West (110). Indeed, Kundnani argues that the war on terror and the consequent propagation of specific terminology – ‘radicalization,’ ‘moderate,’ ‘Islamo-fascism’ – were constructed by Western policy-makers and non-state actors (69-75). As a result, diasporic ‘moderate’ Muslims that are recruited by counter-terrorism programs in Western countries, are frequently megaphones for the government, instead of mediators between the authorities and local communities (69-70).

Modood and Ahmad, and Kundnani offer crucial background to my research. Indeed, I immediately thought to interview Kundnani for my creative project. However, neither covers the importance and complexities of young leaders in the virtual world. The subjects of my study – Saima and Tasneem – are not radical Muslims. Instead, their views on commonality and

15 Please refer to Appendix C for the script of the video in which Kundnani plays a large role.
tolerance are in accordance with those defined as ‘moderate’ in Modood and Ahmad’s work. These two women also speak English without an accent and were raised in Western countries, making them even more likely candidates for cultural mediation. Yet the YouTubers actively refrain from taking up these roles in order to avoid representing a larger group of Muslims. Instead, they focus on being individuals. This makes their presence online ripe for analysis, considering their potential role as cultural mediators and, yet, the inherent contradiction of being online during a time of heavy surveillance on diasporic Muslim communities.

Beyond the political context, it also became essential to analyze the benefits and limitations of YouTube as a platform of online engagement. One of the most influential works about the broadcasting channel – *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, by Jean Burgess, Joshua Green, Henry Jenkins and John Hartley – categorizes YouTube videos as either traditional (made by mass media companies) or user-created (amateur videos). Interestingly, while the Most Viewed videos are traditional ones, the Most Favorite category is divided almost evenly between traditional and user-created videos (41-42). Of the user-created videos that the scholars studied, 40% were vlogs. These constitute a form of participation on YouTube, considering the creators direct their comments to the viewers and ask for feedback (53-54). Another important form of participation on YouTube is the audience’s interaction, which includes commenting, favoriting, liking, disliking, sharing, and viewing. The scholars argue that these acts influence the development of YouTube and its communities, just as much as user-created videos do (57).

On their end, Stephanie Edgerly, Emily K. Vraga, Kajsa E. Dalrymple, Timothy Macafee and Timothy K. F. Fung consider the politicization of YouTube. The scholars focus in particular on the viewers’ responses to political videos by politicians, citizens, and media sources. They
find that when videos “adopt an uncivil tone,” they are likely to illicit “uncivil comments” by the audience (288). Additionally, when viewers’ comments become “uncivil,” others tend to consider the discussion in a negative light and are less inclined to join online conversations in the future. Moreover, the scholars reflect on the purpose of YouTube comments, and argue that while they do not constitute a democratic discussion, they are not “meaningless chatter” either (288). Instead, they conclude that due to the popular online engagement with YouTube videos, the user-creators have the possibility of provoking and guiding a discussion space, and ultimately, influencing public opinion and political orientations (289).

Overall, the novelty of YouTube reflects the various methodologies employed in its analysis and the inconclusive shades of grey around its aims and limitations. To expand on the above works, my research focuses on YouTubers that are not famous – and thus, are not present in YouTube’s Most Viewed or Most Favorite categories – and are not overtly political. These types of videos necessitate analysis, considering they are often not the subject of contemporary research on YouTube and its user-creators.

To build on the theoretical research, I wanted to actively learn more about Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike’s actual online audiences. I created a digital questionnaire that both could share on their social media. Unfortunately, Saima did not respond to my emails about this, so the questionnaire was never sent out to her audience. I thought it would be both inefficient and a breach in my role as investigator if I posted the link to the questionnaire on saimasmileslike’s Facebook page. However, Tasneem was responsive on this matter and I received 51 responses from her viewership.16 From these responses, I found that while more than half of Tazzy Phe’s viewers identified as Muslim, there was a variety of faiths represented. Of the 50 responses

16 Please refer to Appendix D for selected portions of the dataset. I will continue to refer to this questionnaire throughout this document.
received about the viewers’ native tongue, only 19 said English. The most common languages after English were Urdu, Arabic and French (in decreasing order), and the rest varied greatly, from Pashto to Dutch to Hindi. Moreover, I found that her audience was spread out across the world. While the United States held the lead, there was representation from Canada (7), India (4), the United Kingdom (4) and France (3). Other recorded answers ranged across countries in Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Europe. These responses proved that Tazzy Phe’s audience was global and consisted of both Muslims and non-Muslims, despite a perhaps natural stronger representation of Muslims. However, it is unclear whether Tazzy Phe’s audiences share a similar cultural background with her. While many of her viewers said their native tongue was not English, this is not enough to prove that they have immigrant stories like hers.

However, on the subject of identification, the questionnaire produced interesting answers amongst the viewers. To explain why they watch TazzPhe’s videos, many said that they enjoy her comedy and personality. Others brought up her role as a Muslims hijabi online. One person said that “[Tazzy Phe] brings ... attention [to] many of the issues that Muslim women in America face.” Another responded that they were “raised in a very Islamophobic environment, and I feel that watching her videos has changed how I act and think about Muslims.” Lastly, a number of viewers stated that they could find commonalities with Tazzy Phe, regardless of their religion: “She's someone I can relate [to] see myself being friends with”; “I'm not pakistani, religious, muslim and american like her but still, the way she makes her videos about her life makes me feel like she's like me” [sic].

When asked if there is anything they would change about Tazzy Phe’s channel, most answered that they would not alter it. Others encouraged her to upload more videos, but each qualified it by saying that “I understand she has a life outside of youtube/facebook, so I will not
complain she doesn't post often” [sic]. A few had comments about her work, including: “As the representatives of Muslim women she should wear lose trousers” [sic]; that she should “Be more original”; and that she should have “More collaborations with other youtubers.”

This questionnaire was limited both in its scope and breadth, and only focused on one of the two YouTubers. Moreover, Tasneem shared it on Facebook, so the people who saw it were people who already liked Tasneem and thus do not represent all of the YouTuber’s audience or the range of viewers that might have watched and commented on her videos. Nonetheless, the questionnaire was meant to give an introduction to Tazzy Phe’s online audience. Considering the difficulty in gathering this type of data, the questionnaire did provide insight that bolstered my research.

Simultaneous to finding the story, I was also trying to find the mode to tell it. Scott MacDonald writes that in the viewing of a film,

there are three levels of experience that must be taken into account: the experiences of the subjects as rendered in film, the experiences of the filmmakers who have created the cinematic links between their subjects and audiences, and the experiences of the individuals in the audiences that assemble for these films (9).

How could I engage these three levels, openly exhibiting their collision? I turned to interactive media and experiential documentaries. These innovative ways of telling the story allowed for creativity and audience participation. I realized that in discussing YouTube as an interactive platform, a door had been opened for me: I could – in fact, I should – present my findings in an interactive way. This was the beginning of the rollercoaster that is a transmedia project.

*Interacting with the YouTubers*
For many months, I entertained the idea of making a choose-your-own-adventure documentary, in which there were multiple options for the viewers. They would have the reins to explore the documentary in a way that appealed to them. However, I learned that the storyline was very difficult to organize in this manner. I wrote and re-wrote a script and asked for feedback from several people, including one who had created a similar project. Yet it proved difficult to understand and follow the unfolding of the plot. Finally, I decided that this was not the right mode of entry for my documentary.

“Go back to the story,” suggested Ingrid Kipp, director TriBeCa’s interactive department, The Sandbox. “Always go back to the story.”

I went back to the story. In doing so, I realized that it was most effective to break down all the different elements that allowed Saima and Tasneem to produce their work, negotiate with their identities, and create an online following. As a result, I decided to make an interactive installation that would display the YouTubers’ world from their own perspective, and the various interpretations of their work on a theoretical, political, and community level. Moreover, the installation would contain an interactive component that would simulate both the experiences of being on camera and engaging as an audience member. While I do think that I should have created something entirely digital, I realized that I needed to work within my limitations. In fact, my constraints drew out more creativity. Considering my technical abilities and my minimal experience with installation work, this project was already pushing my boundaries. At the same time, the mix of documentary and performance in the same space aims to create a more interesting, innovative, and impactful experience.

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17 This was a personal comment, told to me in December 2014.
After spending a semester fleshing out a researched proposal, I got to work getting my team together and deciding on what I needed to film. This involved taking on the role of director and formulating a very clear vision, so I could explain what had to happen to create this project. As soon as I had people working for me, I also had people that needed my instructions, so I had to be certain about what I was saying — or at least pretend to be. This is especially difficult in documentary filmmaking, when oftentimes, the film is not planned out from beginning to end while shooting, and it really comes together in the editing room.

Overall, the pre-production process was certainly a learning one. It was my first real taste of the type of research and determination necessary for a filmmaker to find a story and transform it into a documentary. In the chapters that follow, I continue to grapple with the process of interacting with the YouTubers and realizing the installation.
Chapter 2. Filming the Project: Production

The production phase actually started early in the academic year, when I filmed the Skype interviews with Saima and Tasneem. I learned immensely from this experience. Beyond honing my journalistic skills, this was the first time that I recorded online interviews meant for video production. I did my research beforehand to find the applications that would give me the best quality picture and audio. However, I did not think through how I wanted the shots to look. I assumed pre-emptively that I would not be able to control the space from which the YouTubers called me. Yet in retrospect, I could have easily asked the YouTubers to be in a quiet space with an appealing background. I was trying to walk the fine line between being respectful of the YouTubers’ natural presences, and directing the shot as a filmmaker. I think every filmmaker struggles with this, to some extent. Moreover, I used Skype for the calls but did not do my research on the company’s copyright laws. As a result, during both calls, I covered the Skype logo with my image, thinking that I would then easily cut out both while editing the footage. However, I realized later on that to abide by copyright laws, I needed to keep the Skype logo. This meant that I could not cut out my own image, which I think detracts from the videos.

Lastly, this experience taught me that when doing online interviews, it is even more important than usual that the interviewer stay silent when the subject is speaking. This is because the audio is extremely unreliable online, so it is crucial that the conversation be as clean as possible. In fact, there was footage from the YouTubers’ interviews that I could not use in my video, because I interrupted the sound with responsive sounds of agreement or confusion while the YouTuber was speaking.

In December 2014, I found a producer and an assistant director. This helped me feel more comfortable and supported in organizing a shoot for February 2015. Since I did not have the
ability to get in touch with very famous speakers to interview (like Dean Obeidallah, a Muslim comedian, or Rula Jebreal, a Palestinian-Italian journalist, or Linda Sarsour, the Executive Director of the Arab American Association of New York), I evolved my expectations and in doing so, found equally fascinating interviewees: Theresa Senft and Arun Kundnani. Since I could not afford to Colorado or the UK to film Tazzy Phe or saimasmileslike, I instead decided to gather abstract footage and add animation. I also made sure to get the permission of Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike to use their YouTube videos in my documentary. Since I did not know how to put together an installation, I had lengthy informative talks with a close friend who studies installation art to understand my options. The shoot schedule came together rather quickly, all pointed for the weekend of February 6, 7, and 8, 2015.

I will add that, while searching for a film crew, one of goals was to bring together people who identified as other than cisgender, white males. This decision traces back to my experiences on other directors’ sets, where I noticed continuously that I was one of few women at the shoot or that those working with the equipment were almost all men. I am happy and proud to note that out of a crew of twelve (including myself), ten identified as other than cisgender, white, and male.

Beyond my feminist take on the film crew, the shoot was also a learning process in terms of being a director. On the first day of the shoot, I realized that I had overestimated the amount of people I needed: I had too many people on set and there was not enough work to go around. I knew this would make it hard for everyone to be engaged and feeling like this was worth their time. I immediately decided to re-evaluate how many people should be on set the following day. Thus, the second day, the crew was just the right size.
Working with others and being the director also meant bringing everyone on board with my vision. I constantly needed to have a clear and concrete idea of what I wanted to see on the camera. Throughout my past projects, this has consistently one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn as a filmmaker. While on set during this project, I did my best to detail my preferences for each shot, but it took me a great amount of confidence, patience, and concentration. This was especially true on the second day, when we were filming the supporting footage. I had not exactly explained why I wanted these shots, so my cinematographers were rightfully confused and a bit frustrated. I had to repeat the same shots with three different actors, and, by the end, could feel myself questioning the reasons for forcing this torture on my crew. The actors were extremely generous, putting up with all of my requests – which included kneeling underneath the tripod so I could get a bird’s eye view of them using the computer.

In a technical sense, the cinematographer/gaffer who shot and did lighting for the interviews should have known better how to create the infinity black effect. At the same time – even though it was not actually my role on set – I should also have had a stronger grasp on the effect so I could have helped adjust the lights and camera. Nonetheless, these kinds of color issues were easy for a colorist to fix in post-production.

Simultaneous to this shoot, I was also trying to amass archival footage in two ways. First, I asked friends from all over the world – including in Amman, Paris, Berlin, Abu Dhabi, and London – to send me short clips of people on the street. This proved to be very difficult because everyone was extremely busy at the time. However, I did receive footage from three cities, and by combining these clips to my own personal collection from my travels, I had enough b-roll for my fourth documentary. Secondly, my assistant director spent hours looking for archival footage from different news sources. I was hoping to include this footage in my own videos. However,
we did not find exactly what I wanted and we also realized that it would cost a fortune to get even a few seconds of a CNN clip. I had to make an important decision as a director: did I really need it? Even though it was unfortunate that my assistant director spent time looking for unused footage, I realized that it was a reality of filmmaking: projects morph quickly and change direction constantly. In the end, no work is completely wasted.

While the production phase of this project was challenging, it was a necessary experience for my own development as a filmmaker, as well as the growth of my project. The creative limitations our crew faced became extraordinarily significant to the project, and allowed it to enter the editing room with exciting potential.
Chapter 3. Assembling the Project: Post-Production & Installation-making

Editing has always been my forte. While I might not have the best sense of aesthetic while filming, I have an instinct for storytelling. In my documentary classes, I have learned over time that films – fiction and nonfiction alike – come together in the editing room. In this phase of my creative project, I grew as an editor and specifically noted several key lessons. First and foremost, in technical terms, I learned the importance of transcoding all of my footage before beginning to edit it. I had been working with the incorrect files of my footage and only realized this weeks later, when my software stopped functioning because of this problem. This was a huge setback in terms of time, considering I had to wait for the software to reprocess all of the video material. Filmmaking relies heavily on time efficiency, so these were unwelcomed stumbles. To me, this emphasized how an editor must have completely mastered the technology they are using, or at least tread lightly along the way. I will remember this in the future.

Beyond the technological portions, the editing process is a truly immersive workshop on storytelling. This was the first time I was working on a nontraditional project, both in terms of its construction (four separate videos) and its presentation (an installation). StoryCode, an interactive media organization, recently published a report with the best practices for interactive and transmedia storytelling. Through interviews with top transmedia filmmakers, the report outlines several considerations to make when creating a nontraditional film. One lesson that stood out to me was the idea of “mov[ing] away from contained one-off experiences. Consider unique pathways to story and actions over time and across media” (Storycode). Another important point was to learn from and use the existing tradition of cinema, as it provided a strong foundation for creating better transmedia work. Lastly, the authors encouraged filmmakers to

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18 The report is accessible online: [http://ten.storycode.org/report.htm](http://ten.storycode.org/report.htm).
“launch, analyze, adjust […] When the project launches, the work actually begins. Don’t think like a traditional filmmaker – once it’s launched it is most certainly not locked.” Since transmedia filmmaking is such a novel field, there is not much writing or analysis available on it. As such, StoryCode provided a base from which I could build my project.

Indeed, conceptualizing the installation required heavy thinking, testing, re-thinking, and re-testing. In doing so, I became aware of two main elements of the editing process. First, I came to grips with a long-standing issue in film in general: the authenticity of representing reality. Stella Bruzzi traces the historical debates amongst theorists about the veracity of documentary film, especially considering the manipulation allowed by technology today. Yet she concludes that recent non-fiction films have begun to propose a complex documentary truth arising from an insurmountable compromise between subject and recording, suggesting in turn that it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is the heart of any documentary (6).

In the editing room, I asked myself how I could make authentic work when I was re-creating a digital platform, from my own interpretation, and with my own chosen footage.

I could not pretend that my work was authentic, considering the footage had been manipulated and edited, and considering, based on Bruzzi’s analysis, that this was not the most significant point of the process. The best I could do was ground my work in the practices of ethnography and, in the most respectful manner possible, allow the subjects to speak and explain their thoughts. I coded my data. I separated the interviews with the YouTubers into three categories: starting YouTube career; dealing with online hatred; and understanding own YouTube identity and matching it to audience needs. The two YouTubers used the same key words and expressed similar feelings when engaging with my questions. Being relatable to a widespread audience surfaced as a trope to which the YouTubers referred over and over again.
Having coded their interviews, I was consequently able to edit their footage and create a conversation between them. Highly respectful of their words, I made sure to take full sentences and retain the meaning they intended, as far as I understood it.

I also coded Senft’s interview, interpreting her commentary as a discussion of the responsibilities of both the YouTubers and their audiences. Kundnani’s interview focused on three main points: the geographies of Islamophobia; the ways to begin the conversation and find solutions; and the contradiction of the ‘moderate’ Muslim. This helped me cut down their interviews to brief videos of two to three minutes each. I struggled in this editing process, because I needed to constantly juggle between laying out highly theoretical material for the viewers and making the videos short enough to keep their attention.

Beyond authenticity, I also became aware of the issues involved in creating an installation. As I edited the footage, I kept the words of Walter Murch (sound designer of *Apocalypse Now* and editor of *The English Patient*) in mind:

> A good editor must have some sense of how to tell a story. And that involves a sense of rhythm. It’s a little bit like telling a good joke … could be a great joke but if you tell it with the wrong rhythm, it falls flat.¹⁹

I knew the story was central to the piece, and had to take precedence over any other element. However, how could I tell the story if it was split between four separate videos that came together in a singular space? Should I consider the interactive feature as a part of the storyline? How could I present enough background information so that the installation goers understood each of the four videos individually? On a related note, how could I set up the installation so the exhibit-goers would not need specific guidance to understand the project?

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¹⁹ This particular interview with Walter Murch, carried out the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, is accessible online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcBpXLNmS3Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcBpXLNmS3Q).
At first, I had thought to make two videos, one from the YouTubers’ perspective and another outlining both the theoretical contexts and the reception from online audiences. However, I realized not only that it would be very difficult to edit the videos into an understandable storyline, but also recognized a disjuncture between the intellectual thinking on these new media matters, the actual subjects, and their viewership. I decided that I wanted to simulate that disjuncture in my installation, aiming to bring these three perspectives into conversation. This brought me to the idea of creating four videos.

I decided that in order for the videos to be digestible for viewers, they should each have some sense of storyline. At the same time, I realized that this would be difficult with the two contextual videos, which were basically brief lectures. To compromise, I actively concentrated on making the videos short and not overwhelmingly didactic. I added supporting footage that I thought supplemented the theoretical components and also helped to guide the viewer’s attention. For the video about the YouTubers and the one about their audiences, I re-created some conflict, so as to be both informative and attention-grabbing. I worked with Post Pros NYC, a post-production company, to animate certain parts of the videos, with the intention of making the information clearer and more engaging. I recruited a sound engineer to clean up the audio on the four videos, in order to make the viewing experience as pleasurable as possible.

At significant points at the end of the editing phase, I showed my videos to about ten people, including some who knew the project well and others who did not. They reported their thoughts on their impressions of each video, and commented on aspects like the length, the supporting footage, and the continuity between the four videos. Their feedback was invaluable to me in bringing the videos to ‘picture-lock,’ which in filmmaker-lingo indicates that the film has been brought to completion. I think that it would have been useful to have an dry run of the
installation in order to see how the four videos worked together in the space, but considering the limitations on my time, I believe this was the best I could do.

I mapped out my installation plan once it was decided that the exhibit would take place in the Global Liberal Studies lobby. The size of the space became a creative limitation. I decided that the video about the YouTubers would be projected on the wall, while the other three videos would play on individual screens. The two contextual videos would be shown on iPads, both located on the same table. The fourth video, instead, would be playing on a laptop directly across from the YouTubers’ video. Next to that laptop would be another laptop, where exhibit-goers could browse Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike’s channels.

Additionally, in the corner between the YouTuber video and the fourth video, there would be a space separated by a curtain that would contain the interactive feature. It was important to me for my installation to be interactive. As mentioned previously, I hoped that a hands-on component would allow exhibit-goers to viscerally experience what they learned through the videos. As it stands at the time of writing, the plan is to set up a laptop inside this curtained corner. A Google+ Hangout call will be running on the computer. The other people in the call will not have their cameras turned on, so they will be anonymous and the exhibit-goers will not know with whom they are talking. The people on the other line will be volunteers, instructed to keep track of the Hangout and write honest comments in the chatbox about what they see. At the exhibit, there will be a container of prompts next to the laptop with the Google+ Hangout. These prompts will be inspired by the videos of Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike. If they so choose, the exhibit-goers will have the opportunity to get in front of the camera, pick a prompt (or not, depending on how comfortable they are), perform in front of the camera, and watch as

Please refer to Appendix E for the most current version of the installation plan.
the other people in the Hangout respond to their presence. I have considered the ethics of this activity, and will be explaining the space to the exhibit-goers before they enter.

I recognized early on that in creating an installation piece, this project would be only live in the exhibit space. Due to limitations in my capacity for the project, I could not also create a website to hold the videos and make them accessible online, simultaneous to the installation. I recognized that this was actually contradictory to the practice of transmedia, which I had been championing throughout my process. Transmedia is vaguely defined as projects that live across various media platforms at the same time. Despite my whole project being based on interactivity and new media, it was falling short of the definition of transmedia, considering it was limited in its virtual presence. If time allows in the future, I want to create a website for my installation piece so that it can be viewed outside of the exhibit hours.

At the time of writing, the installation has not yet been set up, as it will be exhibited on May 1, 2015. This means that I do not know how the installation experiment will turn out. Nonetheless, the planning process has been a growing adventure and I look forward to seeing it come to life. Throughout this entire process, I have kept in touch with the YouTubers, checking in every so often. I will be sure to invite them to be online during the hours of the exhibit in May so that exhibit-goers can engage with them in real time.
Chapter 4. Concluding Thoughts

While the exhibit has not yet gone live, the process of making my thesis video installation is coming to a close. During these past eight months, I have not only learned about filmmaking, ethnography, and installations, but have also researched a culture and world that is stuck between two contradictory roles. Regarding my own personal journey, I have grown immensely as a filmmaker, taking my very first steps into the field of transmedia. If one learns by doing, then I have challenged myself since the beginning to step beyond the boundaries and limitations of film. This process has pushed me as a director and an editor, encouraging reflection on how to translate my skills in traditional media to this adventurous new and flexible form. I am certain that setting up the exhibit space and watching people interact with it will teach me even more about digital storytelling.

Moreover, I have also grown as an ethnographer, investigating cultures – both online and offline – that are distant from my own. Specifically, I have followed a feminist interpretation of ethnographic practice, whereby I have paid the utmost attention to being respectful of my subjects’ thoughts and wishes. I also had to practice identifying my own prejudices and misunderstandings, which were clouding my ability to analyze the YouTubers’ work. I did as much research as possible to fully understand the context surrounding the YouTubers, not feeling satisfied with the theories of ‘Islam 2.0.’ Considering that I want to continue this type of work in the future, this project has provided fruitful insight.

Lastly, I learned many key lessons as I conceptualized the installation. It was the first time I had created anything like it, so it was especially crucial for me to analyze the process, its successes, and its weaknesses. It was intimidating to attempt a creation as foreign as an installation, but it remains the best decision I could have possibly made, knowing the skills and
knowledge I have gained. While it remains to be seen how the exhibit-goers will engage with the
videos and the interactive component, I consider its realization to be the biggest success of all.

Yet as personal as this process document may be, my journey is only a small part of the
project. The principal subjects are Saima and Tasneem and the cyberworld surrounding their
work. As I have mentioned, my work focused on three main points. First, that the comedic tones
of Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike set them apart from other Muslimah YouTubers and, most
importantly, allow for a wider audience of both Muslim and non-Muslim viewers. While humor
has played a large role in the experience of diasporic Muslims, Tazzy Phe and saimasmileslike
shy away from overtly political work, making their comedy even more inclusive.

Secondly, the two YouTubers have actively worked on creating “relatable” work, which
challenges the dominance of male Muslim vloggers. While these male YouTubers have the
freedom of ‘passing’ as people with whom anyone – regardless of faith or background – can
identify, both Saima and Tasneem feel that they have to work harder because they wear the scarf
and are more vulnerable to discrimination by online viewers. As a result, their commitment to
creating relatable content is significant and political.

Yet because the concept of relatability is a double-edged sword, both Saima and Tasneem
are hindered by their objective, especially considering the limitations of YouTube as a platform
and the political context today. If their audiences categorize them as ‘moderate’ Muslims, then
more conservative Muslims criticize their level of faith. If they discuss certain religious subjects
too openly, parts of their viewership rally against them. As a result, my third point is that these
women deal with this contradictory role by taking cautious steps towards informing their viewers
about Islam and facilitating productive conversation.
The visibility politics of diasporic Muslimah YouTubers are complicated and contradictory. While Tasneem and Saima are still developing their online personas, and continue to have room for trial and error, their approach constitutes the best of their capacities. Being criticized on both ends – not being faithful enough, not being moderate enough; not being relatable enough, not talking enough about Islam-related issues – has pushed them to address each side at the same time. On the one hand, they maintain an objective of creating a widespread audience. On the other hand, they sometimes direct their work specifically to viewers that would benefit from more insight into their religious culture. In this context, their method is an attempt to beat the system, and perhaps, having been placed in such a tight position, indicates a slow movement towards progress.
 Appendix A. Script: “Being the YouTubers”

SAIMA
So maybe 15, 16, I started going online and I managed to find all of these videos of all these different YouTubers. I thought it was really fun because, you know, because they just took out like, two minutes of their day to make a funny video to make loads of people laugh.

TASNEEM
I was just bored. My friends were gone. I had written down a bunch of ideas about making different videos. And I was going to make one about white girls in particular.

SAIMA
I thought, you know, I enjoy making people laugh – why not try doing it on a bigger scale?

TASNEEM
I just stayed up really late, like while everyone was asleep. I just recorded in the guest bedroom.

SAIMA
I literally just posted the link on my personal Facebook page, and from there, I’m assuming my friends must have shared it with their friends and from there, it just escalated.

TASNEEM
A lot of times I felt bad about that video, I was like, “oh, I’m being so racist.” I think it was a reflection of my experiences also being on a campus that was super, super white. And dealing with that for the first time.

SAIMA
I didn’t know it was going to get this far. I just thought, you know, five or six people would see it. But then it just sort of grew, really, really fast. I get access to a lot of people through just make a 2 or 3 minute video.

TASNEEM
Whereas traditional media – trying to break into traditional media is like, unbelievably hard, especially for minorities. Especially when the whole agenda of – I don’t know – 70-80% of the media is to promote Islamophobia.

SAIMA
There’s not that many Muslim people who do comedy on there – well, there are a few people. But there aren’t that many when you think about it. Especially Muslim female women who do YouTube comedy.

TASNEEM
Even just making YouTube videos shows people, “hey, she’s a normal person. She went to college, she had the experiences. Maybe sometimes they’re a little bit different, but…” Just to make Muslims seem more human.
SAIMA
Even if I’m a Muslim woman, if I just be myself, people will start to realize, “oh you know, they’re different! They’re not all one type.”

TASNEEM
I feel like this whole Islamophobic agenda has dehumanized us, almost. Unless you’re light-hearted, unless you make them laugh - I think that’s when people are open to listening about issues like racism, gender equality, whatever it may be. I think humor is a really good tool to get people to talk about it. The other thing with comedy that kind of annoys me is that, that’s all minorities in media are. We’re just the joke.

SAIMA
When you do comedy, you sort of – it’s almost, you pick on topics that normal people wouldn’t pick on.

TASNEEM
When I talk about Islamic stuff, and make fun of it, that might make people a bit uncomfortable. And I do think there are lines. And I wouldn’t cross those lines. I don’t know exactly what those lines are.

SAIMA
When it comes to Islam and religion, some people think that Muslim women should hide away or be quiet or shouldn’t be so outspoken and when you do comedy or when you do videos like this, you have to be outspoken. So I think that’s why some people are scared of it, so they don’t do it.

TASNEEM
I don’t really think that we have a choice. I think comedy is kind of the only space that minorities are allowed in. I have seen myself grow over the couple years. I started off – I couldn’t even get any of my videos to really reach a 1,000 views and now they reach that within, I don’t know, a few hours? So, I’m always constantly just trying to see – what am I doing right? What am I doing wrong?

TASNEEM
Everything that I do, it’s like a skeleton crew. It’s just me. Maybe I’ll get my friend, maybe I’ll get my sister to focus the camera. But everything is just me and it’s starting to get really difficult.

SAIMA
One day, I’ll get a random idea based off of something that’s just happened to me on that day. Or sometimes it’ll just be a story.

TASNEEM
And I talk and I talk in front of my camera. And I edit out 60-70% of that.
Most hijabi YouTubers are beauty vloggers and I’m not in that area at all, so... They don’t really talk to me.

SAIMA
Generally, we sort of try to collaborate with people who have the same amount of views or who have lower views than us. Because the bigger people don’t really “look” to work with us if you know what I mean.

TASNEEM
So I think right now I’m really, really behind everybody. For people to even notice me, to be honest, within that community. I’m not super popular. So, I think I’d have to work really hard before I can even build a network.

SAIMA
I think the other part that I probably don’t like is probably when people take things out of context. Or you know when someone clicks on your channel and they watch one video of you and they think that everything is completely wrong? And it’s because, you know, they haven’t watched previous videos and they don’t know about you personally. So then, suddenly they think you’re sharing a wrong message when really they don’t understand that that’s your type of humor.

TASNEEM
When you’re on YouTube, you really have to be your biggest supporter, you know? You have to believe in yourself because you’re not going to convince other people to believe in you if you can’t even do that.

SAIMA
I usually get messages on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, saying how much they like my work and stuff like that. Randomly, I’ll have the one or two people who are just like, “oh, what you do is really stupid, why do you do it?” But you know, everyone gets that with everything.

TASNEEM
I think that it’s a lot easier online to just say whatever, you know?

SAIMA
When it comes to the online community, there’s some people who actively seek out Muslim people and on the videos that are more related to Islam, they usually comment on those.

TASNEEM
With that video, I kept taking it down and I’d put it up and I’d take it down and I’d put it up because I think that was the first time that I was exposed to the hatred that comes with being on YouTube and I just, I didn’t really want to deal with it. I just disabled the comments because I think I got sick of opening it and just seeing just really – I mean it got to the point where that video made it onto a white supremacist website.

SAIMA
You do have the few crazies that you do have to delete, because they’re like, you know, “death to all of you! You must die!” The most controversy I think was – hm – I think it might have been the period one. Because I said the word “vagina” and a lot of people were just like, “how could you say that word?” But it’s just like, it’s just a body part. We get taught this in school!

TASNEEM
Most of the ones that I get are about my neck showing. That’s like, number 1, guaranteed all the time. And I kind of like don’t care anymore. But there will be random ones that where they would be like, accusing me of talking bad about the Prophet. I just want to reply to them and be like, “you’re stupid.”

SAIMA
The one you get a lot is: “oh you know, Muslim women are oppressed. You’re oppressed. Take it off! Why are you wearing it?” If it’s something like that, I will leave it because I’ll respond to it saying, you know, “we’re not oppressed. I’m happy with the way I dress.” I think debates are fine because obviously people can learn from those debates. But if it’s a general hate comment that’s going to spark other people — like if someone says something against a religion or if they diss someone else or if they’re racist, then I delete those because I don’t want other people getting affected by their comment. I do have quite a majority of people who say, “yeah, this is really cool.” And that comes from Muslims and non-Muslims. They’re both just like, “you know what? You’re a human being and you can do what you want and what you think is funny. It’s not wrong, so go ahead.” At the end of the day, people will have their views and opinions. Obviously you can say something to try and change it, but they’re still going to have – whatever they want to believe.

TASNEEM
I don’t know how to define myself. I don’t want to be the poster girl for Muslim-American hijabi whatever. But at the same time, I kind of have to ride that and it’s not just something I can take off.

SAIMA
When I first started out, there weren’t that many YouTube – you know, Muslim YouTubers online. But now, ‘cause there’s quite a bit, there’s also quite a bit more of controversy of these Muslim women being online.

TASNEEM
I really do feel that you have to work harder when you cover – or when you have something that’s so visible. Because it’s just an automatic trigger for discrimination. People just start watching a video and they see you wearing a scarf or a turban and then, all of a sudden, they’re like, “no. I don’t want to watch this.”

SAIMA
I think now I think about it because there’s other people out there who are just like me, and you know, we sort of stick together, in a sense, even if we don’t talk about it.

TASNEEM
I think it can definitely get me down, it makes me think that I’m never going to reach a certain level, because of it.

SAIMA
I think the fixer is essentially to come out and speak about it. I was thinking of making a video about feminism and making a video about misogynists in Islam so people understand that the religion isn’t oppressing us – it’s these people that’s oppressing us.

TASNEEM
As far as hijab goes – to me, I feel like people make it like it’s this huge part of Islam and, the thing is, it’s a small part. Like, it is. I mean, the concept of modesty is not a small part of Islam. But covering your head is.

SAIMA
There’s loads of people out there who think so many bad things of Islam, but when they research it, and they find out more about it, they’re like, “oh my god, everything I used to know was a lie!”

TASNEEM
I want to make videos that appeal to people – that are not just like, “oh only Muslim people can understand this.”

SAIMA
A lot of people out there don’t really know Muslims that well. I guess if I put something out there more “Muslim-related” that’s still relatable, they can still see into our lives and be like, “oh, you know, they’re not crazy. They’re normal. They just wear a headscarf.” You know what I mean?

TASNEEM
But wearing a scarf, being Muslim – that’s also something that’s a huge part of my life. So it’s not just about erasing that.

SAIMA
I do make some videos purely based around Muslim subjects but I don’t like doing it all the time because people can get offended, because everyone’s got different views and opinions when it comes to religion.

TASNEEM
And I think that’s been one of the challenges for me, is to create comedy that’s bigger. So I think that’s probably my ultimate goal, is to just do that in a way that I can have people of all different races and religions and backgrounds appreciate my work.

SAIMA
At least three times a day, I go through everything and just try to reply to as many people as I can. Because you know, they’re taking their time out to watch my things and send me a message – so, you know, I can do the same thing for them.
TASNEEM
I mean, sometimes I’ll interact on Twitter, or, you know, people send me messages and I’ll reply. I don’t always reply.

SAIMA
I started having people come up to me to take photos or to talk to me. And that’s when I was just like, “oh my god, this is real.” Because you know, when it’s online, it’s just like, “they’re online.” You can’t see them. When you see the people face to face, it’s just unbelievable.

TASNEEM
I’ll be at an event and people come up to me and they’re like, “you’re TazzyPhe!” And I’m like, “yeah...” I’m not like how I am in my videos, I guess, in real life. I mean – that’s all edited. I mean, it’s part of me, but I’m also a little bit quiet and awkward in real life. So I don’t know what to say when people come to me.

SAIMA
I think when it all started out, it was mainly just, you know, Muslim people watching it. But I’ve noticed, slowly, slowly, with my content, and you know, as the years go on – it’s starting to change, so slowly I’m getting other people that aren’t Muslim watching it, which I think is really cool because you know, I make my content for everyone.

TASNEEM
I think my audience has grown and I think that the people who watch my videos, they’re either Muslim or they are people who kind of have an interest or are open-minded.

SAIMA
Some people are just like, oh you know, “you’re my role model, I think you’re awesome.” But then you have those other people who are just like, you know, “you’re a role model, you shouldn’t be saying those things, you shouldn’t be doing those things.” It comes to that. It’s just like, you know, I didn’t ask for this. If anything, I’m just a person who makes YouTube videos. It’s just like, at the end of the day, you will learn things from loads of different people. You don’t have to pick one person to fully follow.
Appendix B. Script: “Micro-celebrity Context: Interview with Theresa Senft”

When somebody says, “I didn’t ask for this, I’m just a YouTuber” - I guess my first question would be, “what do you mean by ‘this?’” If it’s interaction in a way that might be deeply unpredictable - I would say, you need to take a little responsibility when you engage in the process of putting out a YouTube video. There’s a certain point at which a community becomes an audience. So a community wants somebody to speak with them. Audiences expect somebody to speak to them, and they also expect to be able to say anything they want. I think that’s where the real disjuncture is, because I think many YouTubers in particular, you know, they don’t have handlers, they don’t managers, training them to function as a commodified product. And yet, they’re being consumed like that.

We don’t ask Justin Timberlake to represent every single white man out there. Yet somebody like Halle Berry is seen as representative of black women.

My most hated word in the whole word is “relatable.” Because there’s nothing that’s inherently relatable. What somebody means when they say, “that was relatable” is “I could relate to it.” Affinity to me is really what somebody’s talking about when they’re talking about relatability. What they really mean is, “I have an affinity for that.” So: I’m not Muslim, but I am the sassy, goofy girl at university, who drops her books in the hall but still manages to get an A in calculus, right? It’s a very particular flavor. But ironically, in its particularity, it gets a wider audience because if you say, “I stand for Muslims,” it’s almost inherent that people are going to resist that and say, “I’m Muslim and you don’t stand for me.” But if you say, “I’m just this singular individual, who has this series of quirks” – you’re inviting other people, as if you’re a character in a novel, to identify with you.

When you think about hateful comments. there are individuals, who are, you know, genuine sociopaths. On the other side, there are people who honestly feel that they are standing up for what is right because somebody is perceived to be violating the dominant discourse, whatever that is. So you’ve got on the one hand, people hating on you because you are Muslim. On the other hand, you’ve got people hating on you because you are sometimes secular, sometimes feminist in what you’re saying. These women are kind of damned if they do, damned if they don’t. And so, I think they’re really brave. I mean I really think they’re doing work most politicians don’t have the nerve to do.
Appendix C. Script: “Political Context: Interview with Arun Kundnani”

One of the contributions that young Muslims are making over the last ten years and increasingly through social media is being kind of conduits for experiences that are happening in other parts of the world. And educating and informing the public spheres in Europe and the United States about that.

I think conversation is an important starting point, right, to start addressing these issues. By itself though, having conversations is not going to fundamentally change the way in which Islamophobia works. Because Islamophobia for me is, is not just a series of prejudices and kind of ignorance about someone else’s religion, but something a bit more structural and systematic.

In terms of Europe, countries like France and Holland and Britain have got long histories of interactions of various kinds with Muslim populations around the world, through the history of European colonialism.

The United States has never had a colonizing presence in a Muslim-majority country until very recently, and so where Islamophobia comes from in the US is much more to do with the Israel/Palestine issue.

I spent a lot of time looking at how this notion of ‘moderate Muslim’ was used. One of the things that you find is that this notion of ‘moderate Muslim’ is inherently contradictory. So, on the one hand, if you’re a moderate Muslim, you’re supposed to be someone who constrains your religion to the private sphere. On the other hand, you’re supposed to publicly condemn other people whose religious interpretations aren’t the acceptable kind. So you’re supposed to - if you’re a moderate Muslim - publicly condemn the use of violence to achieve political ends, unless your own government uses violence to achieve political ends, through wars or through drone strikes, etcetera - in which case, you’re supposed to support that out of some kind of patriotic loyalty. What you end up with is a situation where to be a moderate Muslim, or to aspire to be a moderate Muslim, defined in these ways, is a kind of a trap.

If we’re going to condemn the violence of ISIS or al-Qaeda, we’ve got to also condemn the violence of our own governments when they end up killing civilians.

So what we’re really talking about is not a kind of Muslim public condemnation of ISIS. What we’re really talking about is a peace movement that Muslims and non-Muslims need to be a part of.
Appendix D. Questionnaire Data

Do you identify with a religious affinity?

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<th>Religious Affinity</th>
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<td>Pagan</td>
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<td>I prefer not to say</td>
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What is your native tongue?

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<td>Spanish</td>
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21 Note: this is not all of the data received from the questionnaire. These sets of data are the ones I discussed in Chapter 2 and I included in the fourth video of the creative project.

22 Out of 50 responses. One person left this question blank.

23 Out of 50 responses. One person left this question blank.
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<th>Language</th>
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**What country do you live in?**

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24 Out of 50 responses. I chose not to consider one answer – “Antarctica” – as I judged that this was most probably false.
Why do you watch Tazzy Phe's videos?
“I watch TazzyPhe's videos because she's hilarious!”
“Tasneem is someone I look up to, and would [like] to be like.”
“She brings ... attention [to] many of the issues that Muslim women in America face.”
“She is smart and I like to hear her point of view.”
“I love her personality. She's someone I can relate [to]/see myself being friends with.”
“I was raised in a very Islamophobic environment, and I feel that watching her videos has changed how I act and think about Muslims.”
“I'm not pakistani, religious, muslim and american like her but still, the way she makes her videos about her life makes me feel like she's like me.”

Is there anything you would change about Tazzy Phe's channel?
“Nothing at all. Just keep being her!”
“No, it's up to her to do whatever she wants to.”
“Nope. It’s perfect.”
“Sometimes i wish her videos were longer, but for the rest it's perfect the way it is.”
“I understand she has a life outside of youtube/facebook, so I will not complain she doesn't post often.”
“As the representatives of Muslim women she should wear lose trousers.”
“Be more original.”
“More collaborations with other youtubers.”
Created on April 12, 2015. This is the most ideal plan of the installation and, as a result, is not necessarily the version that will be presented at the exhibit on May 1, 2015.
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