

The Role of a Hermeneutics of Contrapuntality
In Resisting Resolutions of Hybridity

by

Zuhra M. Amini

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Zuhra M. Amini has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Race and Ethnic Studies.

Zahi Zalloua

Whitman College
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Introduction

[S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.

– Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (xii)

In a provocative scene in Ana Lily Amirpour's first feature film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*¹, the "Girl" or "*Dokhtar*," a vampire that kills sexist and patriarchal men, glides down a street of "Bad City" on a skateboard. She's hanging on to the sides of her chador, which she has worn in the style of a vampire or superhero cape, as it blows in the wind. At the end of the scene a slight smile appears on her usually pensive, guarded, or frightening face.

I begin with this scene, not because it is the turning point of the film but rather to engage with the aesthetics of an explicit cross-culture, and therefore, hybrid image. The skateboard as a relic of American skate culture and the chador as a representative image of Islam are not images you see often in conversation with one another, especially with the stereotype of Islamic repression popular in the U.S. imagination. How does one read these seemingly disparate images in the aforementioned scene together? How does the reading of these cultural symbols impact how we read the film? To some extent most images are cross-cultural in that they are influenced by, and

¹ Referred to as *A Girl* from here on.

thus pertain to, more than one culture. Here my work concerns how creators of cultural productions aestheticize cross-cultural realities and the interpretations that follow from such aestheticization. I propose that overlapping cultural signifiers, such as in *A Girl*, can be read either in a way that makes meaning by drawing out of their tensions or by resolving their tensions.

To tease out the implications of these reading, I turn to Edward Said, whose work in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* mainly concerns how to read overlapping and contesting experiences in, or as a result of, imperialist contexts. For Said, narratives and stories carry a set of allusions to the time, place, and context they are situated in and when “[t]aken together, these allusions constitute . . . a structure of attitude and reference” (*Culture and Imperialism* 62). For example, Said analyzes how “the empire functions” in texts situated in imperialist contexts and how these allusions registered, supported, disguised, and transformed imperialist projects (*Culture and Imperialism* 63). I identify *A Girl* as an aesthetic project that offers allusions of cultural influence from both Iran and the United States. I read these allusions together as a structure of attitude and reference that offers a hybrid aesthetic that reflects the cross-cultural experience of individuals situated in diasporic communities. Hybrid experiences, as Said states, “partake of many often-contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, and defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism” (*Culture and Imperialism* 15). In other words, such a contradictory experience resists and definitive boundaries and interpretations. As such, I argue that the hybrid aestheticization in *A Girl* resists interpretative resolutions of hybridity, such

as homogenous nationalisms and reductive multiculturalism. The question then becomes, how does one read this hybrid aesthetic form without flattening its scope?

In conversation with one another, Said's aforementioned works stress the tension of imperialism as a project that, at once, relied on Orientalist interpretations of cultural experience and identities as essences that were pitted against each other, while promoting and accelerating globalization (*Culture and Imperialism* 8). Globalization, as an economic project, augmented the frequency of social and political contact between groups of people as well as the range of available contacts. Here then, Said concerns himself with the repercussions of the inadequacy of Orientalist interpretations of difference paired with an acceleration and heightened exposure to difference.

Said argues that over time nonlinear and unexpected economic, social, and political alignments have fostered a simultaneous awareness of both the explicit "lines between cultures," as well as how "oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are" (*Culture and Imperialism* 15). In analyzing such a tension of contradictory awareness, Said states:

Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. We begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv).

Here, Said argues that systems which employ a binary opposition essentialize and erase experiences that do not align evenly with the restrictions and divisions imposed. Said argues that the more these experiences transgress both physical and ideological boundaries the more visible the hybridity of experiences are. And with this visibility

comes the power to challenge definitions of identity that have historically been conceived as monolithic, stagnant. Although experiences and identities are now more readily understood as hybrid, Said argues that cultural analysis lacks the capability to analyze hybrid cultural products. With this increasing awareness, Said argues that cultural analysts must begin to read cultural products as contextualized in their material reality which necessarily encapsulates cross-cultural influences.

Despite this global shift, Said also recognizes that “We are still the inheritors of that style by which one is defined by the nation, which in turns derives its autonomy from a supposedly unbroken traditions” (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv). For Said, the past is ever prevalent in that we rely on these constructs to shape the present.

Therefore, his cultural analysis of Orientalism is critical, not only because neo-colonial structures are prevalent today but also because they inform present day structural solutions. As such, for Said it is critical to first analyze the constructs that had for so long dominated our conception of the world and which continues to have a residual grip on our reality. This is to say then, in order to analyze the interpretive challenge *A Girl* presents, we must come to terms with the constructs that restrict and divide the cultural signifiers that Amirpour has chosen to place together.

Since *A Girl* is situated in the socio-political context of the United States, I identify nationhood and multiculturalism as two constructs whose reliance on cultural projections shape interpretations of cultural signifiers. Said identifies multiculturalism, alongside hybridity, as “liberal philosophies” that offer a “permissiveness” for restructuring binary oppositions (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). However, in the case of the U.S. while one can describe it as multicultural, multiculturalism as an

ideological and nationalist project often counteracts notions of hybridity. As Omi and Winant argue, sentiments of division in the form of resentment are still prevalent despite and because of a neo-liberal model of multiculturalism. This model values difference for the sake of promoting a “post-racial” society while obscuring racism with color-blind approaches (*Racial Formations* 211). In other words, the U.S. continues to have issues with race and cultural difference more generally, which fosters a hypocritical multiculturalism that relies on difference but neglects people who offer that difference. For example, recent census projections stating that the U.S. will one day become a minority-majority² has heightened animosity towards immigrants despite their contributions to the multicultural society the U.S. seemingly advocates for (U.S. Census Bureau). Said, then, must have a different sort of approach to multiculturalism if he believes it to have the possibility of restructuring binaries.

To open up a project of reading hybrid images as contextualized in the systems they are situated in, I will first begin with an analysis of Orientalism (offered in *Orientalism*) as a case study for the consequences of essentialist cultural divisions, which Said offers an argument of in *Culture and Imperialism*. These consequences include both an impact on how cultures are interpreted as unchanging essences and how then this interpretation restricts cultural analysis to a regurgitation of the aforementioned essences. As a response, Said proposes the need for a critical humanist cultural analysis that at once goes past essentialisms and better reflects the ways cultures interact and influence one another, without claiming a false universalism. Furthermore, Said gestures for the need to reconnect cultural analysis with historical

² Meaning that will be more minorities than that of the white majority.

and political realities in order to better reflect the hybridity of cultural products. Said incorporates and pushes this project of reconnecting in his contrapuntal theory which is a critically humanist approach to situating texts in their “worldly affiliations” that accounts for their historical, material and spatial reality (*Culture and Imperialism* xiv). Thus, I turn to contrapuntality as a hermeneutics of cultural analysis.

Next, I will turn to an analysis of the U.S. as a multicultural state whose attempts at recognizing and unifying cultural difference result in essentialism as well. I take Said’s approach to analyzing imperialism as a model for analyzing nationalism and multiculturalism as situated in the United States. I argue that in the same way that imperialism’s interpretation of cultural difference has an impact on cultural analysis, so too do the cultural interpretations that nationalism and multiculturalism offer. In order to engage with such interpretations, I offer a selective engagement of scholarship that when put in conversation with one another teases out both the limitations and possibilities of multiculturalism. While I depart from the notions of multiculturalism that essentialize and absolve difference for the sake of unity, I adopt Talal Asad’s and Judith Butler’s critiques of specific models of multiculturalism. Together, their critiques open up the possibilities of restructuring multiculturalism towards an ideology concerned with learning how to be a different nation instead of dealing with, accommodating, and folding difference into the nation. By adopting such a model of multiculturalism, I am not dismissing the possibility of other conceptions of modernities. Instead, I focus on the U.S. as one political reality in which *A Girl* is situated and encountered in.

In adopting Asad and Butler's criticism, I offer a reading of The Amplifier Foundation's "We the People" campaign, which I argue resolves the tensions of the hybrid identity of Muslim Americans. In comparison, I will offer a contrapuntal reading of the cross-cultural images *A Girl* offers which makes meaning out of the tensions hybridity offers. I employ Said's notion of the contrapuntal for multiple reasons. First, it best responds to Butler's and Asad's critical reconceptualization of how to approach cultural difference in a multicultural society. Second, it offers a reading of hybrid cultural forms that interpret meaning off of the conflicting images coming together.

This aforementioned plan points to the importance of how we read cultural difference vis-à-vis cultural products. However, my interest in such a plan is not a gesture to stabilize the reading of cultural products. I recognize that readings define a work, in both an individual and collective sense, as much as the author's intent. Therefore, I am not arguing to read difference in the same way each time but instead investigate how we might read cultural difference with more sensitivity to lived experience. Therefore, by the end of this thesis I am interested in coming to terms with the following:

1. That the cultures we encounter and consume are already a product of influence by a specific time, place, and context. How we encounter and consume cultures must acknowledge this in order to resist essentializing cultures and then re-producing their essences.
2. That it is difficult to sustain a conversation that acknowledges both the collective and the individual at the same time. Yet, how we encounter and consume cultures must account for such a tension and attempt to resist flattening the possibilities this conversation offers.

Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Analysis

Orientalism: The Essentialist Consequences of Division

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that interpreting cultures is not a concern in and of itself because identity construction necessarily involves “the construction of opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”” (*Orientalism* 332). The problem arises when the interpretation fails to acknowledge lived experience. As such, Said is specifically concerned with the essentialist interpretation of the Orient which was elaborated on to the point that an essence was adopted in place of lived experience. Here we come into contact with the power and potential danger of the self and other relationship; if identity construction relies on an “other”, then how one interprets the “other” determines relationship between the two. In order to tease out the implications of the necessity of the self/other relationship, I am reading Said’s critique of the practice of Orientalism as a case study for Said’s analysis of the consequences of essentialist cultural divisions, offered in *Culture and Imperialism*.

In *Orientalism*, Said posits a question concerning divisions that if posited today, would still have relevance. He asks: “Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be, genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?” (*Orientalism* 45). With the use of “genuine” and “clearly,” Said distinguishes between, on one hand, an appreciation of difference and, on the other, a translation of difference into an

absolute demarcation vis-à-vis boundaries between different cultural groups. The distinction between genuine and clear lines points to how Said understands culture.

Said defines his use of the term “culture” with an analysis of two historical uses, which work in relation to one another. First, Said states that culture is a set of practices, “like the arts of description, communication, and representation,” that take aesthetic forms and which have “relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms,” (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). Here, Said uses the notion of relative autonomy to suggest one may technically detach an aesthetic object from its political and ideological context and continue to appreciate its aesthetic forms. However, this detached appreciation offers a limited scope of the aesthetic forms in question and as such, Said does not advocate for such a detachment.

Said’s analysis of culture’s second use borrows from Matthew Arnold, for whom culture “is each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought” (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). In this sense, culture is associated with high-class refinement that comes to represent the nation and what makes it unique or special. Said argues that this second use frames culture as “a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another” in battle and contestation (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). This definition forecloses the concept of culture as monolithic and stagnant, effectively limiting conceptions of identity. What is at stake in the aforementioned battle and contestation is not the way ideologies critically inform culture or even the way cultures inform one another, but rather an assertion of essences that serves to differentiate nations. By posing and pitting one’s nation against others, for the intent of acquiring due reverence from other nations, this battle demands that

national identities stay true to their filiative influences, despite affiliative influences. Here I am employing filiation and affiliation as defined by Said in his essay “Secular Criticism.” Said defines filiation as culture acquired through “birth, nationality, profession,” and affiliation as the acquisition of methods and systems such as “social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation,” (“Secular Criticism” 25). In this sense then, the aforementioned definition of “culture” ignores how cultural forms are informed by their historical, political and material realities.

Proceeding from this critique of culture, Said adopts a definition that takes the first aforementioned use of culture (culture as an aesthetic form) and reintroduces it to its “worldly affiliations” (*Culture and Imperialism* xiv). Politics, histories, and other cultures are just three examples of such affiliations. This connection does not fail to account for filiative cultural influence because for Said secular criticism stands between the two in an attempt to resist “the temptations” of their “formidable and related powers” (“Secular Criticism” 25). For Said, opting for either one over the other ignores the hybrid ways that cultural identities are formed and cements essences. Therefore, Said highlights the need to read filiative and affiliative influences in conversation with one another, which we will return to when discussing the distinction between having a full and partial knowledge of different experiences.

Returning to Said’s question of dividing human reality, translating differences into “clearly” distinct lines presumes that cultures are monolithic and stagnant because they do not take into account affiliative influences. As such, “clear” divisions result in

a filiative interpretation of culture as essences. In critiquing such an interpretation, Said begins with the following statement:

Let us begin by accepting the notion that although there is an irreducible subjective core to human experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation, and—centrally important—it is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs (*Culture and Imperialism* 31).

Said recognizes that when one posits human experience as subjective there is a danger of equating the experience as ahistorical and sacred. And that this experience is not influenced but *determined* by totalizing theories that only account for filiative forms. Here, Said defines essentialism as the opposite of subjectively defined differences. Following this, I define essentialism as the practice of interpreting human experience as an essence that exists “prior to existence” (“essentialism”). In effect, essentialism takes an experience, which is produced in relation to filiative and affiliative influences and strips wholly either its filiations or affiliations. This is similar to aesthetic products that are stripped from their material reality, which also includes both filiative and affiliative influences. As such, there are explicit resonances between interpreting cultural difference and cultural products.

When one interprets the cultural other as an essence, two interconnected repercussions follow which methodologically limits analysis of “human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies”³ (*Orientalism* 46). These limitations are intrinsically tied to the assumption of an inherent cultural identity. The first consequence, then, is that essentialism fails to acknowledge how cultural groups are “both historically created and the result of interpretation” (*Culture and Imperialism*

³ From here on, I refer to this formulation as a cultural encounter.

32). In this sense, essentialism ignores the construction and production of culture. Said offers Orientalism and Occidentalism as two examples of identities whose production has been historically ignored.

Said defines orientalism, as a style of thought produced by Orientalists that is “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction” between the geopolitical East and West,” (*Orientalism* 2). Here, Said emphasizes the association of the East with the Orient and the West with the Occident as a geopolitical interpretation of their differences. Like a compass then, the Orient and Occident were positioned as opposite and necessarily opposed to one another. So if the Occident was modern and developing, the Orient was archaic and unchanging. This “basic [geo-political] distinction” served to demarcate the Orient and Occident, as separate and monolithic groups (*Orientalism* 3). As such, Said argues that the differences between the Orient and Occident did not inherently exist. Nor did they inherently possess power as I will discuss in lieu of the second consequence.

The second consequence of essentialism is that the positing of essences necessitates a defense of “the essence or experience itself rather than promoting full knowledge of it and its entanglements and dependencies on other knowledge” (*Culture and Imperialism* 32). Here Said makes a distinction between having full or partial knowledge of a cultural experience. A partial knowledge only appreciates an experience in and of itself, independent of its affiliations or filiations. On the other hand, a full knowledge appreciates the cultural experience in lieu of both its filiations and affiliations.

In the case of orientalism, the aforementioned basic distinction or, in other words essentialist interpretation, was then taken as the “starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs “mind,” destiny, and so on” (*Orientalism* 3). Since Orientalism interpreted the Orient and Occident as oppositional identities, then the following academic elaborations sought to justify this distinction. As such Said defines Orientalism as a “corporate institution” or “discourse” that deals with the Orient: “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (*Orientalism* 3). Thus, each elaboration of orientalism was, in effect, a validation of an initial interpretation of essentialist oppositional identities, which perpetuated an uncritical and shallow consumption of cultural difference. Therefore, the differences between the Orient and Occident did not inherently possess power. Only in the reproduction and regurgitation, by specialists accepting the distinction and then reproducing and elaborating on it in their respective disciplinary fields, did the aforementioned interpretation gain validity and power. Therefore, the interpretation of cultural difference is just as important as how that interpretation then influences the production of knowledge of the cultural difference in question.

In the case of Orientalism these elaborations became so layered that Orientalist discoveries were consumed as “objective” truths when in reality they were subjective truths, in the Nietzschean sense (*Orientalism* 203). Nietzsche defines pure and objective truth as “the thing-in-itself,” which is inaccessible to human experience, because of how language necessarily employs metaphor to translate a stimulation of

nerves into words (“On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” 144). Thus, at each stage of mediation (stimulation to image, image to sounds, sounds to word) the speaker moves further away from the ““thing-in-itself”” because metaphors shape it through “poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration” (“On Truth” 144). These words are then stabilized into concepts when the words are arrived at by the same metaphors in multiple instances, effectively “making equivalent that which is not equivalent” (“On Truth” 145). In the act of translating the “thing-in-itself” the initial creative potential of metaphor diminishes.⁴ As such, Nietzsche defines truth as

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of humans relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are (qtd. in *Orientalism* 203).

Truths about the Orient and Occident, then, are not natural scientific facts. Rather the Orient and Occident are constructed illusions, which have been naturalized by Orientalist discourse. And yet, these definitions played an immense role in socially and politically structuring the world vis-à-vis imperialist projects. This structuring continues to have relevance today, specifically with how people generally conceive the world. Distinctions between first and third world countries as well as north and south, are steeped with values judgements regarding quality of life, for one example.

Linda Nochlin offers an example of naturalized illusions and their repercussions in *The Imaginary Orient*. She specifically writes about European realist artists who would attempt to objectively re-present the East in their paintings. In order to be as objective and authentic as possible, they paid great attention to detail so as to

⁴ This is not to say that metaphors are to be resisted. Instead, Nietzsche gestures to metaphors as literary devices that de-stabilize truths through their creative potential (“On Truth” 146).

guarantee that the image looked as close to possible to reality. Nochlin argues that, instead, these painters reproduced essentialist re-presentations of the Orient. For example, Nochlin takes Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Snake Charmer* as her point of analysis. Gérôme's re-presentation of Arabic writing in the painting and its association with the Qur'an offers a sense of Arab authenticity by invoking Eastern spirituality and religion. However, the image itself is composed of multiple sites⁵ that cannot be reduced to an all-encompassing Arab identity (Clark). As such, whether or not the writing on the wall translates into verses that are spiritually meaningful the writing functions as a stylized script that feigns an Arab authenticity the painter had no access to, to begin with.

Going back to the distinction between a partial and full knowledge, Orientalism then was a partial knowledge. On the other hand, a full knowledge does not merely look for similarities between bodies of knowledge but also encompasses the "entanglements and dependencies" between them (*Culture and Imperialism* 32). Therefore, while a partial knowledge relies on a structure of coherency, and thus a consistency of viewpoints, a full knowledge acknowledges that experiences can be coherent even with conflicting viewpoints. Furthermore, a full knowledge recognizes that "truths are illusions" by attempting to contextualize human experience with other bodies of knowledge located at the site of contextualization. This appreciation does not rely on the premise of knowing everything there is to know about another culture or presuming that you can walk in the shoes of someone else vis-à-vis empathy.

⁵ The Clark Art Institute states that the painting references parts of two buildings, in Istanbul and Cairo respectively.

Orientalism as a discourse cemented the basic “binary opposition” between Occident and Orient, and consequently left no room for alternative narratives that deviated from the essentialist and oppositional interpretation (*Orientalism* 46). However, in reality and on the ground, “the durability of empire was sustained on both sides, that of the rulers and that of the distant ruled, and in turn each had a set of interpretations of their common history with its own perspective, historical sense, emotions, and traditions” (*Culture and Imperialism* 11). For Said, the composition of space impacts the types of cultural encounters (between who and which histories) are possible. Thus, Said’s analysis of narrative not only looks into its filiative and affiliative influences but also necessarily encapsulates a relationship with the composition of space as it relates to physical, ideological, and historical bodies of knowledge.

Coming Together Contrapuntally

By putting *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* in conversation with one another, I argue that cultural divisions pose methodological problems for interpretation. Interpreting cultures with an approach that stresses divisions, offers an essentialist reading of difference that ignores cultural actualities. Furthermore, if taken as *the* interpretation of cultural difference, then the following cultural encounters, whether between people or in discourse, will regurgitate essentialism. In an attempt to counteract such an essentialism Said proposes a project of coming together:

My principal aim is not to separate but connect, and I am interested in this for the main philosophical and methodological reason that cultural forms are

hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality (*Culture and Imperialism* 14).

Said recognizes that since experiences are not produced neutrally, they cannot be understood neutrally. By connecting cultural analysis with the actuality of cultural practices and forms, which he defines as hybrid, Said proposes a notion of reading cultural encounters that goes beyond an interpretation of essences. To embark on this project, Said offers contrapuntality as a hermeneutics, which accounts for how cultures come into conversation with one another through aesthetic forms, that is both critically humanist and spatially aware.

In opening up a project of coming together, Said argues that one must replace a “*rhetoric of blame*” steeped in confrontation and hostility, which results in “short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury,”—in short, division (*Culture and Imperialism* 18, *Orientalism* xxii). As such, Said gestures to humanist critique as way to “open up fields of struggle,” (*Orientalism* xxii). With such a gesture, Said attempts to gather a full knowledge of cultural experience by situating analysis in a material reality that acknowledges such struggles. By arguing for a resistance to a rhetoric of blame, Said employs a monumental amount of grace, generosity and compassion towards historical wielders of oppression. Said finds this grace necessary as a step towards the goal of counteracting imperialist cultural divisions that led to socioeconomic, physical, and emotional trauma. However, such generosity may not be available when one first encounters the injustices the world has dealt them along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. As such, I take Said’s humanism as one stage in the process of negotiating systemic struggles that, although not readily available,

carries value. The value of such a graceful response cannot be understood vacant initial fury and vindictive blame, as well as its consequences.

Said qualifies his humanistic critique with two clauses. First, he advocates for a humanistic approach that engages with a “historically and rationally” tuned mind (*Orientalism* xxiii). This is to say then that Said calls for a humanism that acknowledges experiences in their reality as contextualized by time, place and context. Unlike an idealist notion of humanism, Said does not ignore discrepancies between experiences for the sake of universality or rather an “alleged universalism” that was in actuality “Eurocentric in the extreme” (*Culture and Imperialism* 44).

Instead, as his second clause reveals, Said calls for humanism that “is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods” (*Orientalism* xxiii). Here, he makes it a point to emphasize that humanists are not isolated and detached from communities. Instead, since “every culture is linked to every other one, and nothing that goes on in our world has ever been isolated and pure of any outside influence,” he argues that the humanist, whose occupation concern fellow humans, must operate reflecting this interconnectedness (*Orientalism* xxiii). As such, coming together is a critical aspect of Said’s humanism because of its saliency in recognizing cultures as productions influenced by both filiations and affiliations. Yet, in calling for a coming together Said resists a universalism that “furnishes a trans-national, even trans-human perspective,” which creates “the crisis-free serenity of an almost ideal realm” (*Culture and Imperialism* 45). Said argues that this “ideal realm” recognized the need to analyze how literatures interacted with one another. However, their trans-human methodology perpetuated Orientalist hierarchies by ignoring the

ethnocentrism of their ideals. This underlying ethnocentrism denied recognition of groups of people due to colonialist, racist, sexist, and ableist structures. Additionally, a trans-national perspective ignores the sites in which people come together effectively ignoring the pertinent histories and systems of structure involved. In this case, Said is concerned more with the feigning of universalism than an acknowledged ethnocentrism, which is necessary, to some extent, when offering contextualized readings. For Said contrapuntality encapsulates a humanistic approach that both recognizes the need to match cultural analysis with hybrid cultural forms and employs a methodology that does not strip this analysis from its ethnocentrism.

Said defines contrapuntality as an approach to cultural analysis that at the “outset . . . acknowledges the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless interconnected experiences—of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures” (*Culture and Imperialism* 32). When approaching cultural analysis in this manner, Said argues that “there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them [identities] an ideal and essentially separate status,” (*Culture and Imperialism* 32). Some immediate barriers arise when attempting to employ a contrapuntal reading as defined above. First, how does one “acknowledge the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless interconnected experiences” at the outset? Second, while an “ideal and essentialist separate status” is not productive for coming together, is there not a danger of false universalism with withholding separate recognition of different cultural groups? To tackle these questions, I turn to outlining Said’s theory of contrapuntality in greater detail.

The gist of Said's proclamation is immediately appreciable given his problem with division and essentialism: In the moment of interpreting difference during a cultural encounter, one must recognize that identities and cultures are productions. Said's contrapuntal approach appreciates how an experience can be special in an individual sense (I have a specific experience and it can be no one else's), but also developed in a collective sense which hosts a concert of histories (I have a specific experience that is no one else's but is produced as a result of the histories that overlap in this specific time, place, and context). The difficulty rests on attempting to constantly recognize the individual experience as mediated within the system, and vice versa. This dual recognition attempts to resist determining experiences as either completely individual or completely systemic. As a result, the contrapuntal reader faces the problematic posed by putting singular experiences in conversation with a system that incorporates multiple experiences. There is an assumption that, while the former works with specificity, the latter operates on generalizations and trends due to the mass of information.

In offering his theory of contrapuntality Said acknowledges the danger of distortion that multiplicity poses by prioritizing discrepant experiences:

That is, we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others (*Culture and Imperialism* 32).

Here, Said argues that systems are better understood through an analysis of discrepant, or discordant, experiences that are in conversation with one another but are not completely in agreement ("discrepant"). The challenge is how one must do this with the level of rigor, thoroughness and depth that Said invokes. To get a better sense of

Said's prioritization of discrepant experiences in relation to how a contrapuntal approach may offer a contextualized reading, I turn to his analysis of musical counterpoint as it relates to his contrapuntal reading.⁶

In music composition theory, counterpoint is understood as "the combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines according to a system of rules" ("counterpoint"). This begins to give a sense of Said's interest in the relationship between systems and individuals as discussed above. However, this traditional definition emphasizes a rigid system that enforces simultaneity instead of discrepancy. Such a reading of counterpoint would result in "the belief that mankind formed a marvelous, almost symphonic whole whose progress and formation, again as a whole, could be studied exclusively as a concerted and secular historical experience" (*Culture and Imperialism* 44). Said's humanism, as discussed earlier, positions himself in opposition to such a totalizing universalism.

Instead, Said concerns himself with specific acts such as Glenn Gould's piano career, which he describes as eccentric with its "unique sound, brash style, and rhythmic inventiveness," as well as his erratic performances (*Music at the Limits* 3). In analyzing the act of listening to Gould's *Goldberg Variations* Said expresses how, "you feel as if you are watching a tightly packed, dense work being unfolded, resolved almost, into a set of intertwined lines held together not by two hands but by ten fingers, each responsive to all the others, as well as to the two hand and the one mind really back of everything" (*Music at the Limits* 4).

⁶ Wherein the former is employed in musical composition analysis, the latter is employed in literary analysis.

Said's approach to appreciating Gould's performances resembles a constant unpacking where anticipation for resolution builds but never quite arrives. For Said this resistance to resolution operates in details such as the act of playing notes with ten fingers as opposed to two hands. By focusing on ten fingers Said emphasizes the intricacy of multiple moves at different point of time and space, each of which contribute to the whole sense of interpreting the performance of a specific person with their respective body playing each individual note. For Said, this encapsulates how one ought to proceed "from microcosm to macrocosm and then back again" (*Music at the Limits* 4). As such, counterpoint's relationship between specificity and multiplicity is one of constant reference though movement that pushes back on finite understanding of resolution and singularity.

In this sense, the work of the contrapuntal humanist never ends, since there are as infinite number of histories as there are notes to account for. Although there may be a limited number of keys on a piano, the way those keys are played, at different moments and with different pressures, offers a sense of variety that is infinite. Accounting for these histories becomes a daunting and overwhelming task. However, Said does not gesture to a totalizing notion of contrapuntality in which every single history is accounted for all at once. Instead, Said gestures to a "provisional privileging" of experiences:

In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one: yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work (*Culture and Imperialism* 51).

Here, Said emphasizes how each musical theme plays at a specific moment in time. And while in that moment we may be invested in that one theme, one makes meaning out of the theme in relation to the themes played before and after. Even in the absence of a previous or forthcoming theme, such as in the beginning or end of a piece, meaning is made in conversation with silence and pauses. Furthermore, this wholistic interpretation relates to how one perceives the collective of notes, which relate to one another by virtue of how and when they are placed next to one another on sheet music. Thus, each singular note contributes to the collective composition in a specific and singular way which informs how the composition is understood in appreciation of the discrepant notes. By proposing a “provisional privileging,” Said attempts to gather a more robust and contextualized human knowledge that resists a totalization of experience. As such, each experience is privileged in relation to the others present.

Earlier, I discussed how a full knowledge of a human experience accounts for both filiative and affiliative influences. With these influences in mind, it is critical to note that human experiences may not always be in agreement. For Said, spatial awareness is critical for contextualizing cultural analysis in their historical and political contexts:

I have been proposing the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together . . . but this global, contrapuntal analysis should be modeled not (as earlier notions of comparative literature were) on a symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices—inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions—all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography (*Culture and Imperialism* 318).

Here, Said models his theory of contrapuntality on an atonal ensemble instead of a symphony. Whereas a symphony relies on structure, atonal composition has “no

conscious reference to scale or tonic” (“atonal”). This is to say then that contrapuntality does not rely on linear causality and perfect harmonies. In translating this atonal ensemble into a theory of contrapuntality, Said likens atonality to an “uneven topography.” Such a spatial awareness recognizes the inflections and ruptures of space as they relate to the experiences and histories the space holds. Depending on the groups of people present in the space these experiences overlap, shape, and potentially constrain neighboring experiences.

We see in Said’s understanding of discrepant experience that he does recognize differences. In qualifying the earlier problematic of withholding recognition of separate status Said notes, “Yet we would wish to preserve what is unique about each so long as we also preserve some sense of the human community and the actual contests that contribute to its formation, and of which they are all a part of.” (*Culture and Imperialism* 32). Here, Said engages with the nuance between separation and preservation. Separation demands a clear line that constructs difference as absolute, which demands differential treatment by virtue of this difference. However, preservation, in this context, accounts for connections between cultures, which opens up the possibilities of reading influence and change. So, what one preserves is not the uniqueness but how that uniqueness is informed in concert with community. In a Saidian sense, community necessitates sharing physical space, which engenders connections between people. In this sense then, if differential treatment is necessary it is necessary due to a specific circumstance of relationships.⁷

⁷ Such as the argument for affirmative action as discussed by Omi and Winant in *Racial Formations*, where differential treatment is necessary to counteract historic systems of racial bias in the workforce and college admissions.

Turning now to contrapuntality as a hermeneutics, Said pushes critics to analyze (post-)imperial and (post-)colonial texts for what they say and the implications that follow, instead of un-critically agreeing that they are horrendous from the outset (*Culture and Imperialism* 51). He says, “[w]e must start by characterizing the commonest ways that people handle the tangled, many-sided legacy of imperialism, not just those who left the colonies, but also those who were there in the first place and who remained, the natives” (*Culture and Imperialism* 17). By many-sided, he does not intend to validate the notion that imperialism was good and just for some. Instead he argues that imperialism, as a vastly pervasive system of power, impacted groups of people as contextualized by time, place, and context. And that literary interpretation must account for this topography of experiences, and their respective narratives, that are prevalent in (post-)imperial and (post-)colonial texts.

By analyzing experiences contrapuntally, “alternative and new narratives emerge, and they become institutionalized or discursively stable entities” (*Culture and Imperialism* 51). As such contrapuntal readings offer a means of accessing narratives, which have always been there but have been historically ignored or undervalued. These “new” narratives carry metaphoric possibilities, that re-introduce newness and destabilize essentialist truths (“On Truth” 146):

For each locale in which the engagement occurs, and the imperialist model is disassembled, its incorporative, universalizing, and totalizing codes rendered ineffective and inapplicable, a particular type of research and knowledge begins to build up (*Culture and Imperialism* 51-52).

By taking on a contrapuntal approach, a system of knowledge that prioritizes contextualized lived experience builds in place of those which universalize and totalize human essences. Therefore, Said gestures to contrapuntality’s potential in stabilizing

the truth of hybrid cultural actualities in place of the aforementioned stabilization of an Orientalist essentialist truth:

In an important sense, we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations (although part of their enduring appeal is that they seem and are considered to be like essentializations) but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions (*Culture and Imperialism* 52).

Thus, we return to the root of the matter, the self and other relationship. In gesturing to read aesthetic forms contrapuntally, Said argues for analysis that matches cultural actualities and identities, which are products of hybrid and contesting influence. A project concerned with reading aesthetic forms as productions inform a reading of cultural identities as productions in a specific time, place and context. In the chapter I will turn to the U.S. as one site in which *A Girl* is situated in.

The U.S. as a Mediated Space

American Identity and Nationalism

Before we can agree on what the American identity is made of, we have to concede that as an immigrant settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing; indeed the battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv).

The United States, for Said and many other scholars whose critiques we will engage with, in the next section, is necessarily multicultural due to the variety of physically present cultures that share space. By virtue of sharing space, cultural histories are explicitly overlapping and interacting with one another in ways that shape the cultures themselves as well as the fabric of the nation. How the government interprets this demographic reality, with its use of metaphors and techniques, is the project of multiculturalism.

In defense of multiculturalism, Bhikhu Parekh states that “multiculturalism is not a homogenous body of thought” and emphasizes that as a thirty year old political movement, as of 2006, has only been explored as a theory for only fifteen of those years (qtd. *Multicultural Controversies* 3). Tariq Modood, also a proponent of multiculturalism, argues that multiculturalism in liberal democracies are largely fueled by the tension between large-scale immigration and racism against immigrants (*Multiculturalism* 6). As such, multiculturalism has most prominently shaped state and educational policies through an interpretation of how difference comes together (“Politics of Recognition”, “Rushdie Affair”).

I argue that the tension of multiculturalism lies, as described by Said, between those who argue for a “unitary identity” and those who argue for “a complex whole but not reductively unified one” (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv). In the aforementioned quote, Said is specifically talking about conceptions of American identity. In referencing this passage, I argue that if one is to define American identity, one must take into account the U.S.’s multicultural demographic. In this section I aim to analyze what interpretations of multiculturalism are available and how they influence cultural analysis. I take then, Said’s project of analyzing Orientalist discourse and its influence on cultural analysis as my model. To begin this project then, I first offer an analysis of how U.S. nationalism is constructed because, like imperialism, I argue that nationalism has implications for how cultural encounters and cultural analysis operate.

Benedict Anderson writes that, a nation is “an imagined political community” that is both limited and sovereign (*Imagined Communities* 6). As such, Anderson argues that nationalism asserts that every constituent of a nation is connected to one another by virtue of membership. Yet, in reality one will not come into contact with each and every fellow constituent due to sheer physical and technical limitations. Therefore nationalism, as an exercise of the imagination, points to a discrepancy between nationalism as a concept and its lived experience. Despite this discrepancy, Anderson argues that imagining such a coming together harbors creative potential.

Another imagined aspect of nationalism is the nations’ limitation in size and capacity. Anderson argues that nations are limited because they have “finite, if elastic, boundaries” (7). Here Anderson points to a physical limitation in size, as well as an ideological limitation. The latter, ideological limitation, speaks to how nations are

defined and the constraints these definitions pose on the physical composition of the nation.⁸ But their elasticity point to opportunities to expand these ideological boundaries.

In his essay, “Myths and misconceptions in the study of nationalism,” Rogers Brubaker posits Ethnic and civic nationalism as two such ideological constructions of nationhood that determine national boundaries. According to Brubaker, civic nationalism is thought of as a “good” kind of nationalism in comparison to the “bad” ethnic kind of nationalism (“Myths and misconceptions” 298). However, Brubaker argues that civic nationalisms are erroneously defined as “good” because they come with their own set of issues. For instance, Brubaker notes that civic nationalism becomes too “heterogeneous to be useful” (299). This means that the more heterogeneous the nation is the harder it becomes to define the group with a set of criteria for membership that is applicable to each constituent. One can say the same for ethnic nationalisms as the definition of ethnic identities are always up for question. The more specific the ethnic identity, the less it becomes applicable to each person in the nation. In either case, criteria of membership, whether civic or ethnic, maintains nationhood as an exclusive membership. Furthermore, the very notion of a membership constructs an in and out group which results in differential treatment by the state.

Second, Brubaker notes that by detaching citizenship from ethnicity, civic nationalisms are defined as “acultural” because of their assumed lack of tie to culture (299). However, Brubaker argues that this assumption effaces the very idea of a civic nationalism because all nationalisms, even civically defined one, have a cultural

⁸ By physical composition, I necessarily mean as composed of bodies.

component. In effect, civic nationalisms cannot exist if defined as acultural because they lose a significant part of what encompasses a national identity.

In the case of the U.S., both issues of civic nationalism are at play. The U.S., as a liberal and therefore civic nation, identifies with values such as democracy and freedom. As such, national membership congregates around these values. However, this doesn't mean that just anyone can identify as a member. As Omi and Winant argue, the U.S. was historically organized by an explicit white supremacist system that disregarded the subject-hood of indigenous and black peoples through systematic genocide and slavery, respectively, despite the forced labor they performed in order to build the United States as a nation (*Racial Formations* 245). As an extension of systemic racism access to citizenship and voting rights was limited along racial lines. These limitations made it difficult if not impossible, at times, for non-white⁹ people to access to political values such as freedom and democracy which act as criteria for membership. As such, these people were not recognized as citizens much less members of the nation. This is to say then that organizing around values such as freedom and democracy are not devoid of racial and ethnic conflict. Instead, such values are contingent on how the state defines their use and to whom they apply to. For Brubaker, then, it is more productive to call civic nations like the U.S. nation-states because "it is the state . . . that is the cardinal point of reference" ("Myths and misconceptions" 300).

Going back to the imagined limitations of nations, Anderson thus emphasizes that even, "The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the

⁹ Here I understand white as Omi and Winant understand it in the U.S.: White as a racial category that is a social and historical construct, which has shifted meaning over time based on its use in relation to privilege (*Racial Formations* 125).

members of the human race will join their nation” (*Imagined Communities* 7).

Therefore, there must be some set of criteria, as defined by the state, to pose the national membership accessible to some and not others. This is pertinent for a project of multiculturalism which shapes conceptions of nationhood. As such, analyses of multiculturalism must take into account the power nation-states have in determining which bodies are invited and/or incorporated into the nation. Furthermore, while a nation can be multicultural and promote multiculturalism, it may still pose limitations on how cultures are folded into the nation.

A recent example of a confining nationalist project is Donald’s Trump’s campaign for presidency, which ran on the motto “Make America Great Again.” The question becomes what does greatness mean to the Trump presidency? On Trump’s campaign site, a synopsis of his election is given stating: “On November 8, 2016, *the American People* delivered a historic victory and took *our* country back” (Donald J. Trump, emphasis mine). Here, the definitive singular article “the” constructs an absolute group of Americans while the capitalization of the phrase “the American People” legitimizes the group. The retaliative action of re-claiming rightful ownership of the United States suggests that there is an illegitimate group of people who had wrongly taken the U.S. away from the legitimate “American People.” Who makes up “the American People” in comparison to the outside group is not immediately apparent. However, such a rightful reclamation, of an otherwise widespread and heterogenous identity, posits legitimacy as a criterion for American identity. In other words, how “legitimate” one’s claim to American identity is critical to who is considered a part of “the American People”. In this case, some citizens are more rightfully American than

others. As evidence of by Trump's racist and purist campaign, this legitimacy relies on factors such as country of origin and race. For example, immigrants of color are identified as illegitimate Americans, while white citizens born in the U.S. are considered legitimate Americans.¹⁰ Thus, making the United States "great again" is tied to a return to a past in which white homogeneity prevailed due to systemic racism and its respective power differentials.

Finally, despite the inequity, exploitation, and trauma that specific groups within a nation may face, "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). This imagined conception of comradeship is what keeps constituents loyal to the nation-state. Therefore, a nation may promote a multicultural state for the purpose of improving inter-group relationships, while advancing policies that pose political and economic barriers for communities that provide this valued multiculturalism.

Anderson's definition of nationalism as an imagined community and Brubaker's critique of civic nationalism open up our discussion of multiculturalism in the U.S. This discussion cannot ignore the power dynamics at play with the power the nation wields in determining group membership and how that plays out when encountering race and cultural difference. With this in mind, I now turn to a selection of critiques on multiculturalism that address these dynamics.

¹⁰ There are further nuances between these two extremes but for my purposes here these two paint a clear enough picture.

Multiculturalism: The Essentialist Consequences of Coming Together

In opening up the project of the limitations and uses of different models of multiculturalism, I begin with Charles Taylor's "Politics of Recognition." Taylor approaches multiculturalism as a politics of recognition, which stresses how recognition "partly" shapes identities ("Politics of Recognition" 25). Like Said, Taylor begins with the premise that how we recognize the other, or others in a given society shapes the re-presentations of the other that circulate. Taylor is specifically concerned with how these re-presentations are internalized in ways that inflict negative and detrimental consequences. For example, he cites women's internalization of female inferiority as a result of patriarchal gender norms, as well indigenous people's internalization of Orientalist representations of native savagery. Since recognition has such power Taylor argues it is not only a courtesy but also a vital human need that must be accounted for in a democracy that proposes and promotes equality. The question becomes, how does one properly recognize the other, so as to avoid detrimental consequences of re-presentations? In acknowledging the necessity that each human has for respect and dignity, Taylor argues that we recognize the "equal value of different cultures" so that, "we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their *worth*" (64). By recognizing the worth of a different culture, Taylor attempts to resist homogenizing forms of multiculturalism that calls on culture to assimilate towards the dominate culture and effectively blend their differences beyond recognition (71). At the same time, by identifying the project of multiculturalism as one of promoting cultural survival and worth, Taylor runs into the risk of attempting to recognize authentic cultural identities that are merely essences.

In his essay, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” responding to Taylor, K. Anthony Appiah takes on the aforementioned risk of essentialism with two critiques. First, Appiah argues that Taylor’s recognition politics cannot account for an authentic self because, first and foremost, they don’t exist without perpetuating essences and a monological¹¹ notion of identity (“Identity, Authenticity, Survival” 156). More specifically, Appiah argues that recognition of identity on a political level will rely on collective group labels that do not account for the intersections of identities that an individual may mediate on a personal level (160). Using himself as an example, Appiah argues that a politics of recognition would only recognize his Black identity because it is the most politically salient part of his identity. However, this recognition will inevitably fail as it does not contextualize Appiah’s experience as a Black homosexual man. Instead a politics of recognition will recognize *the* Black experience, which means pinpointing one Black experience and attributing it to each Black person. In short, the Black experience is non-existent. Instead, as Said would argue, there are Black experiences that are individual and discrepant which make up a larger Black community or collective. A model multiculturalism that attempts to recognize authentic selves based on group identity falls into the trap of essentialism because of the methodological problem posed when one takes a single experience to represent a whole group of individuals.

Second, a politics of recognition based on offering respect and dignity ignores the dynamics of power as they relate to race relations. Appiah points out that to live in the U.S. as a Black person necessitates dealing with assaults against one’s dignity. As

¹¹ As understood by Taylor; identity constructed by the self without influence of others (“Politics of Recognition” 28)

such, Appiah argues “It will not be enough to require being treated with equal dignity despite being Black, for that will require a concession that being Black counts naturally or to some degree against one’s dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a Black*” (161). Here, Appiah pushes Taylor’s politics of recognition by pinpointing who holds the power of recognition, which has historically been white men in the U.S. As such, granting recognition upholds the same racial power dynamics as withholding recognition does.

Ironically, Taylor attempts to recognize power dynamics by noting the influence of ethnocentric judgments on a politics of recognition. However, this acknowledgement does not stop Taylor from drawing a line between cultural others and policymakers, as one example, when arguing, “The challenge is to deal with *their* sense of marginalization without compromising *our* basic political principles.” (“Politics of Recognition” emphasis mine 63). Although vague, the “our” alludes most prominently to the nation-state. As such, the nation-state is put on a pedestal and applauded for doing *them*, the cultural others encapsulated in a multicultural state, a favor. Additionally, cultural others are being incorporated into a multicultural U.S. on the principle that they do not compromise U.S. political principles. This will be a critical component of Talal Asad’s critique of multiculturalism, which I will turn to towards the end of this section.

Therefore, a politics of recognition not only demands that the benefactor of recognition be thankful for the recognition, but it also asks one to essentialize themselves in order to benefit from such a recognition. As such Appiah pinpoints an irony in “an ideal [multiculturalism] —I would call it the Bohemian ideal—in which

authenticity requires us to reject much of that is conventional in our society is turned around and made the basis of a ‘politics of recognition’” (“Identity, Authenticity, Survival” 154). Appiah argues that while Taylor is concerned with how to immediately right the wrongs perpetuated by patriarchal, colonial, and racist systems, he is concerned with going “on to the next necessary step, which is to ask whether the identities constructed in this way are ones we—I speak here as someone who counts in America as a gay black man—can be happy with in the longer run” (162). In the long run, Appiah is concerned with the repercussions of recognition as it relates to who holds the power to recognize and their capacity and/or willingness to recognize more than essences.

Like Taylor, Robert Gooding-Williams approaches multiculturalism as an educational and political project. However, whereas Taylor’s multiculturalism ignores a critical engagement with systems of race, Gooding-Williams argues for an explicitly race-conscious multiculturalism that is largely influenced by Appiah’s multiple works and Susan Wolf’s notion of “self-recognition” (“Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy” 30, 35). Following Omi and Winant, Gooding-Williams begins by arguing that race is a social construct that, although not determined merely by biological features, cannot be detached from the body as a racially marked material reality (22). As such, for Gooding-Williams, being Black is not the same as being a Black person. With such a distinction, Gooding-Williams does not mean to separate experience from bodies yet he does so at specific points, which routinely confuses his argument. Instead, he attempts to stress the impact white society’s dehumanizing

recognition of Black bodies has on how Black people construct Black personhoods.¹² Gooding-Williams recognizes that this is not the only way of interpreting of Black identity. Instead, he believes there are “numerous ways of interpreting and assigning significance to being black” (24). Yet, at the same time, Gooding-Williams notes that “the most politically salient modes of being a black person involve the assignment of a *collective* significance to being black” (24). Here, then Gooding-Williams runs into the same problem that Appiah notes in his critique of Taylor. How do we recognize individually construed identities, with categorizes that are meant to recognize collectives?

In this vein Gooding-Williams, rejects Molefi Asante’s multiculturalism, which embraces an Afrocentric education. Gooding-Williams argues that Asante’s project perpetuates essences by ignoring how African-American identities are constituted in part by “the larger society to which they belong to” by an insistence of a true identity that is tied to an ancestral home (27-28). At the same time, Gooding-Williams cautions against an anti-Afrocentric nationalist multiculturalism such as the one that Arthur Schlesinger’s proposes. Gooding-Williams argues that Schlesinger’s multiculturalism may recognize the interdependency of identity construction but chooses to ignore it for the sake of avoiding conflict. By calling for an affirmation of common democratic political values Schlesinger attempts to “transcend the group-based disagreements of a complex and quarrelsome American society” (29). He argues that both projects shapes identity into a form of kitsch, or something that is “sure of itself”. These projects

¹² Such as W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* and James Weldon Johnson in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (22).

contribute to essentialist interpretations of experiences and identities because they determine and demarcate the scope of possibilities.

For Gooding-Williams, then, multicultural education should be race-conscious in order to promote and widen the “capacity for democratic deliberation” (“Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy” 30). He defines deliberation as a practice that “encourages people with conflicting perspectives to understand each other’s point of view, to minimize their moral disagreements, and to search for a common ground” (30). Here, Gooding-Williams invokes Lorenzo Simpson’s “reversibility of perspectives,” which resists the belief that political conversations must necessarily lead to a change of mind. Rather, Simpson gestures to the possibility that a shift in self-understanding might occur after engaging with a viewpoint that is not one’s own (31). But absent race, this deliberation fails as Gooding-Williams’s critique of Schlesinger model exemplifies. Thus, Gooding-Williams is interested in a “cross-cultural hermeneutical dialogue” which makes accessible “cross-cultural knowledge” in an attempt to cultivate a race-conscious democratic deliberation. Gooding-Williams identifies such deliberation as a skill that “is an appropriate medium for seeking and forging common grounds and ideals” in the context of multicultural society (31).

After identifying the failings of the aforementioned models and proposing his own, Gooding-Williams aligns his project with that of Susan Wolf’s notion of “self-recognition” (qtd. “Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy” 35). Wolf proposes self-recognition in her response to Taylor’s politics of recognition. She writes that a politics

of recognition does not merely ask to “make efforts to recognize the other more actively and accurately” (qtd. 35).¹³ It also attempts

to recognize those people and those cultures that occupy the world in addition to ourselves – it urges us to take a closer, less selective look at who is sharing our cities the libraries, the schools we call our own . . . if we are to study our culture, we had better recognize who we, as a community, are (35).

For Gooding-Williams, the rhetoric of “we,” resists the trap of categorizing people who compose a multicultural society as an othered “they” who merely “have something valuable to say” (35). Thus, self-recognition, is a recognition of a collective “we” that encapsulates the wide variety of cultural groups that are prevalent in public spaces.

In this sense, Gooding-Williams and Wolf recognize the need for education to incorporate critical conversations about race if we are to understand how to be a multicultural society. Yet, as Judith Butler breaks down in her essay, *Reply to Gooding-Williams*, there are problems with the methods Gooding-Williams sets out to reach the aforementioned need. Butler specifically questions how Gooding-Williams centers his model of multiculturalism on a “we.” Butler argues that centering a race-conscious deliberative dialogue on a “we” is counter-productive for his purpose in promoting self-transformation. In this vein, Butler asks, “But for there to be dialogue, does there not have to be a certain notion of distance, one that cannot be overcome through the revision and re-articulation of the “we”?” (“Reply” 46). Here, distance accounts for the ways in which cultural groups are different. By shortening such a distance, in the act of collapsing the self/other relationship into a singular “we”, Gooding-Williams metaphorically displaces the difference he puts at the very center of

¹³ Of which Appiah’s critique of Taylor discussed the limitations of earlier.

his deliberative dialogue. As such, Butler argues that in a dialogue centered on a collective “we,” self-transformation is unlikely because no difference is accounted for.

Here, I am not referring to differences that are necessarily enabling of conversation, but those that impede and stop conversation as well (indeed a multicultural conversation might well have to run into such breaks and ruptures in order to enter into radical reflection on the presuppositions that foreclose conversation from the start). What place is there within the hermeneutical dialogue for the expression of such a difference that produces a break in common understanding or “epistemic rupture” to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s term (“Reply” 46).

Here, Butler defines difference as a disruptive force, instead of an inherent good, which may very well impede conversation, if not deliberation. Gooding-Williams’ democratic deliberation does not acknowledge disruptive difference because it prioritizes forging common ground. A project centered on forging common ground can only acknowledge differences that promote similarities and harmony. For Butler then, as well as Said, a hermeneutical dialogue of difference must account for the possibility of contesting values because differences that serve the same purposes, and effectively agree, do not pose ideological problems. The question that arises then is what happens to the project of multiculturalism when differences do pose ideological problems?

In this vein, I turn to Talal Asad’s stance on multiculturalism in the United Kingdom, which he posits in response to a conflict between Britain’s office of Home Security and a large group of British Muslims who demanded a governmental ban on Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Asad pinpoints two multicultural projects at play in the government’s response to the demonstrators; the need to communicate the value of immigrants to a British nation and the need to communicate the necessity of immigrants adopting British norms. At first glance, these two projects seem like a picture of multicultural progress. Yet, Asad argues that both reveal; “essential

sentiments and loyalties” (“Rushdie Affair” 458). This is most poignantly exemplified by John Patten’s emphasis on the contributions British Muslim’s have made to ““Britain’s wealth of culture and tradition”” (457). In this sense, Patten posits Britain as “an essence that can be added to by foreigners precisely to the extent that there is an affinity between what they bring and what is essentially here” (458). Here Asad stresses that British Muslims are valued to the extent that what they bring to the table correlates with essentialist British values. This emphasis on shared values interprets both immigrant and British identities as essences, which simplifies the complexity of living in a society with multiple cultures. Instead of any sort of physical threat, since the group of Muslims did not destroy property or commit violent acts, what mattered more to the government was an emotionally “perceived threat to a particular ideological structure, a cultural hierarchy organized around an essential *Englishness*, which defines *British* identity” (457, 462). In other words, the Rushdie affair makes evident an essential British identity fostered in lieu of cultural hegemony, which dictates what and who can be defined as British. In this situation, the concerns of British-Muslim citizens are pushed to the periphery of the nation’s concerns because of a historic opposition to Islam as a religious tradition (462). Not only are they pushed aside but they are also lectured at on how to properly integrate; as if their political engagement and organizing is not enough as a signal of integration.

For Asad, this conflict exemplifies the problem with a model of multiculturalism that makes it a priority to engage with the “practical problems” of dealing with cultural differences in the realm of education and social service policy instead of “an ideological commitment to cultural diversity” (471). The difference in

goals here lies, on one hand, the need for policies in accommodating cultural difference and, on the other, an ideological reconceptualization of community that resists a collapsed notion of a collective “we”. The problem with multiculturalism for Asad, then, is not that it “freezes cultural difference between entire communities, or that it sanctions oppressive customs” but that it “lies in the problematic connection between *learning* about difference and learning to *become* different” (471). The multicultural project of *learning* about difference employs an essentialist analysis of culture that turns the complexity of how cultures operate in actuality into bite-sized reductions that most benefit the state and/or most readily aligns with the dominant group’s cultural articulations.¹⁴ The problem that often arises with such a conception of multiculturalism is an inability to engage with cultural ideas that conflict with a sense of Britishness.

On the other hand, the multicultural project of *becoming* different then means, similar to Butler’s earlier provocation, being open to conflicts between cultural groups who occupy the same space and the radical changes those conflicts might impart on a sense of “Britishness.” What is at stake here is the potential for critical ruptures to a stagnant and outdated construction of identity. As such, Asad concludes that

[t]he frightening thing about the Rushdie affair for the British liberal elite is the existence of political activity by a small population that seeks authority *for its difference in its own historical, religious traditions*. And it does so in a discourse and through institutions that the liberal middle class has itself consecrated (475, emphasis mine).

Therefore, not only does the Rushdie affair makes evident the power of political organizing, but also that when organized, marginalized cultural groups may not always

¹⁴ Both of which were problematized by Appiah, Gooding-Williams, and Butler.

act, in what is considered as, in the best interest of the nation. How the nation responds to these actions and/or demands reveals the extent to which their model of multiculturalism prioritizes the individuals who compose their multicultural demographic.

As we have seen with multiple critiques, multiculturalism often ignores race relations and upon attempting to bring race into conversations about multiculturalism, racial identities are in danger of essentialism. Second multiculturalism is necessarily a national project that determines the boundaries of a nationhood. As such it cannot be understood separated from the state and its power dynamics. Lastly, multiculturalism is promoted and accepted by liberal nations until it actually becomes about the people's whose cultures are being incorporated. When marginalized cultural groups demand political recognition of values that do not correlate with the hegemonic cultural values, and reaches further than a mere recognition of dignity and respect, then multiculturalism seizes to be accepted.

I now turn back to Said, who offers a consolation to the seemingly never-ending process of producing an American identity that encapsulates the multicultural reality of the United States when he states: "Despite its extraordinary cultural diversity, the United States is, and will surely remain, a coherent nation" (Culture and Imperialism xxvi). What does it mean, then, to be a coherent nation keeping in mind the aforementioned critiques? Coherency most immediately translates to a sense of being readily perceptible and understood. A reading of this statement through traditional multiculturalism offers the metaphor of the melting pot or salad in order to make a hybrid American identity coherent. Such a reading offers a coherent nation that

is harmonious and agreeable. On the other hand, contrapuntality reads coherency in a multicultural state by contextualizing its political, historical, and spatial entanglements, which offers a coherent reading of the entanglements between American identities.

As such, depending on how the reader approaches this statement, a reading of coherent nationalism can either offer a resolution of tension or it can resist resolutions and make meaning out of the tensions of difference. In both instances the reader analyzes how to read a coherent multicultural state. However, in the former, limitations are posed in the scope of this coherency, so that all that is perceived is a harmony. In a contrapuntal approach then, one widens the scope and depth of interpretation, to that of spatial realities and politics, so as to allow for both instances of harmony and disruptions. As such, the contrapuntal reader makes coherency amidst and out of these disruptions and entanglements.

Each critique of multiculturalism exposes the hypocrisy of promoting a diverse multicultural nation-state while methodologically encountering difference through the same binary systems that have supposedly been left behind. Moving forward, I place weight on Butler's and Asad's respective critique as they both offer a model of multiculturalism that re-conceptualizes the nation with multicultural realities of hybridity, instead of a multicultural ideal of cohesion.

Multicultural Resolution and Contrapuntal Resistance

Multicultural Resolution of Hybridity

The repercussions of a neo-liberal multicultural nation-state on cultural production and analysis are apparent in Evelyn Alsultany's book *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, where she analyzes positive representations of Middle Eastern characters, predominantly in North American T.V. series, post 9/11. Alsultany argues while these representations seem to humanize Middle Eastern identities, they are actually "simplified complex representations" that perpetuate essentialist tropes and stereotypes, albeit in a regurgitated form. For Alsultany, this has relevance for national projects:

These seemingly positive representations of Arabs and Muslims have helped to form a new kind of racism, one that projects anti-racism and multiculturalism on the surface, but simultaneously produces the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices (Arabs and Muslims 16)

Here, Alsultany is concerned with the same multiculturalism that Asad critiques, which promotes multiculturalism for the sake of incorporating different cultural values that support the hegemonic culture's values. By reading into these popularly accepted positive representations, Alsultany makes it her project to reveal the hypocrisy of multiculturalism that these characters perpetuate.

In a similar project of multiculturalism, Shepard Fairey created three images, in his signature, red, white, and blue color scheme of an Indigenous, Muslim and Black woman in collaboration with The Amplifier Foundation's "We the People" campaign (Amplifier).



Figure 1: *We the People Defend Dignity*



Figure 2: *We the People Are Greater Than Fear*



Figure 3: *We the People Protect Each Other*

Amongst the three, the Muslim woman stands apart from the rest, visually and symbolically. In addition to the symbolic use of colors, the Muslim woman is wearing an American flag as a hijab. This article of clothing encapsulates both her Muslim and American identity, as it is the site of both Islamic and American values. Thus, the hijab effectively posits Muslim and American values as necessarily similar and agreeable. This visual exceptionalism, differentiates the Muslim woman from the Indigenous and Black woman who aren't wearing anything to signify their American identities. The Indigenous woman is represented wearing a shirt with an indigenous styled bird that could be interpreted as bald eagle, which is the U.S. national emblem. However, t-shirts aren't a racial, ethnic or religious item, nor is it the focal point of the woman's image.

Informed by Alsultany, as well as Butler and Asad, I argue that by normalizing Muslim identity through patriotic acts, only Muslims whose Islamic values agree with American values are incorporated into the American identity. This merely perpetuates normative American values without making any room for values that are unable to align with the former. Such an aesthetic re-presentation resolves the tension between

American values and Muslim practices in order to offer a harmonious picture of multiculturalism in the United States.

Unlike the “positive” characters Alsultany critique, which regurgitate the essential interpretations of Orientalist discourse, and the Fairey poster, which undermines Butler’s notion of disruptive difference, Amirpour offers complex characters. Although the characters speak Farsi, and for all intents and purposes are Iranian, U.S. , if not Western, influences are evident in each character. Thus, while Alsultany’s project is to discuss how simplified complex representations fuel neo-liberal agendas, I argue that *A Girl* resists neo-liberal agendas. By producing a cross-cultural film that invokes a hybridity of cultural signifiers, in both images and tropes, Amirpour conceptualizes a space that resists binary definitions. To put these signifiers in conversation with one another, I employ Said’s theory of contrapuntality.

Contrapuntal Resistance of Resolution

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night begins with a disruption that is foreclosed from the viewer. Arash, one of the main characters, stands nonchalant with a James Dean persona, looks around, presumably for any onlookers, and goes into a fenced area. He comes out a few seconds later with a cat. While intriguing, the scene feels odd and out of place for most of the film. Although the cat’s role builds in the film, immediately the content itself is not as important as the metaphor of an inaccessible disruption. The film offers no backstory, and so the audience has no clue where the cat came from, who the cat belonged to, or its quality of life before getting into the hands of Arash. In a film filled with cross-cultural images, this opening scene offers a metaphor of the inaccessibility of clear-cut and visible ties of cultural influence.

Much like Amirpour's resistive film production, Amirpour herself has resisted clear-cut definitions and responses to specific meanings behind her film, especially as they relate to political issues much to the frustration of her interviewers. However, her resistance to speak of politics is not because she does not believe her work to be political. Rather, she resists most often offering totalizing answers which might confine meaning behind her films. Instead Amirpour offers people, music, and films that influence her which are most often in the realm of pop culture. These influences are given that much more weight in relation to being born in U.K and then growing up U.S. as an Iranian immigrant (The Vileck Foundation). For Amirpour, pop culture and films taught her how to be American (The Script Lab). These experiences, in turn, have had an influence on her construction of the setting.

In offering a general response to a common question about the setting, Amirpour once again resists definitive meanings through a discussion of influence: "People are like, 'Why did you set it [*Girl*] in Iran?' Well it's set in my brain and my brain is . . . it's got Iran and it's got America, and it's got California mall country" (VICE Part 2). Instead of answering the question directly, Amirpour instead emphasizes the influence, growing up within the Iranian diaspora situated in the U.S., has had on her creative conception of place. As a result, the constructed setting in *A Girl* relies on cultural signifiers, most prominently, from both North American and Iranian society and culture. Before analyzing these cultural signifiers, I will discuss identity construction within diasporas and its pertinence to the hybrid cultural signifiers in *A Girl*.

In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* Robin Cohen quotes Steven Vertovec's explanation of identity construction in diasporas:

Aesthetic styles, identifications and affinities, dispositions, and behaviors, musical genres, linguistic patterns, moralities, religious practice and other cultural phenomenon are more globalized, cosmopolitan and creolized or "hybrid" than ever before. This is especially the case among youth of transnational communities, whose initial socialization has taken place within the cross-currents of more than one cultural field, and whose ongoing forms of cultural expression and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretized and elaborated from more than one cultural heritage. (qtd. 128)

Here, Vertovec explains how diasporic identities are formed vis-à-vis competing and overlapping cultural signifiers that are both filiative and affiliative in content. This hybridization makes it difficult to trace cultural identity to one specific center. Instead, it follows disjunctive paths that lead up to and against multiple sources. It is at this point of tension, leading towards but not quite fulfilled, that diasporic communities are situated in. To this effect, James Clifford writes, "The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes solidarity and connection *there*. But there is not a single place or an exclusive nation" ("Diasporas" 322). The disjuncture between geography and community creates instances of liminal experiences where identity is contested. These contestations of identity are necessarily related to sharing experiences with two nations, while being neither fully a part of one or the other. This experience is further complicated with the reality of physically residing in one geographic location enclosed within a nation-state whose conception of nationhood may not be permissive of such an in-between experience.

As such, Amirpour's resistance to answering the aforementioned question about setting becomes clearer. When one chooses a setting, it determines the film to that site as a space that holds specific histories, politics, and cultures. However, as she indicates

in an interview with *The New York Times*, Amirpour is not concerned with one specific place but rather a mash-up of at least two known influences. As such she comments, “with this movie, we kind of made our own place that was as Iranian as we are, which is a mash-up of so many things” (“Ana Lily Amirpour’s World”). In creating their own “place,” the world of *Bad City* operates in the realm of the imagination. However, one cannot ignore how specific nation-states and their conception of nationhood inform this imagined landscape. Nor can one ignore the material reality of the film as an aesthetic product which itself is read as situated in a specific spatial context.

These nuances are informative when engaging with the film’s genre. Amirpour categorizes the film as the first Iranian vampire spaghetti western. The notions of an Iranian vampire invokes a twist on an established trope in the Western canon. Furthermore, by adopting the term spaghetti western Amirpour explicitly acknowledges the implicit technicality of constructing a fictional Iranian town and filming it in California.¹⁵ This is to say then, Amirpour constantly references the film’s produced identity with both cross-cultural images and conception of place as influenced by Amirpour’s own filiations and affiliations (*The Script Lab*).

By reading the images produced in *A Girl* as cross-cultural I am reading their cultural signifiers in “constant displacement” (*Cross Cultural Consumption 2*). For David Howes, a cross-cultural paradigm of production and consumption accounts for the “creativity of the consumer” as opposed to the global homogenization paradigm, which assumes that goods, ¹⁶“on entering a culture, will inevitably retain and

¹⁵ Spaghetti westerns are “Westerns or films set in the U.S. ‘old west,’ but made in Italy or by Italians cheaply.”

¹⁶ Whether material or ideological

communicate the values” they originally held (5). The former paradigm invokes a Saidian analysis of cultural hybridity that the latter ignores; the contextualization of cultural production and consumption in “local contexts” and “realities” (5). This contextualization accounts for how people situated in different places approach the product differently as informed by their own set of cultural practices, histories, and class dynamics. In a Saidian sense, while the product may seem to have one purpose and function in the U.S., that one specific instance of consumption cannot account for all the ways the item may be read and interpreted. As such, cross-cultural production and consumption effectively cause “ruptures and deflections, rejections and subversions” to cultures forms (6). Similar to Said’s notion of an uneven topography then, a cross-cultural paradigm invites the necessity of ruptures between intent and consumption of consumer products.

Howes offers the aforementioned analysis to specifically tackle the reality of Western cultural consumption, vis-à-vis material goods by non-Western countries.¹⁷ However, I will be using the term to talk about the production of cross-cultural images as influenced by Amirpour’s diasporic production. Throughout the film, English and Farsi songs are played, as well as music that has Western or Eastern influences. Following the theme of western horror, a costume party is thrown in “Bad City” but Eastern-sounding music is played while people dance like they are dancing to American music. By putting these different components of Iran and the U.S. in conversation with one another, Amirpour comments on the ways cultures and group identities are informed by one another. For instance, the oil pumps present throughout

¹⁷ However, I argue that the same occurs the other way around and even between a Western country with another Western country and a non-Western country with another non-Western country.

the film operate in the historic political consciousness of both the U.S. and Iran. With these global intersections in mind, the absurdity of exclusivity is apparent. On the other hand, the degeneration of cultural specificity is not favorable either. With an understanding of the diasporic influences of the film and the spatial reality of the film's context, I turn back to the scene I opened this essay with.

The Girl herself is a hybrid character influenced by both Iran and the United States. As a vampire, the Girl is situated within the western canon but speaks Farsi and wears a chador which reference Iran and Islam, respectively, as well as in conversation with one another. However, she speaks English words amidst her Farsi, listens to Western music, and invokes pop culture. Furthermore, instead of covering her whole body, she wears the chador partially in a style that can be interpreted as a vampire or superhero cape. This style invokes an implicit resistance to religion which is made explicit when Atti, the prostitute asks her, "Are you religious or something?" The girl responds with a simple, "No," that carries throughout the rest of the film. As such, the chador becomes almost a habit of dress due, most likely due to obligation. Yet, the chador never solely defines her as she cannot be detached from her contradictory actions and habits mentioned above. By referencing both Islamic dress customs as well as the Girl's feminist vigilante actions, vis-à-vis cultural signifiers, Amirpour constructs a character that resists the trope of the repressed Muslim women. Adding skateboard adds another layer to what it then means to be a girl who wears a chador.

Therefore, the scene with the skateboard adds another layer to this contradictory experience the girl's experiences. The scene starts in complete darkness, making inaccessible the Girl's transition into riding the skateboard. As the scene progresses the

audience first sees streetlights, then the street, and eventually the huddle of the Girl in the middle of the screen. In the first few seconds, the viewer can only make out a silhouette reminiscent of a huddled woman in a full-length chador. However, as the Girl skates down the street towards the camera, the viewer makes out her chador billowing in the wind as she clutches its sides. The movement of the girl as well and the chador are produced by the act of riding the skateboard. One cannot read the image without putting the skateboard in conversation with the chador.

When putting the skateboard in conversation with the chador, I argue that their respective origins, American and Iranian, are not lost. In employing a contrapuntal approach, I argue that although the American and Iranian signifiers are distinct, upon coming together and overlapping they make meaning off of each other by sharing and shifting cultural significance. By shifting, I do not mean that, for example, the chador loses its Iranian cultural significance. Rather, by putting the chador and skateboard in conversation with one another, through their simultaneous use by the Girl, the ways that the chador is significant shifts upon and adds to the meaning of the skateboard. Similarly, the significance of the skateboard shifts upon and adds to the meaning of the chador. Thus, in this sharing and shifting, the distinct cultural significance of the chador, as a religious and cultural item, and the skateboard, as a relic of skate culture, is altered but not without recognition.

Upon introducing a skateboard to this character, which represents rebellious youth culture and alternative subcultures, the notion of a traditional, devout, and chaste Muslim woman is eschewed. The movement in the scene, of both the girl and the chador is a metaphor for a sense of freedom and looseness that is only possible because

of the tension between the stereotype of the skateboard and chador. What appears to be a heavy piece of cloth throughout the film, moves and shifts in ways that are not possible when the Girl merely walks. The Girl herself, who moves slowly and methodically throughout the film unless in the act of killing, glides gracefully. As such, the relationship between the chador and skateboard is based on a visual dependence that necessarily relies on where these images originate from and what their origins impart on the other object.

Most importantly, the Girl is seen to be enjoying herself which is evident in when the wide shot transitions into a close-up that positions the viewer below the girl so that the viewer is looking up at her. In this shot a slight smile appears on the Girl which is a rare expression for her. Although slight, this shift in facial expression is critical juxtaposed with the scene directly before, where she scares the little boy into being a “good boy.” Her a frightening tone of voice, sharp incisors, and harsh facial features are all gone by the end of the skateboard scene. This shows how the Girl has a depth in character that goes past her vigilante activities which are most prominent in the film.

After only a couple seconds, the shot goes back to the initial wide shot just at the Girl skates past the camera and her chador encloses the camera, ending the scene with darkness once again. The darkness at the beginning and of the scene encapsulate this scene almost as if it’s own episode. As such, this scene like some others feel displaced because they do not necessarily correlate with the larger narrative in place. And yet, the way this scene pushes the audience’s conceptualization of the aforementioned cultural signifiers is consistent with the overall project of the film.

As an explicitly cross-cultural horror film, *A Girl* comments on anxieties about group membership and belonging through an exilic experience contextualized within a diaspora. In an interview with VICE Ana Lily Amirpour states that all the characters in *A Girl* are lonely. This loneliness plagues everyone involved. Even the Girl herself, who as a monster strikes fear in the hearts of the men of Bad City, is a victim to loneliness. In response to a question about the theme of loneliness in the film Amirpour states: “Really being a human is a singular private internal experience. Like no matter what you are lonely. You just don’t realize it” (VICE Talking to Star). Scenes such as the one with the skateboard function to make apparent the ways in which individuals are connected to the world only to highlight the ways in which systems also contribute to loneliness.

Conclusion

In employing a contrapuntal approach to reading *A Girl* for its tensions as situated in U.S. nationalism and multiculturalism, I argue that even in coming together cultural signifiers stay disjunctive, to some extent, in order to point to how and when they come in conversation with one another. Thus, these cultural signifiers can point towards a culture but they cannot be understood through exclusive and individual understandings of their significance. In other words, it is not that things should no longer be Iranian or American but that when placed side by side they cannot be understood exclusively.

Amirpour resistive film production pushes back on confining nationalisms and reductive models of multiculturalism by offering a film constructed with hybrid aesthetics. The images and a setting operate in an imaginary context and yet has real implications for lived experience. What better way to reflect the cross-cultural hybridity of diasporic experiences by putting contesting cultural signifiers in conversation with one another? What results are images that resist resolution and instead demands further engagement. Such an engagement opens up avenues of reconceptualizing ideological systems, such as multiculturalism, in order to better reflect the lived experience of groups of people who live in multicultural nations.

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