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Apocalypse and the Algorithm:
Muslim Spiritual Cultivation as Critique

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Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic tends to dominate discussions about 2020, in January and February of that year, most people in the world had their minds on other things. I spent that January on a class trip to Israel and the West Bank. We arrived on January 3rd, the same day the United States assassinated Iranian Commander Qasem Soleimani. By January 6th, Iran had threatened a retaliatory strike against Haifa, where we had planned to drive the next morning. That day a storm hit Jerusalem. Strong winds and rains felled trees and caused mudslides, making the now cancelled drive to Haifa impossible in any case. Watching lighting strike the Old City of Jerusalem from my hotel window, the ground bucked like a horse reacting to its rider leading it into a forest fire. Surrounded by violence and injustice, I felt that we human beings, in our acts of domination, had betrayed God, the planet and ourselves. I felt the ground would open up and swallow Jerusalem whole for this betrayal.

A week later, we visited a town called Battir, just a few miles from Jerusalem but part of the occupied West Bank. Under gruesome conditions imposed by Israel, the residents of Battir have maintained a beautiful, serene environment. The week of travel and exposure to the horrors of the occupation had left the class solemn, but walking around the gardens of Battir, we found ourselves laughing and at peace. Our hosts fed us a meal grown entirely in their own home gardens (irrigated by water shared communally by families over generations through the same turn-based system). They showed us their terracing methods, calling each one “a little jannah, a little slice of heaven,” playing on the literal translation of the word jannah to garden, and the word’s common use in Islam to refer to heaven. I called the joy we shared in that garden “life-affirming,” but I had few resources to describe what exactly I felt happened to us.
Two months later, the pandemic hit, and as everyone sought stability and meaning, Shaykh Yasir Fahmy related a hadith to my class to help us: “If the Hour comes while you are planting seeds, and there is a seed in your hand, still plant the seed.” I have thought about this hadith almost daily, ever since then. On one level, it is an assurance that God holds the human being accountable to niyat, or intention, more than outcome. However, the Prophet (pbuh) uses the example of planting seeds, rather than any other more obviously meritorious actions (like performing salat or giving zakat). I understand this hadith to mean that there is inherent virtue in cultivation. This insight strikes me as key for a Muslim today, faced with a world suffering the consequences of late capitalism—climate catastrophe, inadequate response to pandemic, a war-industrial complex profiting from invasion and occupation. Attempts at any fundamental structural change (let alone revolution!) feel as urgent as they do futile. But forget urgency and futility—as long as we live, the seed is in our hand. We must act!

Initially, this insight drove me to study Marxism and other leftist political and cultural theory. As I eventually got know postmodernist thinkers like Baudrillard and Deleuze, certain aspects of their writing seemed to echo classical Islamic thought. Even better, it appeared to me that a Muslim reading of these thinkers could usher in a practical relevance to their ideas that have otherwise been dismissed as lofty, hyper-academic and downright crazy. The ability to put these ideas into action gained all the more importance as summer 2020 brought people out of lockdown to demonstrate against state violence towards Black Americans. Many called for police and prison abolition and Angela Davis’s call for a radical imagination echoed through the streets of America. What is a radical imagination? I used to imagine a world transformed as far away, mediated by many small steps. However, we know now that the world can change in a day. To me, a radical imagination has to do with recognizing the proximity of a better world.
This recognition takes work to cultivate. As Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism*, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” In 2020, Fisher’s book saw a surge in popularity, as many worldwide took up his challenge to see beyond a reality constrained by capitalism. My own independent marathon through theory ended with his other unfinished book, *Acid Communism*. Soon after writing just the introduction to *Acid Communism* in 2017, Fisher took his own life. Despite this tragic background, deep and certain hope runs through pages of the posthumously published introduction. As the pandemic surged and my home state of California caught fire and the police used increasingly violent measures against the protestors, I sometimes felt like the Hour would surely come soon. Either way, I knew that *Acid Communism* felt like a seed in my hand. I wanted to find a *praxis*, an action by which I could plant this seed.

In *Acid Communism*, Fisher gestures towards an embodied and implicit hope that characterized the early 1970s— he claims that it was easier then to imagine a world transformed because, all over the world, people *were* experiencing unprecedented transformations. New shifts in consciousness most obviously track alongside the psychedelic counterculture, where “altered states of consciousness could offer a perception of the systems of power, exploitation and ritual that was more, not less, lucid than ordinary consciousness,” but Fisher emphasizes that “psychedelic experiences were not confined to those who had taken drugs,” calling “mass media… itself a massive experiment in altering consciousness.” He points to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the rise of the Beatles, and finally the Vietnam War as instances where television was the “channel for contagion (Beatlemania!), trauma and hysteria as much as paternalistic messages or commercial huckstering.” Because of mass media, people’s imaginations of the real had to expand to accommodate the new. Anything felt possible.
An awareness of that psychedelic horizon of the new opened “reality” up for critique—“everyday life” could no longer be taken for granted. In fact, once reality is revealed to be constructed and contingent, once it is revealed to be a dream, the urgencies of everyday life look all the more absurd. If reality is all a dream, why not dream a better dream? However, Fisher points out that at this historical juncture, neoliberalism hijacks the momentum in service of capital. Why transform “the world” when you can transform your world? Despite language around freedom and self-fashioning, the consumerism that thrives on this relentless pursuit of desire is necessarily oppressive. Thus, the cruel pseudo-humility of capitalist realism: if I can only be accountable for what I have chosen, and I certainly did not choose this reality, I am not accountable for it. *Acid Communism* is a response to think bigger, think better, think collectively.

This thesis is an attempt to take up the project of acid communism from a Muslim perspective. It is not necessarily a call to do acid, nor to do communism, nor to be Muslim, but rather a call to invigorate our lives from the ground up with a more robust sense of possibility rooted in connection. I argue for a Muslim apocalyptic ethics (rooted in intersubjective networks) that cultivates creative imagination and solidarity even as the Hour approaches. It is a call to see the proximity of a radically different world. This world may be actualized in part by a state, but it also will necessarily be formed in opposition to the powers that the state is constructed to protect. We need institutions to redistribute wealth and respond to ecological collapse, but we cannot bet our ethical lives on the state. As a result, I take on no particular political dogma and instead find inspiration and energy in putting Marxist language in conversation with socialist, anarchist and downright un-labelable views. Very rarely is mass praxis a true reflection of just one theoretical perspective anyways; mostly, we surf the wave as it rises and cannot name it until it crashes down.
In this thesis, I construct a vision of Muslim apocalyptic thinking against one primary villain: the Algorithm. The Algorithm is no single algorithm, nor is it the set of all algorithms (in fact, as we will come to see, some algorithms make for great allies in the struggle against the Algorithm). Rather, the Algorithm is a catch-all term for the structure through which capital dominates today. As the internet continues to revolutionize daily life, but inequality and injustice only become even more deeply entrenched, some have moved beyond the traditional diagnoses of social turmoil as the result of late capitalism, or neoliberalism. Taking some inspiration from Zuboff’s _Surveillance Capitalism_, and Baudrillard’s _Simulacra and Simulation_, I use the word Algorithm to describe the process that not only tracks our information for the sake predicting what we will consume but has done so for long enough that it also constructs the desires it seeks to fulfill. This process it is totalizing: the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2016 masks the true scandal that all politics are algorithmically determined. Tiktok further demonstrates the collapse of the social network into pure algorithmic content engagement, as users rarely scroll through content created by those they follow and instead spend time on the “For You Page,” algorithmically curated to show their eyes what the app knows will keep their attention.

I articulate the confrontation of Muslim apocalyptic thinking against the Algorithm in three parts: politics, ethics, and aesthetics. Each of the three pieces depends on and provides background on the other two. Each piece also has its own register. I take politics as my point of departure; this first chapter presents the context within which I see the need for apocalyptic ethics. Namely, the first chapter presents anarchist experimental politics as a response to the responsibilities facing human beings today in an alarmist, polemic approach. However, I also concede that these politics alone lack grounding, demonstrating the need for a more detailed account of the kind of ethics that could bring these political views to life.
This brings us to the second chapter, on ethics, which is really the academic heart of the project. Here, I build on Judith Butler’s “decentered ethic” and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “simulation” to present a Muslim theory of ethical subject-formation as critique. Using this model, I then consider what exactly Muslim critique looks like. To develop God-consciousness into an actionable ethical orientation, Anna Gade’s *Muslim Environmentalisms* and Laura Marks’ *Infinity and Enfoldment* both come in handy. Gade’s emphasis on reconstructing Muslim “environmentalism” as a bundle of ethical commitments serves as my foundation for apocalyptic ethics. From Marks, I consider algorithmically mediated network politics as the basis for ethical activity within the Algorithm. Altogether, I find that that each and every human being’s inevitable presence on the Day of Judgement provides a system of relationships alternative to the calculations of the Algorithm. This system constitutes what I call apocalyptic ethics.

Finally, I develop the aesthetic reading of the argument for apocalyptic thinking. What kinds of art suit the moment? This prompts an exploration of psychedelic consciousness-alteration, the Islamic reading of new media art, a Deleuzian reading of Rumi, and Surrealism through ibn Arabi. Further, based on my own understanding of the aesthetic dimensions of apocalyptic thinking, I have included two “freak outs,” as breaks between the chapters. These freak outs intend to honor the bold and poetic ways many of the sources I engage wrote. Maybe the best ideas are hidden in the freakiest articulations.

Ultimately, I take as my primary questions: what could “being in the world but not of it” mean for a Muslim in *this* world? Can we ground some sort of Muslim “leftism,” a stance critical of capital and the state, within the tradition rather than importing an “anarchism” or “communism” into Islam? Can we have fun doing it?
1. Experimental Politics

We cannot let the world-transformative power of *taqwa* be shackled by individualism masquerading as mysticism. We cannot reduce *taqwa* to a mere fear of God.

Some suggest an alternative translation, “God-consciousness,” based on the Prophet Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) call to believers to worship as if they can see God—and if they cannot see God, to know that He sees them.¹ I propose this kind of expanded notion of *taqwa* as the foundation for a Muslim emancipatory politics. If we are to confront the challenges posed by the Algorithm—my name for the complex of tyrannies behind global injustice and ecological devastation—we must bring the spiritual logic of God-consciousness beyond the realm of personal conduct during worship and into a structural analysis of the world today.

The widespread understanding of *taqwa* as a kind of fear may not be baseless, but our first step must be to modify it. Fear, in the English language, is an awareness of a threat or danger. Fear is affective, a sometimes-pre-cognitive impulse for self-preservation in the face of damaging consequences. When we say to have *taqwa* means to fear God, we often mean that to truly recognize His power and presence as absolute, we must act with constant awareness of the consequences God can assign us for our actions. However, we human beings never do act alone, nor do we face consequences alone. We are born always-already embedded in systems of reciprocity we can never fully comprehend, systems comprised of other people, but also plants and animals and minerals. We are not created alone, and if we do live in fear, we must not fear for ourselves alone.

¹ Much of the framework of my argument, including this quote from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) comes from *Hadith Jibreel*, a scriptural narration of a conversation between the Prophet and the angel Gabriel that lays out the most fundamental concepts in Islam.
However, once we move beyond the view of creation as a discrete and finite set of individual subjects, fear becomes an insufficient understanding of *taqwa* entirely. We see that fundamental to Islamic cosmology is the concept of *shahadah*, or witness. One becomes a Muslim by publicly bearing witness to *tahwid*, the unity of God. Bearing witness is more than asserting belief; the difference is epistemic. A witness reports what he sees, while a believer affirms his conviction in what others may not see. Belief is a necessary but insufficient piece of witness. Of course, God Himself is unseen, and unseeable, even to prophets. So, what do we make of the Islamic obligation to bear witness?

Witness is a struggle we must engage in. Our ability to know God through His creation is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Though *tahwid* has been interpreted in a variety of ways, I favor *tahwid* in the largest sense, that the unity of God includes but is not limited to all of creation, that the material world includes parts of the whole, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and thus the conclusion that in all discrete forms of creation we can witness aspects of God, which taken together gesture towards the whole oneness of God. We, creation, coming to know God, are a tiny piece of how God knows Himself. The distinction between the parts and the whole has also been traditionally understood as the difference between contingent or conditional existents and the necessary existent. Here, we arrive at my first proposition: in being called to cultivate *taqwa*, understood as consciousness of God’s *tahwid*, we are being called to recognize that we are contingent beings, part of something infinitely larger than ourselves. The cultivation of *taqwa* can include “Sufi” methods toward pure union with God—however even *fanaa*, or ego death in union with God, is inherently temporary. As long as our body lives, *taqwa* implicates our relationships with the rest of creation.

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2 This is based on ibn Sina’s system of modal logic
Further, in the Quran, God tells us all things are in a constant state of worship towards him—even in a person who does not consciously worship, his atoms individually are in constant remembrance of God. So, *taqwa* is a consciousness of this constant submission to God. Fear, then, is a far from adequate translation. To cultivate *taqwa* is to not to live in fear, but to act with an awareness of *tahhid*. If the ultimate purpose of creation is submission to God, then any act of domination is an affront to God. Unjust acts come from a refusal or inability to see the signatures of God upon the face of the oppressed beings and hear their prayers. Hence, my second proposition: *taqwa* demands intervention against injustice.

Next, we must consider where consciousness resides. Here, we turn to Islam’s spiritual anatomy, where human consciousness is comprised of *nafs, qalb, ruh, and aql*. The *nafs*, or lower material self has a faculty for vice and virtue. The *qalb* is the heart, which has the faculty for character. Some have referred to true worshipper’s heart as the throne upon which only God sits. Disciplined cultivation of character purifies the heart. *Ruh* is the soul, the hidden but uncorrupted spark of life animating all things, and *aql* is the mind, our faculty for reason, with the potential for good. To cultivate *taqwa*, one must orient all these things toward unity.

Further, the three dimensions that comprise Islam (*islam, iman, and ihsaan*) can be interpreted on these terms. Here, *islam* refers to the external submission to God’s will in practice, like acts of worship. *Iman* refers to a more internal faith in God, and His presence in the heart and mind, developed through *islam*. *Ihsaan* goes even deeper, referring to a commitment to

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3 This understanding of all of creation as in a state of worship was most famously articulated in ibn Arabi’s exegeses of the Quran. Seyyed Hossein Nasr points to ibn Arabi’s reading of this verse in particular: “The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him and there is not a thing but glorifies His Praise. But you understand not their glorification. Truly, He is Ever Forbearing, Oft-Forgiving” (al-Isra’ 17:44)

4 My understanding of the spiritual anatomy comes from al Ghazali’s *Revival of Religion's Sciences*.

5 From *Hadith Jibreel*, see first footnote.
excellence in worship, to worship God like one can see him, and witness God absolutely in every reality, and thus to let all acts become acts of worship, to pursue an excellence that permeates the entire being—*taqwa*.

Taken together, *tahwid*, the spiritual anatomy, and the three levels to Islam ought to deepen and strengthen our conception of *taqwa*, beyond just fear of God. Thus, my final proposition: if we cultivate *taqwa* through trying to make our every action an act of worship, then dedication to a *taqwa* provides a robust basis for a contemporary Islamic emancipatory politics, urging us toward action.

Injustices in the contemporary world lean on one another in an interconnected web I call the Algorithm: rampant and escalating ecological damage disproportionately impacts the poor, but instead of doing anything, American politicians who own shares in the defense industry and fossil fuel industry use the largest military on the planet to protect their own financial interests, which has contributed to decades-long periods of instability in multiple regions worldwide, which in turn has created all the more opportunities for the defense industry to cash in on imperialist violence. All the while, an oligopoly of technology and media corporations capitalize on culture wars, profiting off of the advertising and data collection that comes from polarizing a people through advanced algorithms. Despite the widespread violence triggered by this polarization, no political bloc has seriously attempted to put limits on their power. As technology advances, we are given no real assurance that innovations serve the public good—in fact, corporations have developed ways to make sure that their own profit-maximization is widely seen as the public good.

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6 I first learned of this connection between *ihsaan*, or excellence, and *taqwa*, or God-consciousness, in a sermon by Shayk Yasir Fahmy, and I lean on some of his vocabulary (as I recall it) in this section.
This non-exhaustive web of contemporary woes, this Algorithm, the technologically enhanced system of coercive consumerism without a face, eludes serious confrontation because each particular instance of cruelty hides behind the rest when addressed by name, like a child with stage fright in a chorus. To really single one issue out, acknowledge all its intersections but really just target a particular manifestation, takes so much effort and energy that whatever momentum remains can be crushed quickly and easily. We need resources for a long-run commitment to hope and connection. For too long has taqwa been reduced to a fearful obedience, and tahwid relegated to the ambitions of an ascetic domesticated mysticism. It is time we let these concepts guide us to transform the world for the better. My three propositions constitute one broad, flexible basis for a Muslim emancipatory politics.

Consider Friday prayer, where kings prayed next to commoners, and now presidents pray next to their constituents. While the imam (prayer leader) is often the most learned in the community and paid for their time, there is no requirement for formal ordination; anyone can lead prayer. When praying together, we stand side by side, and when we sit on the ground to listen to the imam speak, all are brought to the same level. This practice is an islam, an external act of submission, that cultivates iman or faith in the egalitarian impulse within tahwid. To take this implied theological assertion of human equality before God and let it permeate life outside the mosque would be committing to this value at the level of ihsaan, the level that directly cultivates taqwa. In this instance, the rejection of social hierarchy in acts of worship means a rejection of worldly hierarchy in all political acts. Like those who have developed an “ontological anarchism” inspired by Sufism, I see no value in the utopian ends of revolution but find existential stakes in insurrection, the stand against coercive authority. However, I am not a complete antinomian: ethical politics requires collaboration, which might take some rules.
Our commitment to justice need not insist on institutional frameworks or a lack thereof, but should rather meet the status quo where is, and experiment with ways to make it better, even if that means tearing it all down. The primary confrontation here must be to reduce the power of large corporations— if not to dismantle and destroy them entirely. No other force sits as close to the root of global corruption, mass dehumanization and disenfranchisement.

The ecological and political manifestations of taqwa intertwine: God-consciousness, rooted in recognizing the contingency of our systems and ourselves, should motivate imaginative approaches to developing new modes of production and consumption that afford dignity to the human and non-human beings involved. A full commitment to taqwa requires that we as human beings embrace the paradox of releasing dominion over the rest of creation and still holding tightly to our responsibility to maintain balance and reduce degradation. We must bear witness that creation is a divine, unified unfolding. We must extend our consciousness to attend to the needs of the non-human—the plant, the animal, even the geological formation. This argument isn’t new, but the thrust of our political paradigm must push us beyond existing “Muslim ecotheology” and into a critical analysis of the historical and structural causes of environmental destruction, climate change and mass extinctions.

My three propositions reflect the political logic of God-consciousness:

1. *Taqwa*, understood as consciousness of true Unity, reminds us that we are contingent, interrelated beings.
2. Awareness of our contingency implicates us in the world around us, so taqwa demands intervention against injustice.
3. *Taqwa*, a collective commitment against injustice, then implies the need for Muslim emancipatory politics a vessel for ethical action.
By calling for an expanded notion of taqwa as the basis for Muslim emancipatory politics, I have left open the question of who and what needs emancipation. This is because, above all, a political paradigm today needs to be flexible, keeping up with an ever-changing current of disruptive technologies and global crises while in confrontation old power maintaining itself in new ways. Right now, those engaged in that struggle must look to improving material conditions for life worldwide, following the momentum of movements, but always allowing a critical distance and a willingness to change course when something isn’t working. The taqwa-based framework involves a heightened level of reflexiveness, requiring the aql to look outward at what is possible, while the qalb keeps its focus on what is necessary. This dynamic creative capacity perfectly suits a world where our confidence in our ability to predict what the world looks like a year from now, much less ten, has completely diminished. The most we can ask for from a Muslim political paradigm is to ground the pursuit of justice in a framework that can handle change. One valid critique of this experimental and flexible approach is that it lacks ethical grounding, taking “injustice” as an a priori situation to respond to. In the next chapter, I develop an ethical paradigm upon which we can ground the intersubjectivity implied in my first proposition, the intervention implied in the second, and the collectivity implied in the third. This discussion uses the final accounting on the Day of Judgment as a counter-criterion to the calculations of the Algorithm. As Muslims, our fundamental grounding as a community will always be in the shahadah, a shared bearing of witness to unity kept alive through taqwa.
yes, we have heard it all before,
but what’s old news when i’m eating analog clocks out of a cereal bowl? yes, a revolution is circular but what’s another go round anyways?
nobody wins on a rollercoaster. this rubber tire turns slips and skids toward Judgement Day.

heraan or the Aporia or Abraham’s silence or “fear and trembling”
because awe is an assemblage: hope-fear-wonder bound together by two numinous strings:
the present and the rupture of horizontal time
“jump in the line! rock your body in time!” leap in faith! strive in faith!

“here is the rose! dance here!”
oh that was the rose? we should have danced there!
is anybody else growing roses?
Zulfiqar could vanquish any enemy except the one who spat at the face of the one who held him

parishaan or the atom bomb or Mujnoon’s hair or scattered and subatomic
“lover lover lover lover lover lover lover come back to me”
even the fire is green and the children are changing the rules in the middle of the game
do you know how your parents met?
when sky saw sea and said “what now?”

“Adam raised a Cain” so why can’t i?
in California they’re still saying timshel
and when the floods come our gardens will make the water smell good

SPLIT THE ATOM IN THE MIND
TIME FOR A ROSE SCENTED APOCALYPSE
for all the ripples, there is one wave:
CREATION SURGES BACK TO OUR CREATOR
every birth GENESIS every death QIYAMAT
2. Apocalyptic Ethics

In this chapter, I build an apocalyptic basis for ethics by merging Muslim thought with postmodern and poststructuralist thought. Taking Jannah, the garden of paradise, as our ultimate end, I first refine Judith Butler’s intersubjective basis for ethics, and with some help from Jean Baudrillard’s ideas, come up with a Muslim presentation of subject-formation. Then, I take on the task of operationalizing that theory of subject-formation as critique. This requires an analysis of subjectivity in relation to the Algorithm. To this end, the work of Laura Marks helps us think in terms of networks. From there we can finally get to the heart of the matter: building on the work of Anna Gade in Muslim Environmentalisms, I arrive at apocalyptic ethics as a grounding for the politics presented in the prior chapter and aesthetics presented in the next.

The Kingdom, The Bureaucracy, The Garden

Imagine the “kingdom of heaven”. Centuries of art and popular media conspire to create a standard mental picture: a large, gated castle on a cloud, inside which lie pleasures known and unknown. Somewhere in that castle, there may be a throne for God, and a divine court full of angels, saints, and notable figures. The space might be Olympian in some ways, and Gothic in others. Above all, the divinity of the space of heaven is communicated through gestures toward human royalty, wealth, and abundance.

Now imagine the “afterlife”. Newer media paint an alternative picture to the kingdom. Some depictions avoid the concept of heaven entirely, in favor of a bureaucratic system of souls in transit—Pixar’s 2020 film Soul depicts a cosmological destination called the “Great Beyond,” where a “soul counter” receives newly dead souls. NBC’s television series “The Good Place” (2016-2020) similarly eschews the word heaven in favor of the eponymous “Good Place” and a “Bad Place”. In “The Good Place,” no singular God makes decisions about the destination of
people’s souls after death. Rather, a quantitative system measures the ethical merit of their lives and assigns them to the Good or Bad Place. The agents of the afterlife include “demons” and a “judge,” but the costume and set design reinforce the idea that these figures simply work in a system beyond their own control. At no point in the series is there any reference to a God. Examples of this kind of depiction of the afterlife abound, even when merged with traditional depictions of heaven, like TBS’s “Miracle Workers” (2019-) which depicts a “Department of Angel Resources”. In contrast with the tropes of a “kingdom of heaven,” we can call this aesthetic pattern the “office of the afterlife.”

On a shallow level, the office of the afterlife trope probably comes from a confluence of factors: secular avoidance of religious specificity in light-hearted entertainment, the irony of locating transcendence in the mundane and menial, and perhaps a skepticism toward authority projected toward the heavens. While these factors might sufficiently explain the general trope, when put side-by-side with the kingdom of heaven, the contrast can be read on a deeper level. Clearly, the two aesthetic presentations of “heavens” reflect underlying cultural assumptions and anxieties. The shift from one aesthetic paradigm to another can be read along ethical and political lines that intertwine. I do not suggest an absolute teleology here; rather, the trend of depicting the afterlife as an office, however temporary, suggests that the political and ethical paradigms of the office resonate better with artists and their audiences.

A brief look at the underbelly of each aesthetic trope: in the case of the kingdom of heaven, the human being is conceived of as a royal subject. Their being is contingent on recognition from the king—God—and so political subjectivity depends entirely on the authority of the throne. Royal authority in this model is, to borrow Max Weber’s terminology, “traditional authority”—it is an authority based on the “eternal yesterday,” the mores sanctified by
inheritance over time. The resulting ethical side to this paradigm is divine command. The kingdom of heaven is God’s domain, so to enter, one must follow His rules.

The office of the afterlife suggests a different political and ethical vision entirely. The human being in this paradigm is conceived as part of the system that grants recognition. Instead of being a royal subject, the human soul is an object to be managed by an impersonal bureaucracy. This bureaucracy holds what Weber calls “rational” authority, where the delegation of functions to interdependent agents creates clear roles. This rationality extends into a utilitarian system of ethics, where the greatest good for the greatest number of people is the primary concern of moral behavior. “Good,” from this perspective, can in some ways be measured through a system of quantitative comparisons. Especially because of the pseudo-participatory nature of sovereignty in this view, we can also see this image as a response to the world that gave rise to the Algorithm, the coercive system of lifeless calculation with mechanical agency that hovers over networks and relationships, digital and material.

Now, imagine the “garden of paradise”. For Muslims, this idiom is familiar—the Quranic word we most commonly translate to “heaven” is Jannah, which literally means “garden”. It is a shortened form of Jannat-ul-Firdaus, the garden of paradise. The Quran, in Sura 88, verses 10-16, describes heaven as “a lofty Garden… Therein lies a flowing spring, therein are raised couches, goblets placed, cushions arrayed, and carpets spread.” Like the visual media that flesh out the kingdom of heaven and the office of the afterlife, Muslims throughout history have of course had ample experience with gardens. The description of heaven provided in the Quran goes beyond the visual, engaging all senses.

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7 Weber, “Politics as Vocation”  
8 Seyyed Hossein Nasr. “The Study Quran.” All my references to Quran come from this translation.
As the images of the kingdom and the office loosely mapped onto political-ethical paradigms, the images of the garden come with ethics and politics of their own. Two possible readings emerge from an interrogation of the garden as a paradigm. The first recognizes that lavish gardens can be associated with royalty and worldly wealth. On this reading, the garden is hardly different from the kingdom of heaven. Divine authority mirrors real world authority, as elite status demonstrates itself through the abundance of the garden. However, the existence of public gardens and private courtyards in the homes of common people suggest a different political-ethical reading of the garden. Whether or not this paradigm has been attached to the garden in the past, I argue that this paradigm best meets our moment. This chapter is an attempt to flesh out the ethical content of such a paradigm.

**Garden-Variety Subjects**

The primary imaginary agents of a garden are not its owners, but gardeners who *tend* to it. Their presence is asserted through cultivation, and if the garden bears fruit, the garden then tends to the gardener. Rather than a system of royal subjectivity, or rational objectivity, the garden gestures towards *intersubjectivity*, an ever-shifting sense of the subject, always contingent on the beings in relationship with the subject. I use intersubjectivity in the sense outlined by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, where she argues that morality depends upon an “I” always implicated in a social temporality that “exceeds its own capacities for narration,” primarily the capacity to provide an account of its own emergence. In telling a narrative, the “I” assumes it addresses another, so in narration—in the “I” itself—this other is always present, as well as the norms that facilitate communication. As a result, one can never be fully known, or

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“centered” in a comprehensive identity, which leads Butler to offer a “decentered ethic” based in desire to know the other. This decentered ethic recognizes the limitations of the self and the reality of the other within the “I,” and invites a posture of perpetual curiosity, humility, and generosity towards the other, never reducing the other to a strict identity.

Butler’s decentered ethic could invite a few objections. That morality depends on the “I” may make some nervous about crude moral relativism. It might even ring as an ego-centric or anthropocentric presentation of ethics. To the first objection, it is true that in common language, deeming observations “subjective” and “relative” tends to foreclose ethical discernment. However, Judith Butler flips this reading of relativity on its head: that we each have an “I,” and that each “I” is partially formed in relation to its immediate context becomes an “indispensable resource for ethics,” as “we are bound to each other by what differentiates us, namely, our singularity.”¹⁰ Our subjectivity itself necessitates moral deliberation.

The latter two questions of whether this vision of ethics is ego-centric (undermining moral resources outside of “selfhood”), or anthropocentric (insufficient in its capacity to recognize ethical content in our relationships with non-humans) inspire my exploration and enhancements that follow this chapter. With Butler’s presentation of subject-formation as my point of departure, I build towards an apocalyptic conception of ethics for today.

In Butler’s reading of Foucault’s conception of subject-formation, the subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, and norms. This set is determined by the “regime of truth” that offers the terms that make self-recognition possible. This means that any relation to the regime of truth is a relation to the self; to question the regime of truth is to question the self, a move in which the subject risks unrecognizability. For Foucault, and for Butler, the other isn’t

¹⁰ Ibid. 34, 40.
just a singularity (like another person), but also the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition—but Butler emphasizes that norms must already be in place for recognition to become possible. This is where she starts to differ from Foucault: whereas Foucault sees a regime of truth questioned when “I” cannot recognize myself, Butler writes that “‘I’ submit to a norm of recognition when I offer recognition to you.”\footnote{Ibid. 26.} Though I present a different account of subject-formation, the idea that recognition implies submission to some regime of truth is helpful. The social dimension of normativity governing recognition today is remarkably reflexive. To understand subject-formation in relation to the Algorithm, I must first present Baudrillard’s concept of “simulation.” This leads me to a Muslim conception of subject-formation, articulated in terms of spiritual anatomy.

For Baudrillard, the idea that we live within simulation is far from science fiction, rooted instead in his break from Marxist theory. Marx lays out two forms of value, use value (intrinsic value based on function the object physically performs) and exchange value (value society places on the object, often based on a market). For Marx, exchange value opens the door to commodity fetishism where the desire for an object comes from its social position rather than from its intrinsic value to the human being. Baudrillard adds to this distinction a third category of value that he calls sign value. For Baudrillard, sign value comes from the way an object is situated in a system of objects. Writing in the 1950’s, he suggests as an example that by committing to a brand of washer-dryer, fridge and microwave consumers communicate something to other people and even to themselves, an identity both chosen and contingent. The way objects relate to one another imbues each object with layers of interrelated meaning. Apple uses this to its advantage, when a text from Apple device comes to an iPhone in blue, and a text from a non-Apple device
comes to an iPhone in green. Sign value can be explicitly pointed to that way (“Official NBA Merchandise”), but Baudrillard sees it as third layer in the value of any commodity. Baudrillard refers to the whole layer of sign value as “the code,” the thing that creates and maintains the whole system of exchange and value below it. Like in the Matrix, the code is the basis of the simulation.

Baudrillard argues that we are beings of excess, that we all have an urge within us to break from what the code calculates we value. Symbolic exchange, like ritual and gift-giving, is our answer, where value can be incalculable and in one’s own control. The only way he sees out of simulation is to be “like the sun,” a source of pure, incalculable energy, endowing everything with meaning, and neither receiving nor hoping to receive anything in return, but doesn’t flesh out how one would achieve that. Here, Islam helps us move forward.

First, the simulation can be reimagined through *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsaan*. Muslims recognize the material world as a temporary contingency, and God as the only necessary existent. Our actions are endowed with social and spiritual meaning—our souls exist beyond our lives on Earth, and yet we will be held accountable for our lives on Earth. On this view, *islam* involves acting with an awareness of the consequences of our conduct within “the Matrix,” the social world. *Iman* involves “seeing the code,” an awareness that our actions occur within “the Matrix” but we exist outside of it. *Ihsaan* involves seeing beyond the “code,” aiming to see God absolutely in every reality. Islam’s spiritual logic of surrender translates into an acceptance that we have responsibilities within and without the world of simulation, as God endows everything with ultimate meaning in both. Where *islam* dictates how we move through the simulation, and *iman* dictates how we think and feel through it, *ihsaan* unifies the internal and external in an excellence that permeates the entire being. In this condition of excellence, the heart constantly
witnesses the creator through creation, striving for *taqwa*, a constant awareness of God. *Taqwa* is how we become “like the sun,” understanding our place in this world to come with material responsibilities, but filled with incalculable love and barely communicable meaning. *Ihsaan* is Neo returning to the Matrix with certainty that the being that he is exists beyond what he experiences.

Baudrillard doesn’t say so, but his presentation of simulation can be taken as a theory of subject-formation, as we get to know ourselves and express ourselves to others through what we consume. In terms of Islam’s conception of a “self,” the *nafs* or base, material self is most sensitive to social forces, filled with desire. However, our *qulb*, or heart, can feel our *ruh* or soul like light trying to burst into this reality. Our *aql*, or mind, must make sense of these dual realities, inside and outside of the simulation. For many theorists, “religion” is just one of many social constructs that happen to form people. However, given our Islamic conception of simulation, we can recognize Islam both inside and outside the arena of “subject formation.” Islam exists in the social sphere, within the simulation, and thus obviously impacts consumption and identity. Identity is shot through with temporary contingencies, the conditions of the simulation, and thus Islam, alongside the state, and the rest of the culture, is part of subject formation. However, where the simulation shapes the *aql* by way of the *nafs*, Islam aligns the *nafsi* self with the *ruh*, by way of *islam*, letting that light from beyond the material world shine out.

In recognizing the social needs of material reality but interpreting reality as something that includes more than just materiality, a Muslim reading of Baudrillard endows his ideas with a more robust sense of ethical responsibility. However, our model thus far merely gestures to Islam as ushering some ethics into the process of self-making by way of *islam*. We must be more
specific as to what those ethics are, to assure that they can be observed in a living way, as in morality, politics, and aesthetics. Crucially, for Foucault and Butler, self-making is also a process of critique. For both, knowing we can create ourselves intentionally through our relationship with our context means that our differentiation or adoption of norms is an implicit statement about those norms. Self-making as critique “exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all.”

In what follows, I take our loose sense of Muslim subject-formation and bring it more clearly into conversation with the ethical demands of critique. While simulation was a good first step for figuring out the context in which subject-formation occurs, the model needs updates. Simulation disguises the absence of a coherent material reality behind a conception of reality determined by media and consumption by appropriating all language for reality. The Algorithm goes on to offer a participatory vision of the simulation, the inevitable merger of the self with the self-image through the internet, the promise that surrendering our information to corporate and state actors will empower us and improve our lives. The Algorithm includes but is not limited to what Baudrillard conceived of as simulation and lends itself to thinking in terms of networks. To further refine our idea of subject-formation, we must look to network politics.

Network Instability and Apocalyptic Accounting

In her book Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art, Laura Marks observes the dual nature of network politics. Citing both Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze, she points out that “in our time of self-organizing networks, power is distributed, surveillance is omnipresent, and the notion of resistance is hopelessly outdated.”

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12 Ibid. 17.
13 Marks. 144.
elaboration, Marks seems to describe the conditions from which the office of the afterlife emerges as a salient metaphor:

The twentieth century witnessed mass mobilizations of people in industry, in warfare, as refugees, and in art: arrays of individuals all rendered the same. People, or ‘dividuals;’ as Deleuze called the newly manipulable subjects of capitalism, became points on vast graphs of power. The networked dividual is neither free nor schizophrenic (the psychic state Deleuze and Guattari once suggested was most liberated) but modulated…We are dividuals insofar as our actions are the effects of information, showing that we are points in a large drawing, a mass ornament… Mass ornament continues to describe the algorithmic manipulation of people in digital networks.14

The interpretation of action as an “effect of information” forecloses self-formation as critique! This is how the “algorithmic manipulation of people in digital networks” undermines qualitative, discursive ethics in favor utilitarian calculation! However, Marks also sees the possibility of networks as the means of grassroots movements (even as it is a means to surveil those movements). While not necessary liberating nor oppressing people, networks “create the conditions for a new mode of sovereignty. ”15

This mode of sovereignty has its own reading of the subject. Marks argues that “networks disperse control and organize subjectivity not in depth but at the surface, for it is our surfaces that interact and interface with others,” so “in networks we are not stable identities but volatile nodes.”16 Networks, then, dissolve subjectivity at the same time that they reinforce connectivity. This dynamic vision of the subject—the node in flux—centers the dyadic relationship between self and other that Butler brought to our attention, where the other includes the social field in which the relation sits. The instability of the node, by virtue of its connection, accommodates a merger of Marks’ presentation of network subjectivity with Butler’s decentered ethic. In a

14 Ibid. 148.
15 Ibid. 145.
16 Ibid. 145.
constantly shifting sea of relations, we must constantly interpret our “I,” what it stands for and where it came from. Intersubjectivity locates the node as producing and produced by its relations. Of course, the social field is large, and this interpretation of the subject-as-node mostly reveals how the Algorithm coercively determines much of what the node is permitted to recognize itself as.

This presentation of subject-formation also accommodates our emphasis on self-making as critique; in fact, it deepens it. For Marks, if “protocol is the architecture of networks, then critical politics needs to focus on the protocol—a system of relationships… in which information and materiality are inextricable.”17 In our Baudrillard-inspired view of subject formation, the nafs shapes the trajectory of the aql by presenting it with immediate desires. These desires are the code of the simulation, the information collected and generated by the Algorithm. However, recall that the aql, by way of islam, can unify the subject around the ruh. On this view, ethical self-making involves forging “relations that are transformative and resistant and that disrupt the homogeneity of information with the irreducible particularity of the universe.”18 Despite the coercive power the Algorithm, we do build ourselves through our relationships, and we can build networks with “potential to diffuse individual subjectivity into extended social actions.”19 So, finally, we arrive at the most important question of this thesis: what kind of relationships constitute critical self-making from a Muslim perspective? I argue that our inevitable presence on the Day of Judgement provides a system of relationships alternative to the calculations of the Algorithm. This system constitutes what I call apocalyptic ethics.

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17 Ibid. 147.
18 Ibid. 148.
19 Ibid. 148.
I take my notion of apocalyptic ethics from Anna Gade’s book *Muslim Environmentalisms*, in which she argues against importing Romantic and modern notions of environmentalism wholesale into readings of Muslim thought for the sake of cherry-picking an ecotheology out of Quran verses and hadith that mention trees or water. Rather than approach Muslim sources with an *a priori* notion of what the environment is, she suggests Muslim environmentalism to look more like a bundle of ethical commitments. While she mostly explores what these commitments look like through her field work, her reading of Muslim eschatology stands out for our purposes. She notes that “Muslim worldviews have had a notion of crisis embedded in their eschatological reality from the start as an ongoing ethical calculus, not the projection of an ultimate collapse into oblivion.”\(^{20}\) Despite the temporal location of accounting at the end of time, “the idea of final accounting (*hisab*)… continually rescales the ultimate human consequences into its factors in the moral present.” This calculation of deeds and their merits stands opposed to the Algorithm and its mathematics of desire and dictates the responsible formation of relationships within the network. As Gade notes, the “Qur’anic ontology of processes of creation, destruction, and recreation…orients humans’ ethical action clearly and temporally via-à-vis other creatures,” so an *aql* attuned to *islam* takes on ethical self-fashioning in building responsible and caring relationships with creation.

Gade’s reading of apocalyptic ethics has more to offer for our theory of subject-formation. Because “humans, while part of creation, also stand out from it by virtue of being called to account for their care of the world (*sunnat Allah*) and of others (*hablun min al-nas)*,” we must refine Judith Butler’s narrative basis of the “I,” the “I” that gives an account of itself, to mention that in God’s final accounting, our material body speaks for itself about its deeds.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Gade. 116.

\(^{21}\) Quran 36:65
system of subject-formation we have built locates ethics in the social world, but God’s final accounting holds us to our body and its deeds. As the “I” must continuously form itself relative to its relations, its relationship with God grounds it in the material impact of its actions. God’s final accounting can be understood as a criterion through which we temper the qualities of our relationships, and thus a guide for building the “I”.

In the introduction, I considered the paraphrased hadith, that “if the Hour comes while you are planting seeds, and there is a seed in your hand, still plant the seed.” In her reading of this hadith, Gade argues that “Qur’anically, this teaching is sensible insofar as the rationale to plant the tree would not even be in spite of the impending coming of Judgment Day, not ‘hoping’ in its denial, but for the sake of that very determination itself.”

It is this sense of apocalypse that underscores apocalyptic ethics, the inclination to do right by creation not in spite of but because of its inevitable destruction. Taken all together—everything from Butler, Baudrillard, Marks, and Gade—we can present one account of subject-formation as critique: each human being is created, and just as all creation heads toward destruction, so too all human beings will die. Through discourse, we come to have a sense of self, an “I” that can attempt to give an account of itself to others. We happen to live in a context where a totalizing system—the Algorithm—determines the content of our lives, guiding our understanding of reality and ourselves towards specific consumer and political behaviors. This Algorithm is a participatory network that collects our information in order to perform computations around our desires. From the view of the Algorithm, the subject is a node in constant flux. However, our aql provides the capacity for ethical self-fashioning as critique. By choosing its relationships, and how to relate,

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22 Gade. 114.
the subject has the capacity to operate ethically within the network it critiques, and within which it is continuously being formed.

That our networks of care extend past the human being is especially critical as climate change poses some of the most urgent ethical and political questions of our day. Gade writes that “changing signs in the phenomenal world, certain and unknowable, point to ethical and environmental relationships and practices in the present moment that extend across space, time, and species,” as we build relationships with “creatures (makhluq)” that “include even resources that are used instrumentally, with this relational use doubling as a sign of God.”23 While we can grant that any Qur’anic system of environmental justice is anthropocentric— “insofar as it is humans (and jinn) who are tested”—Gade contents that “it is they who may be the only ones who need to take the test by virtue of an exceptional deficiency, compared to the rest of creation, which worships Allah as its essential character.”24 The view of creation as in a constant state of worship helps us imagine the relationship with the non-human as caring in both ways. In bearing witness to creation, we can learn how to be better.

Apocalyptic ethics rooted in network theory provides grounding for experimental politics. These politics of the garden emphasize mutual dependence, and thus the call for patience, cooperation, and solidarity in the previous chapter. As we might call the shift from the kingdom to the office a shift from the pre-modern to modern, so too we might see the shift from the office to the garden as a shift from the modern to the postmodern. We have built on the thoughts of Butler, Baudrillard, and Deleuze; these thinkers and their arguments have been called postmodern. However, following Laura Marks’ Islamic genealogy of new media aesthetics in *Enfoldment and Infinity*, there may be an Islamic genealogy to a postmodern political-ethical

23 Ibid. 114-6.
24 Ibid. 116.
paradigm. At the very least, there are obvious connections, which I chart out in the next chapter. Despite my emphasis on images of heaven, and ultimate accounting, I understand Rabia al-Basri’s desire to quench the flames of hell and burn the gates of heaven: to act with *ihsaan*, one should undertake ethical activity out of love for God alone. However, the mystical experience of *fanaa*, or ego death in Union with God, is inherently temporary. Even allowing for this death-before-death, the transcendent Sufi’s body, too, will account for its deeds on the Day of Judgement. Thus, to paraphrase what Cornel West has remarked, ethics is less a matter of getting into heaven and more a matter of how much heaven we are leaving behind!
Freak Out

so last night they shot a beam into my brain to show reality tethered to Reality.
ropes of asemic literature, golden disks braided by mechanical elves.
i never worried because my head was safe on my pillow.

i remember wondering how, if She was nowhere to be seen,
how did that idiot see Her everywhere?

the desert teaches:
if She is nowhere to be seen, go nowhere.

so i sat—"Lord look at me, rooted like a tree,” now,
i am eating fruit for the vitamins.

i put the orange slice in my mouth
with the peel facing out and then take a selfie and then i suck the juice
with my tongue, with my lips.

on the plate are several other discarded smiles.
the grapefruit slices were bitter and
i am sure my eyebrows betrayed it.

honey from before is getting all over the fruit.
how did honey lather from below? the plate has not moved.

when i say the honey is sweet, i mean it.
when i say the fruit is sweet, i mean that too.
my tongue doesn’t get it.
3. Dream Aesthetics

Around the 10th century CE in Basra, a mysterious organization called the Ikhwan al-Safa, or Brethren of Purity, published an encyclopedia of fifty-two epistles. Their approach was truly esoteric; they insisted on total anonymity for the sake of writing without fear of personal consequences, and topics in the encyclopedia include mathematics, music, logic, and theology. While they seem to resonate with Ismailism and Neoplatonism, scholars to this day cannot place their eclectic ideas into one school of thought. Perhaps their most famous epistle, Epistle 22, includes a fable about 70 men from diverse backgrounds whose ship wrecks on an island ruled by Biwarasp, the King of the (Muslim) Jinn. As soon as the men understand that they must prepare to live on the island, they go about domesticating the animals, and do so in especially violent fashion. Disturbed and upset at their sudden subjugation, the animals take up a case against mankind in Biwarasp’s royal court. The animals and human beings take turns arguing whether or not mankind has the right to subjugate the animals. At the very end, an especially eloquent human argues that human beings have higher standing than animals because the Prophet (pbuh) was a human being. The animals suddenly drop their case, and the story ends abruptly.

Over centuries, the abrupt ending inspired several fabricated conclusions to provide a clear moral of the story. However, I think the ambiguity of the ending is intentional. The legal debate has for so long focused on proving human beings unique, one could almost forget that the implicit logic that unique beings have the right to subjugate others. By invoking a comparison to the Prophet, the human beings have at once been lifted high and deeply humbled. Rightfully so: the argument that human beings can subjugate other beings because they are like the Prophet absolutely deflates the will to subjugate. It is profoundly shameful to be cruel in his name.
This story tends to come up in discussions about Muslim bases for environmentalism because of its affective display of the human being’s role (appointed by God) as *khalifa*, or steward on the planet. However, in keeping with the esoteric roots of the fable, the deeper level of the story deserves attention. By endowing the animals with speech, and the jinn with material presence, the Ikhwan dissolves *a priori* a means by which human beings inflate their importance. We sometimes understand our consciousness as related to our capacity for language, a capacity human beings seem to share with only jinn and God. In giving an account of their behavior to the animals and jinn, it becomes clear that this capacity for deliberation itself is part of what makes them human beings—because they *can* choose whether or not to dominate, they have a responsibility not to. On this reading, God-consciousness is a non-coercive source for ethics, part of how the *qalb* can steer a person’s *aql*. In seeing God absolutely in every reality, all relationships become mediated relationships with God. Much like last chapter’s dyadic presentation of the subject in relationship with the other, construed as the entire rest of the network in the Algorithm (from other people to norms and values) in one node, we can conceive of a Sufi ontology for the relationship of a person’s consciousness and God. It would be dyadic as well, but where the subject’s node in the Algorithm most closely represents the *nafs*, the person’s node in the network of God-consciousness most closely concerns the *ruh*. Until the Day of Judgement our relationship with God is inevitably mediated, primarily in consciousness.

In this chapter, I sketch some aesthetic dimensions to the politics and ethics I have lain out, politics and ethics that gesture to a kind of mass consciousness shifting. Art can play a role in cultivating such mass consciousness shifts, as propaganda, yes, but also as thinking out loud, as fostering imagination, as providing new terms for critique. To do so, it does not have to be rigidly ideological or dogmatic. In fact, humor, absurdity, and insanity have as much to offer as
overt political commentary. To develop an aesthetic approach to consciousness-shifting, I first consider a psychedelic analog to our environmental humanities approach. This involves a critique of ontological anarchism, as well as a reframing of simulation in terms of consciousness. I then explore Laura Marks’ Islam-inspired concepts of enfoldment and infinity, adding context to her network politics presented in the previous chapter. Marks’ Deleuzian slant leads us to consider Deleuze more broadly, as ideas like crystal-image and nomadism have much to offer. After a Deleuzian reading of Rumi, we conclude on the importance of imagination.

A “Muslim environmentalist” reading of the Ikhwan’s story makes sense, but “environmentalism” can come under fire for uncritically ushering the Romantic construct of the “environment” into ethical conversations. As Anna Gade’s *Muslim Environmentalisms* points out, the “environmental humanities” faces a paradox: how to critique the Anthropocene without being anthropocentric? Further, Gade points out the Romantic individualist roots of environmentalisms. In her critique of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Gade argues that his work reads the Quran and hadith for “environmental” content to support his contemporary environmentalism, rooted in Emersonian ideas of nature and modernist assumptions that the environmental “catastrophe” is an unnatural phenomenon brought on by human interference. From this perspective, Gade calls for the reconstruction of Muslim environmentalism as a bundle of ethical commitments. Chief for her is the eschatological dimension of Muslim ethics, where the destruction of all creation is the context in which God’s final accounting of every person’s deeds takes place. Catastrophe is inherent to Muslim ethical evaluation, and from that standpoint, environmentalism is not about preserving a disaster-free nature, but about a human responsibility towards creation as we barrel towards the Day of Judgement.

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25 Gade, 264.
The linking of consciousness to “apocalyptic” thinking and anarchist politics has an important precedent. In *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy*, Peter Lamborn Wilson builds toward what has been called “ontological anarchism” based on an esoteric reading of the *Qiyamat*, the resurrection of all sentient beings on the Day of Judgement. He takes inspiration from Hasan II of Alamut’s declaration in 560A.H./1164 A.D. that the *Qiyamat* had come to pass, as a dedication to Unity with God abrogated all *shariah* (law). *Scandal* is a celebration of Sufi antinomianism, but for Wilson, antinomianism only permits morality in the sense that “the realized person can commit no ill act, since illusory ego has given way to a will in harmony with being itself.”

He admits most Sufis never achieve permanent Union until death, and in their periods of Separation they make mistakes, but just because that is “the will of the Beloved.” In his writing as “Hakim Bey,” Wilson elaborates on the anarchist politics that follow from his antinomian ethics. In Christian Greer’s presentation of the occult roots of Bey’s politics, Greer argues that for Bey, “insurrectionary action against the forces that impinge on one’s autonomy is less important than overcoming the insidious self-alienation that occurs when one internalizes the illusions of “Babylon or the Spectacle, Capital or Empire, or the Society of Simulation.”

Anarchy for Bey is a refusal to internalize the terms of the Algorithm. It is a resistance on the level of consciousness. Wilson—an open propagandist for “Man-Boy Love” (pedophilia)—should not guide our ethics. However, just as Anna Gade critiques Nasr’s synthesis of environmentalism and Sufi cosmology, and then offers an alternative synthesis that reconstructs “the environment” itself from the point of view of Muslim ethics, I see a better way to achieve God-conscious rejection of the Algorithm that Wilson is going for, one where the living human being still has ethical responsibilities.

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26 Wilson, 47.
27 Greer, 117.
The idea of consciousness is like the idea of the environment: a construct rooted in a duality (mind/body, man/nature) worth deconstructing, but still ultimately a useful word. As an environmentalist studies the relationships that might be flattened into “man” and “nature,” I argue that a psychedelicist studies the relationships that might be flattened into “mind” and “reality,” and not always in the context of mind-altering substances. I propose that much like the “environmental humanities” create a category for parallel social scientific, literary, and historical investigations, the “psychedelic humanities” is the collection of perspectives that track the intentional alteration of consciousness, with the construction of “consciousness” left up for debate. While the frame of reference may have its origins in the study of mind-altering substances, consciousness alteration also includes al Ghazali’s methods for disciplining the mind, floatation tank chambers, and immersive art. Thus, just as Anna Gade did the environment, we can reconstruct an idea of consciousness based on ethics. Over the previous two chapters we have developed a God-conscious apocalyptic ethics rooted in intersubjective networks; hopefully, the payoff here will be worth that mouthful.

Our ethical-political paradigm provides a sense of the subject contingent on its relationships. Within the Algorithm, the subject is overwhelmingly recognized as its nafs. If the entirety of the rest of the subject’s network is taken as one node (Foucault and Butler’s collective other), the dyadic relationship between that node and the subject could be conceived as the nafs connected to the Algorithm through desire. However, the instability of the subject—the ability to act with islam, iman and ihsaan—frays the relation, and the subject can break out of the

28 From Greer (2019): “Derived from the psychical discourse of “consciousness expansion,” psychedelicism suggests a heterogeneous entanglement of esoteric theories and practices, which underwent reformulation and adaptation in the decades subsequent to its debut in The Doors of Perception (1954) by Aldous Huxley. Neither wholly religious nor scientific, psychedelicist doctrines emerged as a highly volatile response to the problem of disenchantment
Algorithm, seeing God in everything and not identical to everything, a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and not identical to any individual part. This instability grants the other dyad some flexibility: when the relation becomes taqwa, love and ethics can flow in the Algorithm as well. Hence, unlike Wilson’s total rejection of “mediation,” with the right ethical basis, we can accept mediation as a condition of mortal life. While coercive powers continue to dictate the terms of many of our relationships, our consciousness of God’s presence, and His ultimate accounting, demands an engagement with those relationships anyways. Just as we attend to “environmental crises” despite knowing the Hour is inevitable, we cannot abrogate ethics just because of the possibility of Union. The possibility of Union, in fact, inspires a deeper commitment to intersubjective ethics, an emphasis on mutual formation in a relationship.

Once we have accepted mediation as part of our current condition, both in our relationship with God and with the other, we can consider the shifting of consciousness as a change in the nature of the relationship between two nodes. In Acid Communism, Mark Fisher argues that in the 1970s, “altered states of consciousness could offer a perception of the systems of power, exploitation and ritual that was more, not less, lucid than ordinary consciousness,” but Fisher emphasizes that “psychedelic experiences were not confined to those who had taken drugs,” calling “mass media…itself a massive experiment in altering consciousness.” Because of new mass media, people’s imaginations of the real fundamentally altered. Where Fisher sees immense revolutionary potential in media-based altered consciousness, he also concedes that at this historical point, neoliberalism hijacks the momentum into a simulation in service of capital. This is where Baudrillard picks up: in Simulacra and Simulation, he interrogates the emergence of video media as the epitome of simulation.
For Baudrillard, in the culture industry, the movie or TV series is a commodity. It has its use value (entertainment), it has its exchange value (what people will pay to watch it) but it is most rich in its sign value, representing objects, people and scenarios that turn represent morals, themes, and ideologies. As more and more commodities relevant to everyday life are intangible, we come to know them through a series of intermediaries, handling most of life’s business through a screen. While it feels oracular that Baudrillard writes about handling all of life through a screen in 1981, the consciousness alteration at play in the relationship between a subject and a screen can also be interpreted in terms of centuries-old Islamic art and philosophy.

In her book *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Laura Marks traces the “broad continuity between Islamic and Western aesthetics,” arguing that “the Islamic quality of modern and new media art is a latent, or deeply enfolded, historical inheritance from Islamic art and thought.” Marks borrows the idea of enfoldment from quantum physics, specifically the work of David Böhm who found that distant subatomic particles seem to behave as if they know what each other is doing, leading him to posit that “beneath the quantum level, all matter is interconnected” in what he calls an “implicate order,” an underlying order to the universe than cannot itself be observed, but rather can only be known through its perceptible effects. Marks connects this view of the universe to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “plane of the immanence,” a “vast surface composed of an infinite number of folds” that “contains all that has existed, will exist, has never existed, and will never exist, in a virtual state.” While we cannot observe the infinite plane of immanence itself, we observe information that unfolds from the infinite plane, and images that unfold from information. This three-layer

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29 Marks, Laura U. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. MIT Press, 2010.5.
30 Ibid. 5-6.
31 Ibid. 5.
relationship between unfolding and enfolding underlies new media art (where digital code unfolds from the infinite, and the images a user/audience perceives unfolds from that code), but it also models Islamic art, like calligraphy. Calligraphy makes visible the sacred word of the Quran, and the Quran itself mediates our relationship with the infinite, God.

Our witnessing of temporary reality unfold hints at true Reality. As Adonis points out in his book *Sufism & Surrealism*, imagination is how the human subject navigates our own contingency in the face of divine necessity. “Imagination has a particular significance according to Sufis and Surrealists,” he writes, “not so much because it is illusory but because it is an unknown bring and can therefore can become real.”

The artist, then, is key to mass consciousness shifting—since “the artist looks at the world with the ‘eye of the heart,’ he transforms it into something that cannot be contained or formed in an image, into a ‘thing/non-thing’...through his work, he tries to ‘overturn’ the world, in order to take it close to the mysterious and the invisible...as if his physical task lies in bringing the invisible out of the visible.”

Aesthetics is a manner of unfolding.

Marks sees in ibn Sina’s presentation of God as “the necessary cause from which all existence emanates” a connection with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the virtual and the actual—which aesthetically collide in the “crystal-image,” an enhanced awareness of the flow of time where the actual is perceived alongside the virtual. A classic example of the crystal-image is in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, where through spinning shots, the protagonist’s fear of falling sits alongside his non-falling, and in the plot, nothing is as it seems as his anxiety spirals over time.

To invoke a sense of contingency, we can play with time; this is a psychedelic aesthetic method. That anything is possible does not have to be as scary as *Vertigo* makes it seem—the sketch

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32 Adonis, 73.
31 Ibid, 176.
comedy *I Think You Should Leave* often relies on suspense for its comedy, where the length of a joke often operates as a joke itself, be it too long or too short. The sudden shifts in focus of an absurdist sketch comic operate like a “peek-a-boo” game for consciousness, a crystal-image where any line could be the last. In fact, Marks sees a parallel here between *fanaa*, the mystical obliteration of difference between self and God, and Deleuze’s idea that the “more perception becomes dissociated from our immediate needs, the further it opens onto the universe of images and opens us up to the flow of time”—an alteration of consciousness through the crystal-image.

Another useful concept from Deleuze, the nomad, offers a few aesthetic lessons. Soudeh Oladi traces Deleuze’s idea of the nomad to the work of 14th century Muslim thinker ibn Khaldun, who “contends that nomads are always in a position of strength because they are continually in motion,” but “once that motion ceases to exist, the group loses its telos, becomes sedentary, and slowly but steadily begins to decay.” 34 Deleuze sees political potential in the constant motion of the nomad. Like for ibn Khaldun, this “motion” is physical as much as it is a form of consciousness. As Oladi writes:

Deleuze’s emphasis on the non-static nature of nomadism is evident in his claim that the nomadic way of being provides a counter-concept and resistance to the sedentary nature of the State. Nomadic thought is distinct because it chooses the open horizon of the plains with its potential for movement. In a perpetual state of decentring, the nomad is always prepared to take flight and resist power as a way of being. The nomad is hostile to settled patterns of thought and exclusionary visions of subjectivity.35 Nomadic thought’s constant decentering and dynamic approach to subjectivity echoes the ethical thrust of Butler’s vision in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Political nomadism can thus be taken as one possible political application of the decentered ethic, where constant curiosity operates as resistance to the sedentary State, which seeks to fossilize the subject into the object, not just by

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34 Ibid. 66.
35 Ibid. 66.
deeming the subject utterly knowable, but even going so far as to treat the subject as always-already known. Translated into our terms, the alteration of consciousness changes the nature of the dyadic relationship between the subject and the Algorithm, as the *aql* performs critical self-fashioning, becoming a self in the terms offered by power, but antagonizing power through that very process. But how to encourage nomadic thinking?

In its striving to be illegible to the State, and thus autonomous, nomadism also underlies Hakim Bey’s political vision. He instructs that “nomads chart their courses by strange stars, which might be luminous clusters of data in cyberspace, or perhaps hallucinations,” that they ought to “lay down a map of the land; over that, set a map of political change; over that, a map of the Net, especially the counter-Net with its emphasis on clandestine information flow and logistics—and finally, over all, the 1:1 map of the creative imagination, aesthetics, values,” just to see “the resultant grid comes to life, animated by unexpected eddies and surges of energy, coagulations of light, secret tunnels, surprises.”

The nomadic approach embraces fast-changing, ever-shifting contexts, and works surprise and improvisation into the method. In Comedy Central’s *Nathan For You*, Nathan Fielder’s relationship with the fourth wall is always in flux, as different schemes require different levels of chaos. Some personas seem more genuine than others, as when a gas station attendant offers to give him a bottle of his grandson’s urine and Fielder is so surprised that he clearly “breaks character”. Fielder’s earnest brand of sarcasm can make for solid critique as he “helps” small businesses, but his constant shifts in persona and even format make his “bit” an extremely flexible method for humor and critique.

Another way to think about the nomad is Deleuze’s concept of the nomadic war machine, a name for “social organizations that counter State orthodoxy and resist control from all

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36 Bey. 105-106.
directions,” “a counter-force that unsettles and challenges the State with its ability to function without a commanding center” that is “not invented by the State apparatus and derives its vitality from ‘without’ and emerges like fate, without reason, consideration, or pretext.”

For Hakim Bey, anything outside of the State goes—any active resistance that can slip through the cracks of what the State can see keeps revolutionary ideals alive. Oladi, however, emphasizes the resonance between Deleuze’s presentation of the nomadic war machine with how love operates in the poetry of Rumi. She writes that “Rumi contends through the practice of selfless love, the individual is no longer confined to predetermined paths but is alive in an open and empty ‘field of possibilities’ where life unfolds and transformation is a never-ending reality.” Love is endlessly generative. It “never loses its nomadic quality because, ‘Like Adam and Eve, Love gives birth to a thousand forms; the world is full of its paintings but it has no form’ (Rumi, Divan, 5057).”

Oladi writes:

Rumi’s war-machine of love offers a conceptual tool for revisiting hegemonic discourses with the potential to resist them. The war machine of love relies on its nomadic qualities to create ruptures in static spaces through fluid and indeterminate action. Similar to the Deleuzian war machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), Rumi’s war machine of love has the ability to spring up at any point and deconstruct thought in nomadic fashion.

With this in mind, Oladi presents the idea of the spiritual activist, who links spiritual reflection with direct action. Again echoing our intersubjective network ethics, Oladi writes that “like a nomad who vacillates between being and becoming, the spiritual activist chooses openness over any fixed and finite field; what the nomad and the spiritual activist have in common is humility, creativity, and an openness to difference as they both connect to all the creative forces that move

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37 Oladi. 68.
38 Ibid. 70.
39 Ibid. 70.
40 Ibid. 71.
through an individual.” To illustrate spiritual activism, Oladi recounts a tale in the Mathnawi about a hare who kills a tyrannical lion by provoking his pride. The hare tells the lion he fears another lion, and when the lion lunges at what he thinks is his competition, he falls to his death. The superior “other lion” was just his shadow. When the small animals rejoice the death of the tyrant, however, the hare warns them that only the outer lion has been defeated—the inner lion, the *nafs* or ego, cannot be defeated as easily. Oladi writes that “it is at this point that the hare transitions into a spiritual activist; constantly in motion; always questioning; travelling tirelessly from the struggle with the outer enemy to the one within.” Consciousness-shifting techniques must confront inner and outer lions with equal vigor.

Vigor must not, however, trample over subtlety. Mystery, the invitation to imagine and interpret, is the most essential part of psychedelic aesthetics. Marks points out that imagination is “not creation ex nihilo” but rather imagination discovers “hidden affinities between seemingly disparate things, revealing the harmony of God’s universe” in a “sublimely delicate process.” As such, surrealism, with its poetics of juxtaposition, best accompanies Sufism with a degree of subtlety. For the Ikhwan al-Safā, “true knowledge remains in a state of latency until one who is qualified comes to make it manifest.” Marks compares this to algorithms, where “when the algorithm is carried out, what is latent becomes manifest.” Both these presentations of knowledge (or information) have aesthetic counterparts: “In computer media, as in Islamic art, image is a manifestation of algorithmic activity.” “The state of latency in algorithmic Islamic art invites a high degree of participation on the part of the viewer,” which is key for

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41 Ibid. 71.
42 Ibid. 73.
43 Marks, 163.
44 Ibid, 163.
consciousness-shifting. In terms of framing the Algorithmic network as a dyad with a subject and the extended other, the nature of the relationship shifts, changing both nodes in the process. Imagination is a nomadic war machine within networks, the only hope for unpredictability. Imagination is how we participate in unfolding.

Mark Fisher offers us a final psychedelic approach to critical aesthetics, what he calls “laughter from the outside,” a “psychedelic laughter, laughter that — far from confirming or validating the values of any status quo — exposes the bizarreness, the inconsistency, of what had been taken for common sense.”46 His chief example comes is a 1966 adaptation of Alice in Wonderland in which the characters were rendered not as animals but rather adult human beings:

Once you take the animal heads off you begin to see what it’s all about. A small child, surrounded by hurrying, worried people, thinking: ‘is this what being grown up is like?’ The film is pervaded by an atmosphere of lassitude, of languor and catatonia that sometimes lurches into sudden panic and helplessness. Miller again: “The book, by dressing things up in animal clothes, presents a disguised — a dream-disguised — domestic charade. All the levels of authority and order-giving and obedience are reflected.” The ordinary world appears as a tissue of Nonsense, incomprehensibly inconsistent, arbitrary and authoritarian, dominated by bizarre rituals, repetitions and automatisms. It is itself a bad dream, a kind of trance. In the solemn testiness of the adults who torment and perplex Alice, we see the madness of ideology itself: a dreamwork that has forgotten it is a dream, and which seeks to make us forget too, by sweeping us up in its urgencies, by perplexing us with its lugubrious dementia, or by terrifying us with its sudden, unpredictable and insatiable violence.47

Far from being an indicator of comfort, laughter can reveal an uneasiness with the status quo, a sudden awareness at the contingency, instability, and downright absurdity of everything “real.” Recognizing contingency is the first step to the transformation of consciousness. When we see that very little of our world is inevitable or necessary, we better understand our ability—then our duty—to change it. All hierarchies, all sense of order, all of it is up for grabs when we laugh.

46 Fisher, 16.
47 Ibid, 16.
Oladi’s narrative illustration of spiritual activism was of a hare who killed a tyrant with a prank, then implored his fellow creatures to kill the lion within; Bugs Bunny absurdity followed by cutting spiritual realism. As Christian Greer writes:

The psychedelic theology of laughter can be summarized as follows: “nothing is true unless it makes you laugh, but you don’t really understand it until it makes you cry.” …This theological adage suggests that enlightenment begins when the mind is liberated from the conditioned attachment to self. From the enlightened perspective, all of the sound and fury of the world appears as a comical farce devoid of meaning. However, detachment is here portrayed as the prerequisite for compassion: the sacred laughter of the psychedelicist is consummated in the higher realization that life entails a perpetual cycle of pain and suffering. Motivated to alleviate the pain of others, the holy goof employs jest, satire, and slapstick to lead his brothers and sisters out of the delusion of ego, into a new, jubilant way of life.  

The holy goof knows about suffering but is determined to kill the lion within. Reframed in our political-ethical terms, the holy goof uses humor to belittle the nafs, allowing for other aspects of the self to come to the surface of the network, diminishing the overall presence of egos in the network. Subversive humor is powerful: because laughter is such an overwhelming affective state, humor can reconfigure a network in seconds, creating autonomous zones, robust contexts made of relationships that enable joyful self-fashioning as critique.

Once reality is revealed to be constructed and contingent, most urgencies imposed by the nafs look absurd. Psychedelic aesthetic methods—methods in new media that foster shifts in consciousness—invite deep engagement from a subject, opening space for complexity and a dynamic sense of self. A single imaginative challenge to the Algorithm can spark a chain reaction of critical self-fashioning in a network. If reality is all a dream in relation to the Real, why not dream a better dream?

48 Greer, 136.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I advance a Muslim way to think about politics, ground it in an ethics, and then consider what aesthetics accompany that political-ethical orientation. In response to the totalizing and intertwining set of injustices, and the methods of reflexive simulation by which it perpetuates itself (an assemblage I call the Algorithm) I develop apocalyptic ethics rooted in intersubjective networks. First, in “Experimental Politics” I present a political logic of God-consciousness:

1. *Taqwa,* understood as consciousness of true Unity, reminds us that we are contingent, interrelated beings.
2. Awareness of our contingency implicates us in the world around us, so *taqwa* demands intervention against injustice.
3. *Taqwa,* a collective commitment against injustice, then implies the need for Muslim emancipatory politics a vessel for ethical action.

Then, in “Apocalyptic Ethics,” I develop an ethical basis for the subject who develops *taqwa,* the “I” that forms itself in critical relationship to the Algorithm. This “I” finds its only permanence in the Day of Judgement, in which its body gives account of its deeds to God. In dyadic relationship to the Algorithm, however, the “I” is dynamic and contingent. Finally, in “Dream Aesthetics,” I develop a psychedelic approach to the changes in consciousness that make subversive politics in the Algorithm possible. Most promising in this context are nomadic and experimental aesthetics that problematize “reality” as constructed in opposition to the Real, revealing the Algorithm to be a lucid dream, malleable in the hands of the dreamer. All of this, not for a return to Eden, nor anticipation of Jannah, but for the infinite present, God.

*Schizo-Sufi-Apocalyptic-Subject-Node:*

Witness God In (but not as) The Other and The Other In (but not as) The Self

La Ilaha illAllah
Bibliography


