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Oppositional banality: Watching ordinary Muslims in 'Little Mosque on the Prairie'

Jenifer Chao

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Abstract

This essay interrogates how the globally-syndicated series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-2012) mobilises one of the most beloved television formats – the situation comedy – to insert a banal and normalised gaze toward Muslims and contest hostile representations of Islam in Western media. Through what I have termed 'oppositional banality' the show relocates Muslim identities to the realm of everyday life and out of the confines of global terrorism. Rather than being under the scrutiny of news cameras and viewed through cataclysmic international events the Muslims in *Little Mosque* are made comical and timeless, subjected to the emotional entanglements of ordinary life.

Keywords: cultural resistance, Islam, Little Mosque, media representation, Muslims, situation comedy, television

1 Introduction

In the premiere episode of the Canadian situation comedy series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-2012) the character Joe, a white prairie farmer, wanders into the local Anglican parish hall to witness a group of Muslims praying and prostrating in unison. Alarmed, he stumbles out of the building to call the national terrorist-attack hotline. Later he recounts this encounter to his reverend with agitation: 'I saw them [Muslims] bowing and moaning just like on CNN.' While the comical scene parodies the post-9/11 anti-Muslim paranoia that had spread in America, Canada, and elsewhere it also crystallises several perennial debates concerning the visual representations of Muslims and Islam in Western media: first, there remains a

tenuous but stubborn visual association linking Muslims and the practice of Islam with terrorism; second and as a consequence of the first, encounters with Muslims for non-Muslims like Joe become moments of alarm and panic; and third, perceptions of Muslims and Islam are often shaped by the media, in this case the news media.

No doubt these interrelated strands already propelled debates before the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America in 2001, given a visual heritage of Western hegemonic representations of Arabs and Muslims already existed;¹ these same debates over politics of representation have intensified following 9/11 and beyond as images and public discourses relating to Islam and Muslims continue to be entwined with the effects of the war on terror, security concerns,² and the circulation of Samuel Huntington's much-criticised civilisationalism discourse.³ Recent terror incidents – the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris and other atrocities committed by extremists elsewhere, including the beheadings of Western hostages by the so-called Islamic State (IS) – have further inflamed public discussions on these and other issues such as the battle between freedoms of expression and extremism.

Against this complex background of global developments *Little Mosque* (henceforth thus shortened) becomes a relevant case study because it addresses these same debates concerning Muslim identities, Islam-West relations, assimilation, and politics of representation. Having premiered on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 2007 and ending in 2012 after six seasons *Little Mosque* features a mosque located intentionally in a church. It parodies many post-9/11 scenes: Muslims or dark-skinned foreigners interrogated at airports as terrorist suspects, Muslims placed on airlines' no-fly lists, and mosques under police surveillance. Acting as a comic relief to succour anti-Muslim fears and hostility the show directly opposes stereotypes and hostile perceptions toward Muslims by exaggerating these attitudes or exposing their instrumentalisation by Western media.⁴

This essay demonstrates how the series mobilises one of the most beloved television formats – the situation comedy – to insert a banal and everyday gaze toward both Muslim bodies and the religion. By showcasing the mundane experiences of a Muslim community the show contests hitherto hostile televisual representations through what I have termed 'oppositional banality'. My analysis first traces the necessity of this visual normalisation by outlining the post-9/11 political and cultural backdrop against which *Little Mosque* has emerged. The examination proceeds to detail this banality as enabled by the situation comedy genre that relocates

Muslim identities and Islam to the realm of everyday life and maximises the emotiveness of conviviality, as articulated by Paul Gilroy. Together this banality aims to remedy a belligerent visuality, becoming an act of opposition that harnesses the potential of humour and laughter. The essay then questions whether these visual manoeuvres have expediently depoliticised Muslim identities and sentimentalised Islam. The study concludes by arguing that while the show is able to construct a different visibility for Muslims this new presence nevertheless rests on elements of similitude, recognisability, and conformability which affirm Western secular hegemony rather than undermining it.

2 *Little Mosque, big aspirations*

Little Mosque offers a homey depiction of a Muslim community as its members interact with non-Muslims in their fictional Canadian prairie town of Mercy. The show's first episode attracted 2.1 million viewers which, according to a television critic, was a feat in a country where an audience of one million is already a hit.⁵ Although originating in Canada the show circulates globally through syndication. Pointing to the sensitivity of the subject matter the series belatedly made its way to America in 2013, appearing on the cable and satellite television channel Pivot. The show's title is an allusion to the classic American book and television series *Little House on the Prairie*. While the show's Muslim-Canadian creator Zarqa Nawaz downplays the connection and explains that the title has



Fig. 1: Promotional photograph for 'Little Mosque' featuring, from left to right, Barber (Manoj Sood), Rayyan (Sitara Hewitt), Amaar (Zaib Shaikh), Reverend Thorne (Brandon Firla), Yasir (Carlo Rota), and Sarah (Sheila McCarthy). All photographs are courtesy of WestWind Pictures.

more to do with her own move from Toronto to a Canadian prairie town, the intertextuality is evident in the shows' parallel narratives of family and community life, westward expansion, and settlers-versus-natives conflicts, with *Little Mosque* offering a reversed and more complex dynamic of racial and religious tensions.⁶

The show's storylines contain a Muslim perspective that showcases the religious practices of Islam, such as the five daily prayers and halal food, and popular universal themes such as family and marriage life, love, and friendship. More ambitious is the aim identified by Nawaz, who hopes the situation comedy would alter the public's misperceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims. She explains:

a lot of people don't see Muslims in the media, they only see the male terrorist or the oppressed Muslim women. They get a skewed perception of the Muslim community. This is a show that examines the ordinary lives of ordinary Muslims. Muslims are parents ... they are holding down jobs; they are paying off their homes; they are paying off their bills, and no one ever gets to see that side of the Muslim world.⁷

Nawaz is articulating what scholars have already pointed out: Orientalist cultural stereotypes underscore the persistent hostility of Western media toward Islam and Muslims.⁸ Researchers have scrutinised numerous post-9/11 visual and other textual representations and argued that they mostly hold fast to expected stereotypes.⁹ Against this backdrop *Little Mosque* is widening the debate with a different, although not necessarily new, strategy. Using the situation comedy to contest media misrepresentations has a precedent. The most familiar case is the American programme *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), which offered a positive characterisation of a successful African-American family, deviating from the negative and distorted television representations of African-Americans from previous decades.¹⁰ Some have drawn the parallel and dubbed *Little Mosque* the 'Muslim Cosby Show'.

Although Nawaz uses neither the word 'resistance' nor 'opposition' when describing *Little Mosque* her rejection of the caricatural and anti-Muslim stereotypes echoes the sentiment of many Muslim and American-Muslim writers and artists who believe stereotypes and misrepresentations serve as a site for cultural contention and resistance.¹¹ Cultural resistance in this context is synonymous with self-representation and self-articulation through counter-images, narratives, and history. The situation comedy's prominent attribute of humour also generates oppositional possibilities

to neutralise an antagonistic gaze. Indeed humour as a form of resistance has been well established, with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the carnival being foundational.¹² In the case of *Little Mosque* humour and laughter are important elements but poking fun at post-9/11 effects such as airport security, the no-fly list, and racial profiling can be precarious. However, what is potentially more consequential is the opportunity now available for Muslim bodies to become sites of comedic performance, as I will soon demonstrate.

The characters in *Little Mosque* reflect the diversity among the followers of Islam and its varying ideologies in opposition to the perception that the religion is homogenous and monolithic; their designations include reformist, moderate/feminist, conservative, and also nominal. Their countries of origin are Nigeria, Pakistan, and Lebanon, along with second-generation Canadian-Muslims and a white Canadian Muslim. This Muslim element is further negotiated through the Canadian context, as testified by CBC's promotional phrase: 'Small Town Canada. With a Little Muslim Twist.' The locations of Canada and the prairie raise multiple issues regarding the specificity of Canada's publically-funded television, its geographical-ideological politics, as well its national imaginary and multicultural policies. However, my analysis concentrates on the show's transnational attributes and implications due to my own alternative viewing position: not on CBC during the show's regular Monday night slot, but rather via a DVD and on YouTube in America and multiple European countries, as well as on Dutch television. This shifting method of viewing does not disregard the show's Canadian roots and its space of production but it does lead to other lines of thinking.

This is also because the show approaches its own geographical locations with tremendous ambivalence. Jokes sometimes highlight Mercy's own regional location by making fun of Toronto. However, the prairie setting is seen only in the opening credits and occasionally when characters wander outside and into the public spaces of Mercy. The show's storylines generally do not concern the national or the prairie location with the exception of two episodes: 'Wheat Week' and 'Mercy Beet', which are specifically connected to the prairie economy. It is also noteworthy that the show's title has been shortened to *Little Mosque* with the prairie reference dropped when shown in America. There is indeed an unresolved geographical disorientation when examining the show which defies clear geographical delimitation. Its location in the Canadian prairie has to be weighed against its generic approach to Islam and its global success, which seems to be due to its universal appeal.

In addition, previous scholarship has focused precisely on the show's Canadian origin and specificity but lacked an examination on how the overarching Muslim identity, which lies at the heart of the show rather than its geographical distinctions, is significantly linked to Muslim media representations and debates on the integration of Muslim communities in Western societies.¹³ My examination of the show's politics of representation is hinged on visibility and visuality, interrogating the boundaries that delineate a sphere of appearance for Muslims and Islam. This exploration also introduces the two aforementioned aspects – the genre of situation comedy and the potential of humour as a resistant practice – demonstrating how the show inserts a more congenial and convivial mode of watching Muslims which, in the post-9/11 context, had gained greater oppositional significance.

3 'Mixing' bodies and genres

In response to negative media images discussions about representations of Muslims and Islam are often limited to the 'critique-of-stereotype' approach which aims to address the inadequacy or distortion of representations. However, French theorist Jacques Rancière argues in a different context that an image does not stand alone or exist solitarily but rather

it belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit. The issue is knowing the kind of attention prompted by some particular system.¹⁴

Although Rancière is speaking here about photographic images this attention to a broader system of visibility is helpful for the discussion at hand. Moving beyond specific negative or positive images, then, a productive discussion would consider the existence of a wider system of visibility or visual regime governing Muslim bodies and Islam. What is helpful is to investigate the dominant interpretive grid or televisual distribution of the visible that renders Muslims and Islam perceptible and known by focusing on genre, a key factor that affects visibility. What becomes prominent in my analysis is the act of looking at Muslim bodies and to question how that act itself is framed.¹⁵ This is to inquire into the construction of the Muslim body as an element in an existing visual regime that structures what is possible to see – or more bluntly, what kinds of Muslim bodies are possible to see on television and what are the possible ways of seeing.

It is helpful to briefly think through Rancière's foundational idea of the distribution of the sensible which, although he considers it in relation to the ways a political community is structurally divided, can be posited more broadly here in terms of the distribution of genres and the pairing of bodies and themes within the televisual landscape. For Rancière that process of partition is also related to the deterministic apportionment of competences (who is qualified to speak and act), visibility and audibility (who becomes visible/audible or not in a common space), and capacities and capabilities (what a body can/cannot do consequently). It is a form of distribution that ultimately establishes delimitations.¹⁶

How might this logic of distribution and its subsequent delimitations relate to visualising Muslims and Islam? In terms of televisuality apportionment and delimitation are two ways of discussing Muslims' and Islam's entrances into this media sphere of appearance. I reframe Rancière's theoretical thoughts on the distribution of the sensible to suggest a broad administration of the media landscape that has the proclivity to partition Muslim bodies to the realms of terrorism. Media in America in particular and in the West more broadly generally encounter Muslims and Islam both before and after 9/11 through the confines of dramatic incidents such as suicide bombings, gun attacks, and beheadings. The 9/11 catastrophe, the subsequent wars, and the related issues of national security and Islamic radicalisation are subjects that are by necessity represented by news-related genres like the daily news broadcasts, current affairs programmes, and documentaries which in turn thrive on and are dictated by contemporary events. Having their status grounded in the reproduction of reality, transmitting what some might even think as 'unmediated reality',¹⁷ news genres emphasise and accentuate society's most current and dramatic conflicts.

Given that Islam is a vast subject depictions of it would assumingly encompass a wide range of televisual genres and narratives. Still, it has been the emergence of terrorism inspired by radical Islam that has dominated the media's imagination. Critics often do not think beyond the negative media images themselves and address how those images are the consequences of Muslim identities and Islam being firmly entrenched within the limited factual genres. As Rancière comments in another context, '... the distribution of genres – for example, the division between the freedom of fiction and the reality of news – is always already a distribution of possibilities and capacities ...' for those represented.¹⁸ In this way Muslims and Islam are confronting an uneven distribution that determines how they will appear on television and to which specific genres they

should be assigned, which in turn dictate and delimit how they are to be portrayed and with what kinds of capacities. Television genres impact thematic content, dictate expressive range and emotive scope, and establish formulaic constraints;¹⁹ they are a way of framing a specific mode of visibility and visuality. No doubt genre categorisations are dynamic and cannot always be solidly fixed, given programmes can also contain a mixture of genres.²⁰ They nevertheless help to determine capacities and possibilities for those bodies represented within, how viewers will experience these encounters, and what forms of knowledge, entertainment, and excitement are to be gained.

Muslims are certainly the subjects of fiction in a myriad of films and television dramas. When they appear in those non-factual formats they are still habitually scripted within the themes of global terrorism, homeland security, and fundamentalism.²¹ Appearing in this news and terrorism-oriented visual system means Muslims merit tremendous media attention only and when they function as emblems of global terrorism (as terrorists, suspects, or terrorists-to-be) or as pressing problems of multicultural societies.

There are a few exceptions to this narrow visual regime. In America there was the little-known CW Network situation comedy *Aliens in America* (2007-2008) which was cancelled after one season with 18 episodes, and the reality show *All-American Muslim* (2011-2012) on the cable channel TLC which was also cancelled after just one season with eight episodes. As the titles from both shows intimate the Muslim identity is forcefully embedded within an American geographical location, national identity, and lifestyle. Compared to these two programmes *Little Mosque* has ambitions that are bolder and more substantial. It offers a dramatic shift in the distribution of the sensible that transforms Muslims from news-making bodies to comedy-making and banal bodies, as I will argue in the following section. In opposition to news the situation comedy has the potential to deter Muslims and Islam from being only recognisable and perceivable through realism or contemporary events of terrorism.

4 Seeing Muslim bodies differently

While comedy exists in numerous forms on television none is as familiar and popular as the situation comedy, one of the staples of television.²² Its basic features of fixed and likable characters, locations (in a studio with several sets), narrative style (conflict to resolution and happy ending),

warm moments, humorous situations, one-liners, and physical comedy²³ create more congenial viewing intentions than the news genres. *Little Mosque* adheres faithfully to the conventions, norms, and features of the situation comedy and as such positions Muslims and Islam in a very different context via a contrastive aesthetic, tone, and plot. The show might be considered a traditional family situation comedy, with the family being the various individual Muslim families showcased and the Muslim community that acts as a wider family. With this emphasis its studio sets also follow the family situation comedy iconography: the cosy kitchen and living room of the Hamoudi family, the principal Muslim family in the community, and the character Fatima's welcoming diner-style café. One other key setting is that of the Mercy mosque, which is located within the Anglican church since Muslim worshippers are unable to find any other building in town that is willing to house it.

This fictional mosque offers a significant opportunity to portray Islam's spaces and soundscape in a different mode from other Western media representations that have taken on violent connotations.²⁴ In a study on the sounds of the war on terror Corey Creekmur explores the various functions of the *adhan* (the call to prayer) and Muslim prayer in films and television dramas. He argues that

in popular American media, Muslim prayer has become the sound of Islamic fundamentalism rather than a common cultural practice; it anticipates political violence while masquerading as religious ritual, narratively functioning as the sonic prelude to the danger that soon follows.²⁵

In contrast the fictional mosque and Islamic prayers in *Little Mosque* are visualised within a religious context. In the show the mosque is only designated as such by a small sign posted on top of the entrance to the parish hall and a metal structure upholding the symbolic crescent affixed to the church's roof. The mosque itself consists of the imam's office and a plain prayer hall, which is decorated with individual prayer rugs, wall decorations, and a minbar. There are no other props that signify drastic differences either religiously or culturally. Absent too are the overtly connotative visual and audible cues of minarets and the *adhan*. The mosque's diminutive size as suggested by the word 'little' in the show's title is also cosy, if not reassuring, given that real-life urban mosques are sometimes seen as sites for radicalisation.

In the final season when the Muslim community builds its own mosque it possesses more elaborate features including minarets and stained glass



Fig. 2: Promotional photograph for the 'Little Mosque' finale with Sarah (Sheila McCarthy) in the new mosque.

windows. Although the construction of the mosque is incorporated into the plotlines of the last few episodes the actual space is featured only briefly during the mosque's grand opening in the series finale. A wide-angle shot from the mosque's balcony is used to reveal its minimalist aesthetic. This is also seen in the promotional photograph for this mosque-opening episode, which CBC has placed on the show's website. The space of simple grandeur is dramatically-lit with the character Sarah kneeling for her morning prayer. The undertone is one of romantic fascination, returning the space of the mosque from the political to the sacred. For the rest of the episode the mosque is visually downplayed, as its opening coincides with another storyline that culminates in the marriage of a non-Muslim character who wants her wedding at the mosque. The prayer hall is thus familiarised as the setting for a Christian wedding ceremony with the bride walking down the aisle to Pachelbel's *Canon in D*.

In addition group prayers and individual prayers in the programme are uttered and performed but stripped of any fearful emotive values. In fact prayer scenes appear to have a didactic purpose rather than a politicised framing. One such scene occurs in the fourth episode of the first season involving the character Rayyan. The scene appears toward the end of the show with Rayyan sitting on the steps leading to the mosque and talking to the imam Amaar who scolds her for harbouring ill will toward her mother and urges her to pray. Heeding Amaar's advice, Rayyan stands up and enters the mosque. At this point it is logical from the preceding dialogue that Rayyan intends to go pray in the prayer hall, while there is nothing in

the storyline later that requires an actual praying scene. However, what occurs next are four shots that follow Rayyan into the prayer hall documenting her every physical movement as she performs the act of prayer. Utilising medium and close-up shots the scene demystifies and accentuates Rayyan's prayer movements for non-Muslim spectators, given that practicing Muslims would likely be familiar with this daily practice. The scene posits Islam in the private realm as a personal religious experience while serving at the same time as a pedagogical moment to educate viewers on the practice of prayer.

With its studio settings and the neutralised mosque the show locates Muslims and Islam within domestic spaces and out of the confines of global terrorism. Rather than being under the scrutiny of news cameras, perennially vilified as a group responsible for extreme violence, and dismissed as being 'unassimilable' in Western multicultural societies, the Muslims in *Little Mosque* are made banal and ordinary, subjected to the emotional entanglements of everyday life and personalised with their own individual histories. While references to terrorism and 9/11 abound in the show, which is thus still haunted by that outside world of political violence, Muslims and Islam in *Little Mosque* nevertheless become timeless – or perhaps more accurately untimely in the sense that their presence is a timely response to post-9/11 misrepresentations, and yet their portrayals are no longer conventionally and conveniently anchored in historic moments and cataclysmic events. Instead they are ensconced within the homey situation comedy world and dwell in the uneventfulness of domestic times. Thinking again with Rancière's idea of partition, the wisecracking Muslims of *Little Mosque* have strayed away from their prescribed realm of controversial global problematics to spaces of the ordinary.

5 Watching convivial relationships

While the Muslim body itself is a site for the politics of representation it is also that body's relationship with non-Muslims that has provoked public debates, most often through the leitmotif of a cultural clash. Against this antagonism *Little Mosque* showcases multicultural friendships and community, endeavouring to transgress the 'us versus them' demarcation. The series portrays a specific vision of a Muslim/non-Muslim relationship that can be best visualised through Paul Gilroy's concept of convivial culture, a vision of cross-cultural relationship that opposes Huntington's thesis of civilisationalism. As part of his discussion of multiculturalism in Britain,

Gilroy introduces the concept of convivial culture or conviviality, defining it as ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multi-culture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere’.²⁶ Gilroy has used the same set of adjectives repeatedly to capture the dynamic of this ordinary multiculturalism: spontaneous, organic, chaotic, unkempt, unruly, everyday, demotic, and perhaps even banal. What convivial culture privileges is an informed affiliation based on shared common interests and social desires.

While *Little Mosque* takes place in different political, historical, and geographical contexts the term is still helpful due to the broader issues of identity, differences, and multiculturalism. This concept is also appropriate despite the show’s setting in a Canadian prairie town because, as I stated earlier, that location is quite ambiguous. More importantly the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are distinguished by this spirit of conviviality; each week the storylines unfold with this routine and mundane exposure to difference. The show’s expressions of conviviality between the two communities reflect that, as Gilroy has argued in the British context, cohabitation and encounter with difference need not be a source of fear, anxiety, or violence.

This conviviality is exhibited through the stable friendship between the imam Amaar and the Anglican Reverend Magee – the metonymies of Islam and Christianity. Since the mosque is housed within the church this proximity between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities leads to Gilroy’s everyday, spontaneous, and organic moments of conviviality. Having the mosque within the church also means Amaar’s and Reverend Magee’s offices are near each other, prompting various idyllic and convivial moments between the two spiritual leaders. They are often shown sharing cups of tea or playing a game of chess during their working hours as well as walking through the park or sharing a bench outside the parish hall. Of course not all relationships in the show are convivial; the two characters of Barber and Fred often articulate the conflicts between the Muslim and the non-Muslim communities. Fred, the white shock DJ at the radio station, constantly demonises and vilifies Islam, sowing suspicion and paranoia as a way to drive up ratings. Barber, a Muslim, inanelly calls Mercy’s white townfolk ‘infidels’, ‘heathens’, and ‘crusaders’. However, these hostile attitudes are always blunted by the humour of a situation comedy. The show’s comical scenes drastically sever Muslims from their highly-politicised ‘terrorist’ designation and transform them into bodies that generate laughter through forms of humour: caricature, wordplay, repartee, and misunder-

standing. Muslim characters here are comical bodies, not menacing or victimised bodies.

One scene between the female characters exemplifies the process of negotiation that always leads to conviviality between the two communities. The scene occurs in the episode 'Swimming Upstream' in season one. After breaking her ankle following a fall the character Fatima is urged to take up aqua aerobics at the public pool as part of her rehabilitation. However, the swimming instructor turns out to be a man and she, as a Muslim woman, refuses to bare her swim-suited body to the male instructor – despite the fact that he is gay. After a failed attempt to convince the mayor to hire a female swimming instructor Fatima resorts to donning an Islamic swimsuit: a three-piece outfit with a hood, a tunic, and a pair of pants. Only her face, hands, and feet are visible.

The scene begins with a shot of the poolside showing the gay swimming instructor setting up the CD player for their aqua-aerobics class. This is followed by a close-up of a pair of dark-skinned legs (Fatima is Nigerian) limping into the swimming pool area. The camera then searches up to accentuate this fully-clad body, revealing it to be Fatima in her bright-yellow swimming suit. This is followed by a medium shot foregrounding Fatima with two overweight white women in the background. Instead of being an object of ridicule in her funny suit or a sight of strangeness that triggers discomfort in the white townsfolk Fatima actually becomes the object of envy, as one of the white women says to her friend: 'I wonder



Fig. 3: A scene of convivial culture from 'Little Mosque' with Fatima, second from left, in her Islamic bathing suit.

where she gets that suit? It would really cover my cellulites.' For this full-sized white woman who earlier in the episode supported the idea of a female instructor as a way to evade male visual scrutiny this encounter with Fatima becomes a moment of female bonding and solidarity, as both are united in their desire to subvert the male gaze. This moment of solidarity then transitions to another encounter between Fatima and her gay aerobics instructor, who pays her a compliment: 'girl, about that get-up', he says while pointing at her swimsuit, 'you make that work'. The comment is well received as a close-up shot shows a smiling Fatima delighted by this praise. The scene finally ends in a boisterous vision of Gilroy's conviviality as Fatima follows women of various shapes and sizes, all swinging to salsa music as they descend into the pool for their aqua-fit class. This is the everyday convivial culture that according to Gilroy looks beyond differences and seeks cross-cultural solidarity and pleasures.

The show's rendering of multicultural relations is explicitly idealised, for conviviality is possible only because acceptable differences are being addressed. Those with extreme behaviours that encroach on the communal harmonious order are banished from the plot. For example, a woman in a burka appears in episode two of season two but disappears by the end of the programme after the controversial issue of the face veil is feebly addressed. In episode seven of season four radical Muslims join the mosque but are expelled when they frighten the Anglicans. Regardless, the close relations depicted between Muslims and non-Muslims are a substantial visual in the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia. It is through conviviality that *Little Mosque* counter-poses abundant scenes that visually contest iconic images of hostility and atrocity, from American soldiers' treatment of Muslim detainees in Guantánamo Bay to the torture and humiliation of Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib. The show negates the interpretive grid of a clash between civilisations to pose model quotidian encounters between two communities. Perhaps the most subversive quality of convivial culture lies exactly in the show's everyday and mundane moments of friendships, spatial intimacy, and interdependence, utopian as they may be. These ordinary encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims create what Gilroy elsewhere calls 'a liberating sense of the banality of intermixture'.²⁷

6 From oppositional banality to banal opposition?

With the aid of situation comedy features *Little Mosque* offers congenial visions of Muslims as well as a familiar mode through which to see them. These fictional Muslims have escaped the dominant partition of television visibility that customarily identifies them through the modes of realism and violent events. Much is gained for Muslims in being made funny and banal, but something may also be lost. In its eagerness to remedy a belligerent post-9/11 visuality *Little Mosque* also has to render Muslim identities and Islam 'safe' and acceptable for a Western and later global audience. For *Little Mosque* belonging for Muslims and Islam in the West still rests on criteria of similitude, conformability, and recognisability. Islam in this comical world is sanctified rather than politicised, made comprehensible and validated solely through its general spiritual practices. The show embeds Islam and Muslim identities solidly within a religious framework and rarely broaches the subject of politicised Islam. This depoliticisation is the condition of its new visibility. But this stance is also extremely political, not least in the fact that national identity while not explicitly defined with distinct Canadian attributes still trumps Muslim identities, as assimilation is a requisite. Muslim characters who are not Canadian-born are shown assimilating quite successfully; the naturalisation of Fatima as a Canadian citizen is actually inserted into one episode's plot.

This process of national enfolding inadvertently steers Muslim characters toward that 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim' distinction so prevalent in post-9/11 and the war on terror discourses.²⁸ This 'goodness' is often pivoted on Muslims' Westernisation and their exhibition of patriotism, underlining the point that the reception of American/Canadian/British-Muslims – hostile or amicable – hinges on their loyalty to national civic life. The show has further solidified that line between a normal bill-paying and domesticable (Western) Muslim identity that reiterates and affirms democratic ideals and a deviant Muslim-ness that is politicised and radicalised. As Richard Johnson questions in a related context, '... we have to ask what would happen to them [Western Muslims] if they expressed dissent'.²⁹ The oppositional banality of *Little Mosque* threatens to become banal opposition when it showcases only images of Muslims that are deemed inoffensive and acceptable while reinforcing the normative criteria of a 'good' and 'normal' Muslim.

Another way to see this quandary is to ask what would a critically politicised representation of Islam look like? To begin it would extend beyond the strategy of normalisation and not efface the significance of

social commitment and political participation in Islam. Scholars like Tariq Ramadan have detailed the debates, aims, justifications, and responsibilities for political and social involvement for Western Muslims both personally and collectively.³⁰ Rather than portraying an Islam emptied of political influence and impact it could articulate how Islamic principles inform political activities and decisions for Muslims and others. Such a representation could demonstrate how Islamic values such as charity/compassion, social justice, and custodianship might be relevant for public life when they challenge the hegemony of Western norms on issues such as corporate finance, defence, justice, human rights, ethics, governance, and the environment.³¹ It could do so not from the position of an alterity, the Other, falling back to an affirmation of Huntington's ideas of clashing civilisational differences, but as a critic from within, mindful of the historical relations between the Arab-Muslim world and the West.³²

To be fair, by highlighting the everyday lives of Muslims *Little Mosque* inevitably has to confront some political issues. Yet when it does address contentious topics it always manages to circumvent and manoeuvre its way out precisely at the juncture when the faith's essentials might serve as a critical tool and not just echoes of accepted norms. No doubt a politicised representation is more easily imagined than accomplished in reality given the political sensitivities of our present moment. *Little Mosque* has brought to light the quagmire: too much politics and it would attract controversy and condemnation, as politicised Islam is often viewed through newspaper headlines of radicalisation, extremism, and terrorist violence; but too little politics and criticality and it would forgo an opportunity to engage politically. In the end the show's global success is secured through its achievement of non-provocation and normalisation of Muslim identities. When this is accomplished visually it adopts an oppositional stance against the previously-hostile visual legacy. However, it also reveals that these identities can be made ordinary only because they are shown to be compatible with a Western and secular worldview. In the process the show reinforces Western secular hegemony rather than problematising it. Visual dissent is what *Little Mosque* has achieved and there lies the limit of its opposition; this resistance does not exceed the threshold of audiences' comfort level, which is always informed by their familiarity and expectations of the resolution and happy ending of a situation comedy. Ultimately it is the genre that becomes both liberating and constricting as the show highlights how the situation comedy is often considered to be both conservative and progressive.³³ In its limited but cheerful way *Little Mosque* has facilitated a freer visuality and imagination to engage with Muslim

bodies and Islam, paving the way for other forms of intervention into these questions of identity, integration, and representation, whether on television or beyond.

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Notes

1. Said 2004, 1981; Shaheen 2001; Aguayo 2009; Morey & Yaqin 2011.
2. Semati 2010; Tripathy 2010, pp. 220-221; Poole & Richardson 2006, p. 1.
3. Huntington 1993. Huntington's concept gained currency after 9/11 and was adopted by American media as an explanatory framework for the attacks (see Abrahamian 2003).
4. 'The West' and 'Western media' should not be reduced to homogeneous entities. Without cluttering my text with too many qualifiers I use the terms 'the West' and 'Western media' within the context of the show's interactions with the media in Canada and America but also take into consideration debates on Muslim identities in countries such as The Netherlands, France, Britain, and Denmark.
5. Mason 2007.
6. Byers 2011, p. 145; Morey & Yaqin 2011, p. 202.
7. DVD commentary from *Little Mosque on the Prairie: Season One*.
8. Said 2004; Morey & Yaqin 2011; Mishra 2007; Aguayo 2009.
9. For an analysis of textual representations in *The New York Times* see Mishra 2007; for films see Shaheen 2001 and Aguayo 2009; for television see Morey & Yaqin 2011; for American media in general see Karim 2006 and Nacos & Torres-Reyna 2007.
10. Mastro & Greenberg 2000, pp. 691-692; Cummings 1988, pp. 75, 82; Neale & Krutnik 1990, pp. 243-244.
11. Husain 2006.
12. Bakhtin 1984.
13. For analyses on the show's Canadian roots see Cañas 2008, Byers 2011, Dakroury 2008, and Fleras 2011, pp. 46-48.
14. Rancière 2009, p. 99.
15. This attention to the multiple framings of visibility is inspired by Mieke Bal's writing on visual analysis (see Bal 2008).
16. Rancière 1999, pp. 26-30; Rancière 2004, pp. 12-13.
17. Creeber 2008, p. 104.
18. Carnevale & Kelsey 2007, p. 263.
19. Creeber 2008.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
21. Shaheen 2001.
22. Creeber 2008, p. 78.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-83.
24. Shaheen 2001, p. 9.
25. Creekmur 2010, p. 87.
26. Gilroy 2005, p. xv.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
28. Johnson 2002, p. 224; Mamdani 2002.
29. Johnson 2002, p. 224.
30. Ramadan 2004, pp. 144-173.
31. On politicised Islam's relevance for the West see Buck-Morss 2003, pp. 41-56.
32. Some of these entanglements are highlighted in Gafaïti 2008.
33. Morreale 2003, p. xii.

