



Islam and the Middle East in the United States

Claire Beckett's Simulating Iraq and The Converts

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Claire Beckett's series *Simulating Iraq* consists of more than thirty large-scale (40 × 30 in.) color portraits and landscapes taken over a ten-year period in U.S. military training centers in California, where fabricated and populated Afghan and Iraqi villages help soldiers prepare for deployment. Granted special access to these sites as an "embedded artist," Beckett documents the simulation techniques used to portray the peoples, cultures, and landscapes of the Middle East. Questions of authenticity are also central to Beckett's series *The Converts*, a set of large-format color portraits of men and women who adopted Islam as adults. Drawing on the representational strategies of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting, Beckett's photographs are rich with architectural, physiognomic, and sartorial details. Taken as a whole, these images might serve to play into an exoticist fantasy of the Middle East. Yet, as I suggest, the surfeit of details in Beckett's photographs deliberately undermines their reliability as cultural documents. What matters in these images is less the accuracy of specific components than the forms of imaginative projection that the photographic ensembles serve to enable. If Beckett's work seems to lean on the documentary function of photography, it also questions what audiences in the United States know (or think they know) about the "Middle East" and "Islam."¹ The reinterpretation of Orientalism evident in Beckett's works opens up a performative space in which multiple and conflicting identity formations can be enacted both at the level of the image and in the lived realities shaped by it. They point to the contradictions inherent in popular conceptions of the "Middle East" within the U.S. national imaginary.

In her influential essay "The Imaginary Orient," the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin argued that "authenticating details" in the work of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme serve to lend credibility to the fiction of "a supposed Oriental reality" that exists independently of its pictorial depiction. For Nochlin, "Orientalist transparency," in which viewers fail to acknowledge the mediation of the pictorial, relies on a structuring absence: the willful effacement of the "Western colonial or touristic presence."² More recently, the literary scholar Ali Behdad has extended this framework to consider how the indexical properties of chemical photography work to validate dubious truth claims about the so-called Orient:

The seemingly objective quality of photography was deployed to fix and stabilize the subject of Orientalist representation. As such, photography transformed the Orientalist system of knowledge by furnishing it with an efficient technological apparatus for gathering presumptively reliable, nonsubjective data about the Middle East. The camera thus gave Orientalism a scientific gloss, investing it with an aura of objectivity and accuracy even as photographers continued to exoticize people and cultures of the Middle East through their careful staging and selection of images.³

Claire Beckett, *Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen playing the role of an Iraqi nurse in the town of Wadi Al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, CA*, 2009. Pigment print, 40 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist

- 1 Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*, 2008. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, 30 × 40 in. © Lalla Essaydi, Courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York



Nochlin and Behdad, of course, are primarily talking about images produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It should be added that in earlier modes of image production, European artists accentuated perceived civilizational differences through acts of cultural projection. The East was not only geographically distant but also viewed as stuck in another time.

This view has come under pressure as art historians such as Hannah Feldman have sought to problematize a definition of Orientalism as a totalizing and static ideological system that is seemingly devoid of contradiction or anxiety. To this end, Feldman underscores the material and discursive shifts that Orientalist visual culture undergoes as it moves between a period of European colonial conquest, a later stage of modernity in which anti-colonial movements overlapped with the rise of cinema and television, and the subsequent advent of digital media. Seen within this trajectory, photography is viewed as “no more stable than the sites in which it is produced and which we ‘imagine’ we know *through* it.”⁴

The postcolonial literary critic Edward Said dates American involvement in Orientalism to World War II, “when the United States found itself in the position recently vacated by Britain and France.”⁵ Films such as *Casablanca* (1942) drew on European tropes of exoticism that were tied to colonial power dynamics in the Maghreb. The Middle Eastern studies scholar Brian Edwards contends that Orientalist patterns of representation can be discerned in many films, television serials, graphic novels, and journalism produced in the United States over the last two decades.⁶ This is not surprising given the surge of interest in the Middle East since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Yet two factors distinguish twenty-first-century Orientalism from its historical precedents. The first has to do with the United States’ declining influence as a global power and the increasingly anxious preoccupation with homeland (in)security. The second factor has to do with the emergence of foreign-born artists in the United States who use performative strategies to contend with “Western” visions of the Middle East. Since 9/11, the art world has seen a marked interest in the output of female artists who self-consciously deploy Orientalist tropes in their work. Artists Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat have gained particular



attention for producing images that feature female subjects who are culturally inaccessible. That is, both artists reference dress customs, literary traditions, languages, and religious practices that are not widely understood outside the Middle East. Alongside the overt eroticism, cultural references to feminine craft (e.g., henna, embroidery), sartorial practices of piety, and the Arabic and Farsi languages root the images in highly localized traditions. Here, the political intentions would seem to foreground female agency and self-possession: a rebuttal to Orientalist sexualization and possession of the “East.” For example, in a photograph from Essaydi’s series *Les Femmes du Maroc* (fig. 1), a partly naked Maghrebi woman adopts a pose that clearly borrows from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, Musée du Louvre). Unlike the subject of Ingres’s work, however, the henna-covered woman in Essaydi’s composition has been described as “remote and unavailable to the viewer,” and thus resistant to male voyeurism.⁷ Yet the market demand for what the curator and media artist Amirali Ghasemi derisively calls “chador art” is at odds with the anti-essentialist politics that arguably animate such practices.⁸ A case in point is Neshat’s *Women of Allah*, a series that has attracted widespread recognition in the art world but also deep reservations on the part of some critics (fig. 2). The art historian Jaleh Mansoor argues, “the exotic physiognomic beauty of Neshat’s photographic subjects (herself included) and that of the photographs themselves” offer a form of visual pleasure that is premised on access to the eroticized other.⁹ The result is what might be called a second-order Orientalism, in which the line between problematic cultural projections and its subversion becomes difficult to parse.

2 Shirin Neshat, *Unveiling* (*Women of Allah series*), 1993 RC print and ink, 59 3/4 x 39 3/4 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase with funds from the Photography Committee. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, N.Y. © Shirin Neshat, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

While Beckett’s photographs are similarly preoccupied with Orientalist stereotypes, her work offers a critical lens onto American identity that is bound up with recent and ongoing interrogations of Whiteness. The postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha points to the ways in which Whiteness functions as “a base color that regulates all others, a norm that spectacularly or stealthily underlies powerful social values.” At Fort Irwin, Beckett photographs White soldiers in the role of Arab and Afghan protagonists. On one level, the photographs capture a central tenet of White privilege: the ability to cross racial and cultural boundaries and assume other identities. This is the product of a symbolic order in which White people are not racially marked and benefit from what Bhabha terms the “tyranny of the transparent.”¹⁰

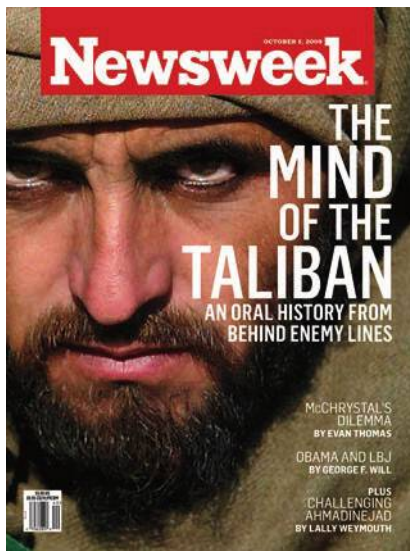
Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism equates the “will to understand” the Orient with a “will to dominate it.”¹¹ In this regard, much has been made of the Pentagon’s efforts to incorporate knowledge of “adversary culture” into military operations. As the international security and strategy specialist Patrick Porter notes, the United States military found itself unprepared for the “post-invasion disorder in Iraq” and the “intimacy of

prolonged contact with a complex foreign society.” Informed by anthropological methods, strategists argued that an effective counterinsurgency called for an “understanding of the intricacies of tribes, clans, customs, and traditions.”¹² Viewed within these terms, Beckett’s photograph of a White Marine who adopts the guise of an Iraqi nurse in the Californian desert (frontispiece) could certainly be viewed as illustrative of a U.S. strategy of domination that relies both on military force and cultural infiltration. However, this top-down view of American power tends to overlook the ways in which military constructions of the Middle East generate moments of epistemological lack for role players on the ground.¹³ This predicament is usefully summed up by Montgomery McFate, a defense and national security analyst, and former senior adviser to the controversial United States Army Human Terrain System program: “Although ‘know thy enemy’ is one of the first principles of warfare, our military operations and national security decision making have consistently suffered due to lack of knowledge of foreign cultures.”¹⁴

As I will show, Beckett’s portraits of military personnel draw attention to the disconnect or disparity between role and role player, signifier and signified. These moments of disjuncture suggest that it is the persistence of cultural imagination — not epistemic mastery of the Other — that animates contemporary variants of Orientalism. At the same time, Beckett’s attention to individuals engaged in imperfect acts of ethnic mimicry invites consideration of Whiteness as a tenuous mode of authority that is open to disruption. Equally, the artist’s focus on the performative dimensions of identity construction prompts viewers to question the idea of an “authentic” Islam or Middle East that can be readily imaged. Ultimately, I argue that Beckett’s deconstruction of an Orientalist vision of the Middle East is bound up with a critical rearticulation of American identity in the twenty-first century.

To understand the visual tropes of Orientalism that Beckett leans on in her work, it is useful to consider the media coverage of the United States–led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The practice of embedded reporting granted photojournalists access to military units starting in about 2003, but only if they agreed to have their images vetted by the Pentagon. As the philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues, the tight regulation of war photography functioned as a concerted effort of the state to regulate the field of perceptible reality: “‘Embedded’ journalists traveled only on certain transports, looked only at certain scenes, and relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action. Embedded reporting implies that reporters working under such conditions agree not to make the mandating of perspective *itself* into a topic to be reported and discussed.”¹⁵ In other words, what is kept out of view are precisely the acts of selection and framing that form the conditions to produce any image in the theater of operations. A survey of photographs from the invasion of Iraq published in nationally distributed U.S. newsmagazines revealed “a highly restricted pattern of depiction limited largely to a discourse of military technological power and response.”¹⁶ By contrast, images of Taliban fighters that circulated in U.S. media outlets following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan play into familiar Orientalist tropes of Muslims as violent, anti-modern ideologues.

One notable example is the October 5, 2009, cover of *Newsweek* that featured a portrait of a Taliban *mujahid* (fig. 3), a member of the Afghan mujahideen, which is a loosely aligned network of Islamist rebel groups who initially fought against the government of the pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) starting in the late 1970s. The pictured subject is wearing a tan-colored *lungee* that covers his hair and forehead, leaving only his face exposed to the camera. In this way, visual attention is drawn to the subject’s physiognomic features: in line with the well-established tropes of Orientalist photography, the focus is on signifiers of the exotic. At the same time, the cover image plays into the already prevalent perception of the Taliban as an opaque and menacing entity.¹⁷ The man’s face is off-center and truncated, destabilizing the image and casting him as untrustworthy; his lowered brow and black-rimmed eyes amplify this effect. Moreover, to the extent that the



- 3 Cover of *Newsweek*, October 5, 2009. Photo: Anja Niedringhaus. Courtesy of EnVeritas Group, Inc.
- 4 Taliban portrait, Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2002. Photograph. © Collection Thomas Dworzak / Magnum Photos



tightly framed composition crops out any reference to the subject's surroundings, it forcefully denies access to the context under which such images are produced. The essentialism already implicit in the picture is made overt in the accompanying caption. Displayed in large type, it reads: "The Mind of the Taliban." This stereotypical imagery invites immediate comparison with the portraits of the Taliban sourced and published by the Magnum photographer Thomas Dworzak. While on a mission in Kandahar province, the birthplace of the movement, Dworzak came across a series of snapshots taken in a photographic studio, one of the few such establishments allowed to operate in that part of the country. While the subjects had gone in to procure official identification photographs, they also posed for highly stylized portraits that emphasize cosmetic details: dyed hair and beards, kohl-rimmed eyes, and gold watches (fig. 4). Captured in playful poses against Alpine backdrops and later retouched and colorized, these portraits offer an unexpectedly intimate view of a sector of Afghan society that remains insufficiently understood and uniformly vilified in the West.¹⁸

There is certainly evidence to suggest that the sanitized image of distant conflicts in the Middle East has worked to shore up support for the war effort. Yet this line of interpretation underplays the degree to which the unsettled boundaries between the foreign and the domestic complicate assertions of American power. The anthropologist Joseph Masco has shown how the expansion of the U.S. security apparatus in the early 2000s can be seen as symptomatic of a new climate of uncertainty, in which nonstate adversaries are viewed as less legible in the eyes of the state. For Masco, the U.S. military conflicts waged in the Middle East are bound up in the legal and epistemological problem of how to define an enemy and demarcate a theater of operations:

One important aspect of counterterrorism is that its theater of operations has been construed from the beginning as planetary, meaning that there is no space, object, or person that cannot be construed in some fashion as on the front line of this new kind of conflict, and thus of potential concern to

*the U.S. security apparatus. The complexity of this world-without-borders approach to counterterrorism ensures immediate and constant slippage between the desire for a planetary theater of operations and the very real limitations on American power.*¹⁹

In similar terms, Butler conjectures that the post-9/11 logic of homeland security is premised on an anxious perspective “according to which the ‘permeability of the border’ represents a national threat, or indeed a threat to identity itself.”²⁰

Beckett’s photographs give form to states of insecurity and uncertainty that I suggest are specific to contemporary forms of Orientalism. The landscapes and physiognomies captured in her work are strangely recognizable and yet untethered: viewers may well assign them to taxonomies of what they think is true about Arabs and Muslims, but in most cases they will know little or nothing of the context in which those images were originally produced.²¹ The use of widely circulated Orientalist tropes—desert landscapes, minarets, veiled women, armed insurgents—plays on a sense of a falsely familiar “Middle East,” one recognizable from films such as *Argo* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and the television series *24* (2001–10, 2014). However, as I argue, the emphasis on the performatively staged image compels audiences to query details that they may otherwise take for granted. This dramatization of the documentary mode’s supposed encounter with the real functions to undermine the truth claims of contemporary image regimes even as it strategically draws on their powers of authentication.



Simulating Iraq

Beckett took the photographs in *Simulating Iraq* over the course of three years in which she was given sustained access to military training centers in California: the U.S. Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, and the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, in particular. The locations depicted in the images have specific architectural aesthetics, functions, and demographics—components that Beckett describes as obvious “fakery” in person and which she uses to construct the sense of uncanny reality in her photographs.²² Built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in a 1,000-square-mile region on the edge of the Mojave Desert, Medina Wasl (Junction City) and Wadi Al-Sahara (Sahara Valley) at Fort Irwin contain residential “sets”—stores, restaurants, apartment blocks—designed by Hollywood builders and made of shipping containers sprayed with stucco (figs. 5, 6). These scenographies serve as stages for simulation techniques and role-play exercises used to prepare troops for encounters in the war zone. Participants are required to navigate a range of possible threats: improvised explosive device (IED) detonations, rocket attacks, martyrdom operations, and televised executions. Behind the scenes, teams of writers script scenarios that ask soldiers to interact with the resident population. They devise story “injects”—unexpected plot twists that complicate the mission at hand. In most cases, the war game rewards evidence of cultural awareness and social sensitivity over acts of brute force. The participant demographics are crucial: the roles of civilians are primarily performed by Arab Americans, many of them drawn from the growing Iraqi immigrant community in San Diego. These “actors” live in the simulated town for an extended period of time, developing links with their fellow expatriates. In a curious role reversal, the insurgents are played by military personnel who most likely have no cultural ties to Iraq or Afghanistan. Thus, while the Arabic-speaking Iraqi Americans “provide the texture of the culture,” the protagonists who plot against the U.S. troops and intimidate the civilian population must identify with the “enemy.”²³

- 5 Claire Beckett, *Medina Jabal Town*, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist
- 6 Medina Wasl, street view. From “In the Box: A Tour Through the Simulated Battlefields of the U.S. Army National Training Center,” September 2012, v-e-n-u-e.com. Photo courtesy of Venue (v-e-n-u-e.com)





It has been frequently noted that the power of U.S. military technology, perversely entangled with video games and computer simulations, contributed to the cynical fiction of a “bloodless war” in Iraq. The arts organizer Rijin Sahakian suggests that in order to “extend the war” initiated in 2003, the American public had to extend its implicit “acceptance of Iraqi bodies as available to abuse, to torture and to kill,” even if images of the victims were rarely seen in the media.²⁴ *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, held at MoMA PS1 in New York (2019–20), is a rare example of an exhibition that showcased work by Iraqi artists who have lived through devastating economic sanctions, successive military invasions, and prolonged sectarian strife.²⁵ While *Theater of Operations* did much to probe the interplay of violence and disavowal that underpins virtualized warfare, it included comparatively little in the way of images made by or about Iraqi Americans. The artist Jaafar Alnabi, a child of Iraqis who immigrated to the United States in the wake of the Gulf War, explores how diasporic identity interfaces with photographic rituals that are transcultural in their reach (fig. 7). In one portrait, Alnabi photographs his mother and father in their shady suburban backyard in Minnesota. Notably, the parents of the artist appear in traditional dress. Like Beckett, Alnabi’s reflexive images draw on portraiture’s humanizing capacities even as they foreground its performative dimensions. Similarly, in her group portrait *Wedding Party*, Beckett photographs the Arab American role players at Fort Irwin in costume (fig. 8). The cast includes a cross section of Iraqi society: local elites, policemen, insurgents, and civilians. The sitters seem to conform to the roles prescribed by the simulation exercise, but their expressions and demeanor point to traces of subjectivity that read more ambiguously than the context might initially suggest.

As an “embedded artist,” distinct from accredited journalists, Beckett was given the freedom to work largely unencumbered, photographing the constructed scenographies, training exercises, and individual subjects. For their part, military officials described the collaboration as a “win-win-win”: an opportunity for them to reach the civilian population that the artist represented and to whom she was speaking (“artists, intellectuals, the

art-viewing public, Northeast U.S. residents, etc.”).²⁶ The resulting photographs are less documentary than meta-cultural—in conscious conversation with Orientalist traditions of portraiture and landscape imagery, as well as emergent tropes of Neo-Orientalism, as I discuss further below. They call attention to an accumulation of detail—the apparent “reality effect” that points to the tension between constructed scenarios (i.e., set, script, and actors) and the very real Middle East into which these military personnel would enter and from which many of the local actors had come—and to the individual decisions made by the photographer and her subjects. What becomes central is less any question of the accuracy of the set design or its scripts and more the forms of misrecognition that they enable.

In his review of Beckett’s exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the art critic Drew Johnson observes that despite the context of the art museum, some viewers took what they saw at face value. While Johnson describes himself as drawn to the “blond, blue-eyed insurgents” and the “under-detailed” architecture (i.e., that which might belie widely circulated tropes of Arab physiognomy and architecture), he is also unsettled by the quite different reaction that the work seems to elicit in other viewers. The critic recalls overhearing one man who, not having read the wall labels, believes that he is looking at images of Iraq: “What seemed odd at first glance, disorienting to me, he assimilated without a bump. This was reality.”²⁷ The photographs are caught between competing impulses: a projection of “reality,” taken for granted by some; an unmooring of that “reality,” as in Johnson’s response, one that could theoretically prompt a productive unsettling of racialized stereotypes; and a ratification of critical vigilance that one has had to adopt toward a media environment “saturated by suspicion, interpretive polyvalence, and evidentiary uncertainty.”²⁸ That is to say, what I mean by “imaginative projection” is simultaneously a tacit acknowledgment of Orientalist tropes, a subversion of them, and a recognition that what a viewer sees and assesses may or may not in any case be “real.” The point is not to identify a singular response engendered by the series or to suggest that there is a monolithic U.S. audience, but rather to signal to the varied instabilities of its depictions of “reality”—those of the training centers and those of the Middle East.

In Nochlin’s account, realism lies not in any correspondence with the actual people and places of the “Near East” but in the ability of the pictured scene to stand in for that world. On the surface, Beckett’s photographs of the constructed villages would seem to follow the same logic. Satellite disks, telephone or electricity lines, window air-conditioning units, handwritten signs, and meat hanging in butcher shops all become recognizable markers of authenticity (fig. 9). The cumulative effect of the illusion supersedes the importance attached to any single detail within that space. Enough specificity is provided that the image becomes credible, so that viewers are not inclined to further scrutinize the details. Here, the power of the photographs, unlike a firsthand visit to the training centers (in which the illusion is swiftly

- 7 Jaafar Alnabi, *Portrait of Parents, Kadhum & Warda, August 2019*. Fujifilm Provia 100f 120mm Film, 20 × 20 in. Courtesy of the artist
- 8 Claire Beckett, *Wedding Party*, 2009. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist
- 9 Claire Beckett, *Butcher Shop, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009*. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist





10 Claire Beckett, *Jabal Village Mosque, Fort Irwin, CA*, 2009. Pigment print, 40 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist

11 Claire Beckett, *Jabal Village Mosque, Fort Irwin, CA*, 2008. Pigment print, 40 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist

12 Thomas Phillips, *Lord Byron*, ca. 1835 (replica based on an 1813 work). Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 × 25 1/8 in. Image © National Portrait Gallery, London

13 Claire Beckett, *Marine Lance Corporal Joshua Stevens playing the role of a Taliban fighter, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, CA*, 2009. Pigment print, 40 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist

punctured by obvious artifice), lies in their ability to capture a textured reality that feels relatively familiar to viewers, derived as much from distracted consumption of fictive dramas set in the region as from news reports.²⁹ And yet, as the curator Patricia Hickson writes, this is always a “feigned reality filled with the incongruities of cultural simulation.”³⁰ Through the juxtaposition of multiple mosque photographs that progressively challenge viewer perceptions, Beckett’s series reveals the ease with which perceptions of “reality” are undermined.

In one image, Beckett photographs a simulated mosque from a distance (fig. 10). The composition is punctuated by a blue-domed minaret in the center of the frame. Seen from this vantage point, viewers might be led to believe that the tower and the adjacent white building are made of concrete, and the mosque vaguely recalls familiar televisual images. For someone who has only seen images of mosques, the signification is likely successful enough to evince belief. This illusion is punctured, however, in a second photograph that emphasizes the contingent and tenuous qualities of this makeshift reality (fig. 11). Once again, the eye is drawn to a polychrome minaret that accentuates the vertical orientation of the image. Except in this version, the shaft of the minaret is brown — in what may seem like an unlikely color choice even if the viewer cannot say



why. Moreover, the structure leans awkwardly against a plywood box yet to be painted, drawing attention to the haphazard construction of the simulated mosque and of the reality in which it pretends to partake. If the first photograph seems to provide enough detail to be credible, to forestall scrutiny, the second photograph calls immediate attention to its participation in a fabricated reality. Taken together, the photographs shuttle viewers between disjunctive states, between an affirmation and undoing of preconceptions about the region.

Beckett's portraits of U.S. military personnel in the guise of Iraqi or Afghan combatants or citizens draw on an established tradition of Orientalist portraiture in which self-fashioning is achieved through the knowing manipulation of clothing and artifacts that signal otherness. One powerful art-historical precedent is Thomas Phillip's portrait of Lord Byron in Albanian dress, in which the famed English poet poses in garments he acquired while on a Grand Tour of the Mediterranean in 1809 (fig. 12). The turban and brocaded jacket are indicative of an emergent European fascination with cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. Yet if Byron's apparel suggests a cosmopolitan perspective that transcends nation and nationalism, his self-conscious

appropriation of these signifiers ultimately serves to heighten the distinction between the sitter's aristocratic identity and the Oriental persona that he can adopt as a function of his class position.³¹ In one of Beckett's portraits, for example, Lance Corporal Joshua Stevens is photographed playing the role of a Taliban fighter (fig. 13). The Marine wears a cream-colored dishdasha and a deep blue headscarf that conceals his blond hair. This photograph also foregrounds this tension, in that viewers are led to contemplate the seeming disjunction between Steven's fair complexion and blue eyes and his "ethnic" attire—a visual incoherence that holds only if we recall that Arab protagonists are almost universally coded as dark-skinned in U.S. televisual representations. The question of how to read identity in visual terms is also complicated by the tendency in the United States to align Muslims with Arabs, a move that works to collapse the distinction between religion and ethnicity. At the same time, the persistent othering of Arab Americans in the public sphere stands in tension with their designation as "White" in the 2020 U.S. Census. The Egyptian American journalist Moustafa Bayoumi





14 Claire Beckett, *American civilians playing the role of Iraqi village women drinking tea, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, CA, 2009*. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist

speaks eloquently of the strange sense of disjunction that he experiences as someone who is “brown in reality and white in bureaucracy.”³²

As with the portrait of Byron, performative authority belongs to the dominant culture (if not to the individual sitter, given the Marine’s restricted agency in the military environment). Even so, crucial differences separate Beckett’s portrait from the nineteenth-century visual tradition that it references. At the military center, both trainees and civilians wore plain cotton dishdashas and headscarves, complicating a distinction between the two groups and unsettling categories of racial otherness. In the photograph, Stevens wears clothing that only loosely references traditional Afghan dress with some telling inconsistencies. The Marine’s top resembles a *jalabiya*, a wide-cut collarless garment commonly worn in Egypt and Sudan. This is quite different from the *shalwar kameez*—the long shirt and wide pants worn by members of the Taliban. Moreover, Stevens’s navy blue headscarf has only a superficial resemblance

to a *lungie*, the specific style of turban worn by adherents of the Islamist group. Although American viewers may not realize it, what gets lost in each case is the range of meanings that specific articles of clothing acquired in Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime. Between 1978 and 1992, Afghanistan was ruled by a Marxist-Leninist regime, the DRA. During that time, the *pakul*—a flat, rolled-up, round-topped men’s cap—gained popularity in large parts of the country as the favored headgear of the mujahideen, an alliance of guerrilla groups who defeated the DRA and their Soviet backers. When the rival Taliban took control of Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the *pakul* was forbidden and the turban was made obligatory.³³

In another portrait set in Wadi Al-Sahara, Beckett photographs Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen assuming the role of an Iraqi nurse (see frontispiece). The selective deployment of perceived Muslim fashion, in tension with the performer’s physical features, works in several ways at once. Veen is wearing an abaya that covers her body, leaving only her hands visible. A white hijab loosely frames her face. The covering, coupled with the subject’s demure body language and cradled arms, seems to echo preconceptions of Muslim women as sexually repressed. As the art historian Reina Lewis notes, the U.S. and European obsession with the hijab “fuels moral panics about Muslims that within the securitizing discourse post-9/11 presents Islam as uniquely oppressive to women.”³⁴ Yet Beckett’s photograph simultaneously unsettles the cultural projections that serve to limit how such garments are commonly read within non-Muslim societies. Veen’s use of cosmetics and French-tip fingernails presents a challenge to an Orientalist gaze that cannot encompass Islam in the framework of capitalist modernity and globalized fashion. Furthermore, the photograph invites comparison with familiar televisual images of U.S. women in the Middle East, including those



15 Claire Beckett, *Afghan-American civilians playing the role of Afghan villagers*, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center, CA, 2009. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist

of Carrie Mathison in the series *Homeland* (2011–20). Here, the White woman dons culturally appropriate garments both as a sign of respect for a foreign culture and as the means of cultural infiltration. As the scholar Mary Roberts has argued in her work on nineteenth-century travelers granted access to harems in Istanbul and Cairo, this “sartorial metamorphosis” provides “a powerful strategy by which European women” both affirm their “privileged status” and penetrate domestic boundaries.³⁵ Beckett’s portrait starts with a racial inversion already in play at the training center, in which a U.S. soldier performs the role of Arab civilian, but it suggests other configurations.

Another category in Beckett’s series contains tableaux, in which evident performativity returns to a discussion of Orientalism as a visual tradition. These images consist of multiple subjects playing roles: White male soldiers cast as hostile forces, wearing outfits that draw on elements of Pashtun traditional dress; non-White civilians adopting the roles of Iraqi villagers, drinking tea at a communal table (fig. 14); and civilian Afghan Americans cast as Afghan locals (fig. 15). Certainly, the tableaux draw attention to the manipulations of the photographer and to the authority of the military scripts to apprehend the adversary at the cultural level. They recall earlier pictorial traditions that,



16 Claire Beckett, *Afghan-American civilians playing the role of Afghan village women*, 2009. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist

as Said famously argued, acted as discursive constructs, expressing a will to manipulate a manifestly different world and therein “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”³⁶ At the same time, in the use of unnatural poses, overhead angles, and inconsistent details, Beckett’s images signal to the instabilities of cultural impersonation, which always risks undermining its authority by calling attention to its own status as a performance. Yet if one can speak broadly of Orientalism as unstable in this way, the tableaux evoke a more contemporary set of incongruities—forms of role-playing that are less about knowledge of another culture than they are about imagination and psychological projection. Afghan Americans play the role of “native” insurgents in a war game that takes place in the state of California. U.S. citizens enact the roles of civilians, but they do so in such a way as to conflate or obscure the subjectivities of White American and Middle Eastern noncombatants.

In their essay “Neo-Orientalism,” the scholars Juliet Williams and Ali Behdad identify a contemporary mode of representation that builds on classical Orientalism but at the same time “engenders new tropes of othering.” As evidence of this, they point to the public fascination with memoirs written by Arab and Iranian women, bestsellers that “pointedly criticize Islamic governments and unapologetically advocate regime change in Iran and other countries in the region.” Notable examples of this phenomenon include Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Roya Hakakian’s *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), and also precursors like Hanan Al-Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1992). They describe this subgenre as “monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other.”³⁷ This would no doubt resonate for readers of Said’s *Orientalism*, but where Neo-Orientalism crucially differs from its earlier counterpart is in its reliance on diasporic figures who were brought up in the Middle East. In this regard, Williams and Behdad foreground the ways in which exilic writers like Nafisi claim a special kind of authenticity that they leverage to speak as authorities on Iranian society and Islam. The cultural simulation strategies employed by the U.S. military are similarly reliant on imported knowledge provided by “native informants.” As the anthropologist Nomi Stone has noted, many of the role-players who take part in these simulations are war refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. While trainees are typically required to attend language classes (the duration often depends on rank and mission), Stone observes that the soldiers involved in these exercises “did not appear to understand the role-players (who were speaking in their own dialects), nor did they try to converse with them in Arabic within or outside simulations,” but generally relied on interpreters who accompanied them.³⁸

Beckett’s photographs also point to the limitations of cultural access and recognition within these scenarios. Yet in contrast to the veiled and prescriptive interactions described by Stone, in *Simulating Iraq* audiences are left to discern identity based on a set of external visual signs or markers. While some viewers might regard these images with critical suspicion (I am thinking specifically of people like myself who have origins or heritage in the Middle East), Beckett’s work takes on a different valence when it is encountered by viewers who have little or no knowledge of the region beyond the images that stand in for it. In those instances, the portraits raise the question of what viewers can know about the role-players based on their outward appearance. The sitters pictured in one striking image from the series are émigrés who fled Afghanistan following the onset of war in 2001 (fig. 16). While these women belong to a younger generation raised in the United States, in this militarized context they serve as embodied repositories of cultural knowledge (not unlike Afghan locals who act in the U.S. military as translators and proxies). Some of these role-players have relatives in Afghanistan, which complicates their involvement in training exercises that could signal their collaboration with the “enemy occupier.” Thus, here, the women use their headscarves not to convey modesty in line with Islamic customs but to conceal their identities. The tableaux appeal to our illusions, to what some viewers think they know about these women, but this is undercut as soon as the identities of the role-players are questioned. Pointedly, the women wear not the chador imposed by the Taliban but a variation on the colorful tunic adopted by various ethnic groups across Central Asia. The illusion of authenticity is again punctured by contingent details in the picture, such as the combat boots and athletic shoes worn by the women. Moreover, the headscarves that on the surface could read as traditional have been purchased from a fast-fashion retailer based in Europe and North America.

The Converts

In her recent series *The Converts*, Beckett photographs Americans — most of them White — who were not born into families practicing Islam but who have adopted the faith as adults.³⁹ Her subjects range from recent converts to individuals who have adhered to the religion for decades. The range of Islamic sects on display is also notable in its diversity: Beckett pictures Salafists as well as Sufi and Sunni Muslims. As in the *Simulating Iraq* photographs, these images arguably speak to an almost ethnographic interest in how aspects of Arab and Muslim culture are taken up by people who have little to no prior knowledge of the Middle East. That said, if Beckett's series is fundamentally about the globalization of Islam, it is also about how U.S. citizens as viewers might access a cultural minority (roughly one percent of the U.S. population) that is unfamiliar and persistently represented as a threat to the nation.⁴⁰

Numerous scholars point to how Islam is frequently represented in the United States as static and monolithic, the “quintessential other, the antimodern antithesis to a supposedly secular,” modern, and liberal West. The anthropologist Lara Deeb states this commonly held perception in order to debunk it and “explore the multiple intersections between ideas and practices of modernity and of piety in a Shi'i Muslim community in al-Dahiyya.”⁴¹ The tenets of Muslim piety, especially those promoted by Islamist groups, are seen as out of step with the demands of advanced capitalist society (secularism, individual freedom, and disenchantment). Most often, in news reports on the Taliban in Afghanistan, accounts of Sharia law, and public justifications of Executive Order 13769 (signed in January 2017 and titled “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States”), Islam is cast either as a cultural antagonist to a hegemonic modernity or as selectively modern. Either way, Islam is written out of the universal project of modernity or placed in a subordinate position to the unfolding of a singular history.⁴² Yet as the post-9/11 era has also brought into sharp relief, the contemporary moment is marked by the global resurgence of religious movements, from Christian evangelism in the United States to Hindu fundamentalism in India. These seemingly anachronistic revivals, of which “political Islam” is but one variant, challenge the idea that religion and modernity stand in simple opposition to one another.

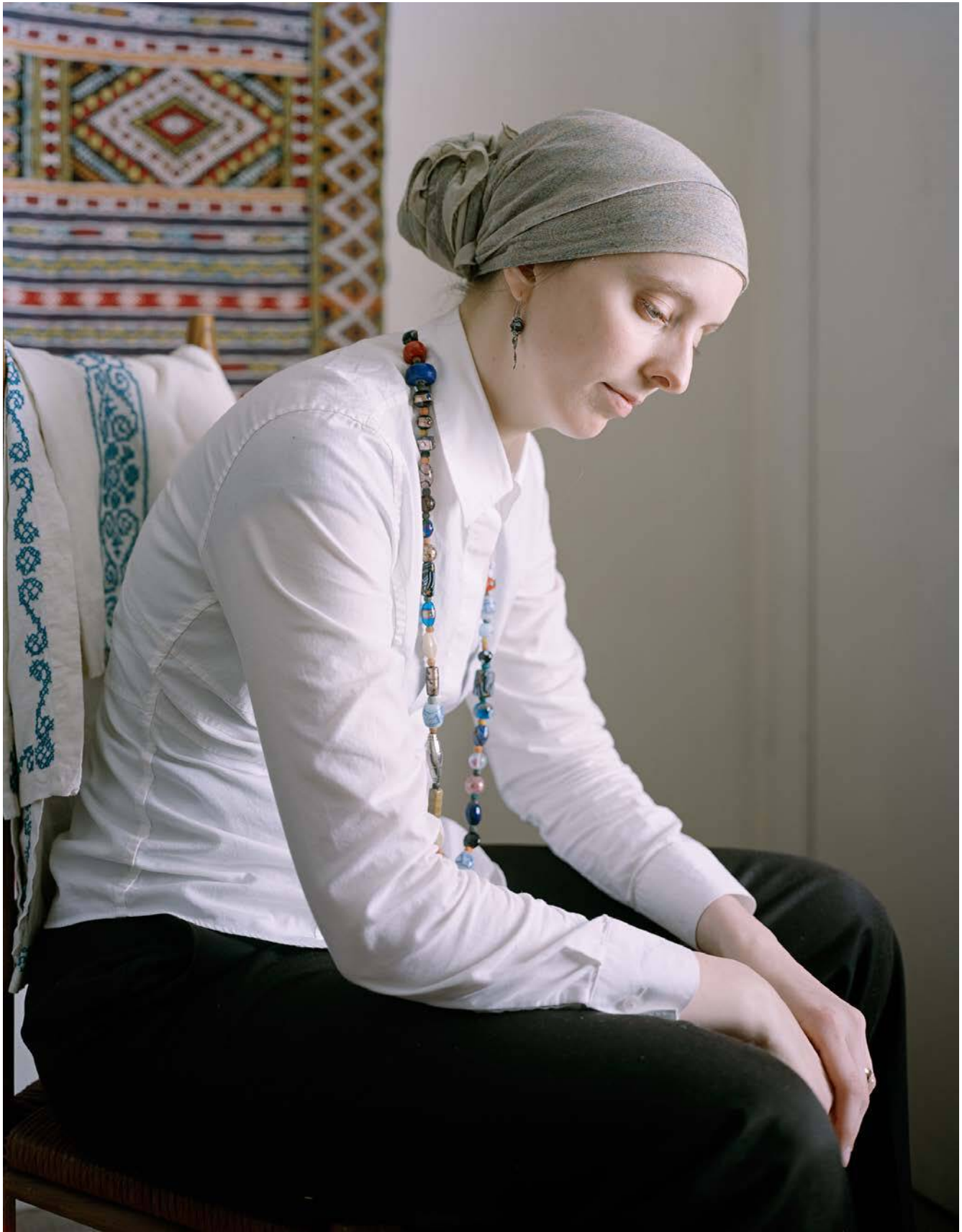
Moreover, U.S. Muslims destabilize any assumptions that “there is a foreign place — a distant, contiguous part of the world — where Islam properly belongs.” To this end, the anthropologist Zareena Grewal asks two questions that bear directly on the *Converts* series: “What might an authentic, American Islam look like in the context of a mobile, heterogeneous, transnational community of believers? What makes a religion, a people recognizably American?” While U.S. Muslims are granted legal rights afforded by the nation to citizens, their links to a global umma — the belief that all Muslims, regardless of their nationality or background, share a common faith and a unified community — stands in tension with the dominant conception of cultural citizenship, what Grewal defines as “the collectively imagined affiliations among American citizens — and the corresponding imagined separation from people outside the nation's borders (as well as outsiders within).”⁴³

As noted above, the imagined Muslim threat to “domestic America” is projected onto an external enemy, despite evidence to suggest that the more likely danger comes not from foreign nationals or recent immigrants but homegrown recruits to Islamist movements. As the journalist Maïa de La Baume notes, “French antiterrorism officials have been warning for years that converts represent a critical element of

the terrorist threat in Europe, because they have Western passports and do not stand out.”⁴⁴ One index of this at the popular cultural level is the blockbuster television series *Homeland*, a show that, in the words of one of its many critics, “insists on an image of . . . Muslims as overwhelmingly sadistic, barbaric, and morally bankrupt.”⁴⁵ While *Homeland* relies on the simplification of the terrorist as an alien who infiltrates domestic America, the plot of the first season includes *Al Jazeera* journalists who secretly work for al-Qa’ida, Muslim professors at U.S. universities who are undercover operatives for the terrorist network, and a White Marine’s secret conversion to Islam. In one memorable scene, the converted Marine sneaks into his suburban garage to pray. White U.S. converts to Islam present a particular dilemma to a nationalist ideology that constructs “American” and “Muslim” as diametrically opposite categories. The Arabic studies scholar Stephen Sheehi argues that while contemporary Islamophobia builds on previous strains of Orientalism, it introduces a new twist: where previously “Brown Arab” Muslims were cast as irrational and backward, this view is now applied to Muslims in general as a component of “America’s racial unconscious.”⁴⁶ In this regard, the humanities scholar Gauri Viswanathan points to the subversive potential of conversion: “By undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries [by] which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders.” In similar terms, also applicable to the United States, the anthropologist Esra Özyürek argues that White converts to Islam give rise to anxiety that permeates recent German debates about national identity: “In a context dominated by fears of Islamic religion and culture taking over Europe, worries about individual converts to Islam come to the surface. Ethnically European and, more specifically, German Muslims become the most visible manifestations of Islam taking over the European mind, life-style, and culture, which do not have an agreed-on, positive self-definition.”⁴⁷

How is White U.S. Muslim identity understood given that Islam is increasingly racialized and presented as an external threat to the integrity of the American homeland? This is the central question that Beckett explores in the *Converts* series. As in *Simulating Iraq*, the artist sets up a fascinating interplay between the documentary function of photography and the medium’s ability to open a performative space in which multiple and contradictory identity formations can be enacted—both at the level of the image and in the lived realities shaped by it. Beckett recasts some of the questions about ethnic drag and cross-cultural appropriation she explored in the context of the military training exercises, but with a crucial distinction: while the images in *Simulating Iraq* depict a predominantly White cast of Americans inhabiting the roles of Arab and Muslim others, in often tenuous ways, *The Converts* further undermines the distinction between a hegemonic conception of U.S. identity and what it excludes. Although many of the sitters were born and raised in the United States and identify as White, their ethnic and racial status is arguably filtered through their adopted religion.

The photograph *Mary* self-consciously draws on the pictorial conventions of a portraiture tradition that is secular-humanist or Christian in orientation (fig. 17). A young, pale-skinned woman dressed in simple black trousers and a white collared shirt is pictured in three-quarter view. Her hair is mostly concealed by a gray-green scarf that covers her head but leaves her face exposed. Her gaze is cast downward, and she seems not to acknowledge the presence of the camera. Indeed, there is little in her expression that would provide access to her thoughts or personality. Moreover, in contrast to other portraits in the series, there is nothing in the image that



immediately codes the subject as Muslim. The muted tones that dominate the picture are only interrupted by the colorful tapestry that hangs on the wall behind the sitter, the glass bead necklace she wears, and an embroidered cloth on the back of the chair. Although these objects might signify as “ethnic” to some viewers, they are not obviously tied to Arab or Islamic culture. In this image, religious identity is not understood through reference to a set of external objects or physical traits. *Mary* thus opposes visual structures of social profiling that function to racialize the Muslim body. Pointedly, especially given the Christian connotations of the subject’s name, the photograph also borrows heavily from the formal language of Renaissance portraiture. The woman’s pose strikingly echoes the central figure in Donatello’s marble relief *Madonna of the Clouds* (1425–35, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and the natural light calls to mind Johannes Vermeer’s carefully illuminated domestic spaces. By implicitly aligning the figure of the Muslim convert with Christian iconography, Beckett also undermines the contemporary impulse to situate Islam as outside or indeed antithetical to Western values and norms.

17 Claire Beckett, *Mary*, 2012.
Pigment print, 40 × 30 in.
Courtesy of the artist

18 Claire Beckett, *Hans with his teacher, Shaykh Lokman Efendi*, 2012. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Another photograph, *Hans with his teacher, Shaykh Lokman Efendi* (fig. 18), depicts two men who belong to a group that claims allegiance with the Naqshbandi-Haqqani, a



transnational religious organization with roots in the North Caucasus. Under the guidance of Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order has become one of the most prominent Sufi communities and politically active Muslim organizations in the United States. The group has a doctrinal predisposition toward religious pluralism and multi-denominationalism, and has been openly critical of the orthodox models of Islam practiced and promoted by Salafist leaders. Hans and Shaykh Lokman Efendi are photographed inside the dergah—a meeting place for Sufi Muslims—that the Naqshbandi-Haqqani established on a fifty-acre farm in Sidney Center, New York. There, about two dozen adherents of the group “tend sheep, grow vegetables, worship and study religious teachings.”⁴⁸ In the portrait, Beckett explicitly foregrounds the crucial relationship between teacher and student within conversion communities. Many new converts struggle to fulfill their newly learned religious obligations in a society not organized around Islamic beliefs and practices. The need to master the Arabic language quickly, at least enough to recite the Qur’an and the sunnah (the body of traditional social and legal customs and practices of the Islamic community), also presents a significant challenge for these relative latecomers to the religion. For many American viewers, this image might suggest a displaced or transplanted set of traditions. Yet

19 Claire Beckett, *Imam Subaib Webb*, 2012. Pigment print, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy of the artist



this would be to presuppose a universe in which Muslims are rooted in their proper place. Against this view, art historians like Finbarr Barry Flood emphasize how the transnational movement of people, ideas, and cultural forms has been an intrinsic feature of Islam from its inception.⁴⁹ Seen from this angle, Beckett's image points to modes of transmission and transformation that do not assume the existence of singular or unified points of origin.

In another portrait from the series, Beckett photographs Imam Suhaib Webb (fig. 19), at the time the head imam (worship leader) of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, the largest mosque in New England. Webb was raised as a Christian in Oklahoma and converted to Islam in the early 1990s. A charismatic figure with a national profile, the native Midwesterner has used social media to cultivate a sizeable following among a multicultural constituency of young Muslim Americans. Webb uses popular culture to deliver speeches that challenge the fundamentalist doctrines promulgated by so-called Islamic reform movements. The three-quarter view that Beckett employs again connects the image to well-established pictorial devices. Even so, this portrait also departs from those conventions in important ways. Although Webb kneels in a prayer position, the unusual framing of the photograph conceals the lower half of his body from view. Moreover, because his blue business suit and tie would not be out of place in a university, law firm, or any number of bureaucratic offices, it is not immediately evident that this is a religious space or context. Beckett has chosen an aperture setting that blurs the titles of the books in the background, and there is nothing that reveals that the photograph was taken inside a mosque. These factors allow for a degree of ambiguity that is perhaps not accorded to some of the other converts in the series. Instead of invoking the authority of visual traditions that are overtly linked to religious practices, Beckett seems to work against it to produce an image that does not neatly fit into a canonical format or tradition. While Webb's appearance might seem to represent an "American Islam," in which the former overwrites the latter, the lack of obvious signifiers in the image also undermines the binarization of those two terms.

Through the allusions to pictorial traditions, including those of European Orientalism, as well as popular constructions of Islam and the Middle East, Beckett's series foregrounds the crucial role that lens-based media play in rehearsing and, indeed, mediating the encounter with other cultures and locales. At the same time, the artist reveals the mechanisms through which these simulations are staged. On a very general level, the details in these images are culturally accurate, even and perhaps especially in the pointed anonymity and stripped-back signification of the first and third photographs of the series discussed here. The focus on physiognomic details also highlights the split between a performer and the role that he or she adopts in front of the camera. Beckett's series not only calls attention to these contradictions, and so unsettles the documentary claims of photography, but also points to the charged and often partial deconstructions of geographic and cultural exclusions. If this ambiguity casts doubt on the truth claims of photography, it also suggests that Orientalism is at once instantiated and most effectively undermined through a critical miming of its iconography and formal operations.

Beckett's work reveals how representations of the Middle East made in and for a domestic U.S. audience exhibit a deep sense of anxiety founded not only in fear of the other but also uncertainty about what defines the cultural boundaries that serve to regulate the distinction between "us" and "them." The unprecedented movement of people and images across national boundaries arguably opens up a greater diversity of cultural perspectives, but it has also served to undermine traditional identity formations rooted in primordial differences. U.S. military simulation exercises function as a space in which soldiers can be exposed to a foreign culture as a component of their preparations for war. Ethnic mimicry suggests that some level of ambivalent identification with the Other is built into these rehearsals. For the art historian Nuit Banai, these practices of cultural immersion serve

“to transform the unfamiliar cultures, peoples, and locations of the Middle East into a representational range both knowable and coercible.”⁵⁰ It would be tempting to conclude from this that the rehearsal strategies enacted at sites like Medina Wasl involve a kind of epistemic mastery over the Other. However, as I have shown, Beckett’s photographs of these architectural simulations foreground their tenuous nature. Similarly, the portraits of military personnel point to the disjunction or gap between the role and the role-player. Yet the photographs also tap into a durable ensemble of fantasies about the region—fantasies that have very real and deleterious effects. In this regard, Beckett reveals that it is the persistence of cultural imagination—not knowledge—that fuels Orientalism in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

- 1 Brian T. Edwards notes that terms such as “the Middle East,” “the Muslim world,” or “the Arab world” all work to “collapse internal differences and diversity in place of an imagined totality.” See Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2015), 206. Along the same lines, Derek Gregory shows how discourses of the Middle East express an imposed cartographic imagination shaped by long-standing European and American interests in the region. See Gregory, “Middle of What, East of Where?” in *Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Artists*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari and Jill Baird (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013).
- 2 Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 38, 37.
- 3 Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), 10.
- 4 Hannah Feldman, “Flash Forward: Pictures at War,” in *Photography’s Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, ed. Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 154.
- 5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, rev. ed. (1978; repr., New York: Random House, 2003), 290.
- 6 Edwards, *After the American Century*.
- 7 Benjamin Genocchio, “Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2010, NJ14.
- 8 Amirali Ghasemi quoted in “When Global Art Meanders on a Magic Carpet: A Conversation on Tehran’s Roaming Biennial,” in “Visual Arts and Art Practices in the Middle East,” special issue, *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 288–99, quote at 294.
- 9 Jaleh Mansoor, “Shirin Neshat,” *Artforum International* 46, no. 8 (April 2008): 365.
- 10 Homi K. Bhabha, “The White Stuff,” *Artforum International* 36, no. 9 (May 1998): 21.
- 11 Said, *Orientalism*, xix.
- 12 Patrick Porter, “Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War,” *Parameters* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 12, 47.
- 13 Gregory, “‘The rush to the intimate’: Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn,” *Radical Philosophy* 150 (July–August 2008): 11.
- 14 Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 38 (July 2005): 42.
- 15 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 64.
- 16 Michael Griffin, “Picturing America’s ‘War on Terrorism’ in Afghanistan and Iraq: Photographic Motifs as News Frames,” *Journalism* 5, no. 4 (November 2004): 383.
- 17 Dana L. Cloud, “‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 3 (August 2004): 285–306.
- 18 Thomas Dworzak, “Artist Project/ Taliban,” *Cabinet* 12 (Fall–Winter 2003), cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/dworzak.php.
- 19 Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2014), 35.
- 20 Butler, *Frames of War*, 43.
- 21 A 2017 article concludes that “most Americans—who live in a country with a relatively small Muslim population—have said they know little or nothing about Islam.” Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World,” *Pew Research Center*, August 9, 2017, pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world.
- 22 Claire Beckett, interview with the author, April 2019.
- 23 Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley, “It’s Artificial Afghanistan: A Simulated Battlefield in the Mojave Desert,” *Atlantic Magazine*, May 18, 2013; theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/05/its-artificial-afghanistan-

- a-simulated-battlefield-in-the-mojave-desert/275983.
- 24 Rijin Sahakian, "Embedded Horizons," in *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991–2011*, ed. Euba Katrib and Peter Eeley (Long Island City, N.Y.: MoMA PS1, 2020), 147.
 - 25 Organized by Peter Eeley and Ruba Katrib, *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991–2011* (November 3, 2019–March 1, 2020) featured more than three hundred works by more than eighty artists based in Iraq and its diasporas, as well as artists from Europe and the United States.
 - 26 Beckett interview.
 - 27 Drew Johnson, "Your Eyes Deceive You: Claire Beckett at the Wadsworth Atheneum," *Paris Review*, August 7, 2012, theparisreview.org/blog/2012/08/07/your-eyes-deceive-you-claire-beckett-at-the-wadsworth-atheneum. Indeed, as Beckett has noted, the Wadsworth staff recognized that this might be the case. Although the artist and curator had selected *Army Specialists John Griffin and Bobby Kirby playing the role of members of the Mahdi Army* (2009) for the banner to hang outside the museum, they were overridden by the director, who feared that the image was too violent to present to passersby. Beckett interview.
 - 28 Adi Kunstman and Rebecca L. Stein, "Digital Suspicion, Politics, and the Middle East," *Critical Inquiry*, accessed March 15, 2019, criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/digital_suspicion_politics_and_the_middle_east.
 - 29 Beckett interview.
 - 30 Patricia Hickson, "Simulating Iraq," in *Claire Beckett, Matrix 163: Simulating Iraq* (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2011), 4.
 - 31 Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 7. This is not to say that cultural cross-dressing was not at times multidirectional, as Kristel Smentek and Ahmet Ersoy have argued in their respective essays on Jeanne-Étienne Liotard and Osman Hamdi Bey. Rather, it is to emphasize the social privilege that allowed Byron to take on the guise of another. See Smentek, "Looking East: Jean-Étienne Liotard, the Turkish Painter," in "Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century," ed. Nebahat Avcioğlu and Finbarr Barry Flood, special edition, *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010): 84–112; Ersoy, "A Sartorial Tribute to Late Tanzimat Ottomanism: The Elbise-i 'Osmaniyye Album," *Muqarnas* 20, no. 1 (2003): 187–207.
 - 32 Moustafa Bayoumi, "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?" *Amerasia Journal* 27, no. 3–28, no. 1 (2001–2): 73.
 - 33 Willem Vogelsang, "Dressing for the Future in Ancient Garb: The Use of Cloths in Afghan Politics," *Khil'a* 1 (2005): 129.
 - 34 Reina Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2015), 46.
 - 35 Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007), 30, 99.
 - 36 Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
 - 37 Juliet Williams and Ali Behdad, "Neo-Orientalism," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 284, 285.
 - 38 Nomi Stone, "Living the Laughscream: Human Technology and Affective Maneuvers in the Iraq War," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (February 2017): 171n2.
 - 39 While it remains beyond the scope of this essay, one question that *The Converts* raises has to do with the politics of Black alignments with Islam in a period in which African American activists not only confront entrenched systems of racial violence but also seek to disrupt the hegemony of powerful national narratives premised on notions of self-determination and sovereignty. See Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2012), xvi.
 - 40 For a discussion of these demographics, see the report "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape.
 - 41 Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 4.
 - 42 Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000). See also, Exec. Order No. 13769, 82 F.R. 8977 (2017).
 - 43 Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2013), 6, 16, 5.
 - 44 Maïa de La Baume, "More in France Are Turning to Islam, Challenging a Nation's Idea of Itself," *New York Times*, February 4, 2013, A8.
 - 45 Rozina Ali, "How 'Homeland' Helps Justify the War on Terror," *New Yorker*, December 20, 2015, newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/how-homeland-helps-justify-the-war-on-terror.
 - 46 Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Atlanta, Ga.: Clarity Press, 2011), 11.
 - 47 Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), 16; and Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015), 135.
 - 48 Julia C. Mead, "Leaving Stony Brook to Follow a Sheikh," *New York Times*, April 9, 2006, L11.
 - 49 Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).
 - 50 Nuit Banai, "Simulating Iraq: Cultural Mediation and the Effects of the Real," *Public Culture* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 249.