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AUTOMATIC ISLAM: DIVINE ANARCHY AND THE MACHINES OF GOD*

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This essay explores how particular variants of "Muslim anarchism", as distinct forms of radical anti-authoritarian religion, subvert conventional approaches to Islamic hermeneutics by drawing on intellectual traditions and discursive strategies external to them. Through recourse to the mutuality between autonomy and automatism, most notably in Western avant-garde and countercultural aesthetics, it elucidates the import of automatic transcendence and retro-futurist imaginaries as novel interpretative techniques for spiritual emancipation in radically libertarian approaches to Islam. My aim is to show how the rich, multivalent concept of automatism, neglected in studies of social and religious phenomena, can be a useful way of elucidating the hermeneutics of specific strands of Muslim anarchism. In doing so, the paper also challenges received understandings of "radical" Islam and the restrictive polarity between militancy and liberalism that has come to frame discussion on global Islam. To this end, I focus on the thought of Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), Michael Muhammad Knight and Yakoub Islam.

While there has been a significant growth in studies of global Islam since 9/11, conceptions of Muslim radicalism have been conflated almost entirely with those of Islamist militancy, epitomized in the burgeoning discourse of "radicalization".[1] Elsewhere, innovation in Islamic thought has been identified chiefly with reformist attempts to synthesize Islamic and Western values, or, more specifically, the assimilation of Islamic political thought to the liberal-democratic state.[2] These dominant narratives reflect how an emergent reformist discourse of Muslim liberalism—which has arisen primarily to contest globalized forms of

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1 Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences*, 2nd edn (Farnham, 2011); Magnus Ranstorp, ed., *Understanding Violent Radicalization: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (New York, 2009).

2 Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006); Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the*

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Islamist violence—has increasingly colonized the ideological terrain upon which all forms of non-militancy in Islam have come to be defined. The term "Muslim liberalism" refers here to various forms of contemporary Islamic thought which stress that Islam is not fundamentally at odds with the values and variant institutional forms of Western liberal democracy. Aside from a small number of secularists calling for the radical delinking of state and religion whose prominent Western media profiles belie their relative lack of influence among Muslims,[3] such perspectives typically tend to regard state authority as a critical guarantor of a free society under Islam and traditional forms of Islamic religious authority as vital elements in fostering a virtuous Muslim society. Among proponents of this synthesis are orthodox, even conservative, "classical" Muslims who emphasize the imperative of social order, albeit within a framework of social justice, which the state can best provide;[4] assorted "representatives" of so-called "moderate" Islam, including religious entrepreneurs, media personalities and self-appointed community leaders who have been preoccupied with allaying the fears of Western governments in light of Islamist militancy;[5] and intellectuals actively engaged in constructing a rights-based Islamic discourse compatible with the liberal-democratic state.[6]

The way in which these reformists, of various hues, have engaged with the West by accepting the institutional parameters of its dominant political culture of liberal modernity (the state, the rule of law, representative democracy, human rights) even as they seek ostensibly to contest their precise content,

Post-Islamist Turn (Stanford, 2007); Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford, 2009).

3 For example Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji. Like their more traditionally inclined Muslim reformist counterparts, though in divergent ways, they share a focus on the importance of the role of the state and legal and institutional remedies in the promotion of liberty.

4 This tends to centre on the primacy of the four canonical schools of Sunni jurisprudence. It is personified in organizations such as the US-based Zaytuna Institute, now College, and the UK-based Radical Middle Way, and has been associated with a relatively small circle of scholars, some of whom are or have been government appointees, such as the Egyptian grand mufti Ali Gomaa and the Saudi-based Mauritanian Abdullah bin Bayyah, and several of whom have engaged with Western counterterrorist governmental policy agendas.

5 This is a hotchpotch of individuals and groups eager to "represent" a rather ill-defined "moderate" Islam, primarily to Western audiences, reflected most clearly in several of the signatories to the "Amman Message" (Nov. 2004) and the open letter "A Common Word Between Us and You" (Oct. 2007). For a critique of such initiatives see Faisal Devji, "Muslim Liberals: Epistles of Moderation", 18 Oct. 2007, at www.opendemocracy.net/article/muslim_liberals_epistles_of_moderation, accessed 28 March 2013.

6 The activist scholars Rachid Ghannouci, head of Tunisia's ruling Al Nahda Party, and Tariq Ramadan are prominent examples.

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however, has also set in train certain exclusionary interpretative practices. This can be understood broadly in four ways: first, by fostering a binary discourse of "Muslim militancy versus Muslim liberalism" which has come to dominate debates about the fragmentation of Islamic authority; second, by making existing vocabularies of Muslim radicalism coterminous with Islamist militancy;[7] third, by bolstering institutional orthodoxies which have little room for the free expression of "heretical" religious tropes and impulses; and fourth, by equating all forms of anti-authority and anti-statism in Islam implicitly with the parlous pulverization of conventional forms of religious authority. On this view, far from being liberating, Muslim liberalism can be seen to function as a differentially inflected disciplining force for religious orthodoxy and state-centrism in the face of a perceived existential threat to Islam from militancy; in fact, the self-images of Muslim liberalism have been largely constructed in the context of this threat and have, in turn, come to be constrained by it.

As a consequence of the intellectual closure brought about by this preoccupation with militancy, non-violent, non-statist and non-liberal forms of contemporary Muslim radicalism have remained largely beyond the margins of scholarly inquiry. It is revealing of the hegemony of the dominant framing of radical Islam that such neglected radically libertarian writings have now begun to be coopted in Muslim liberal fora which have arisen, in large part, to contest Islamist militancy. The journal *Critical Muslim*, for example, which has recently hosted the work of Michael Muhammad Knight, a prominent anti-authoritarian writer I discuss in this essay, is tied to the Muslim Institute—a once-vocal body in British Muslim and Islamist politics—and various figures from the rather narrow pool of Muslim media personalities in the West whose public profiles have been fostered largely through this kind of liberal contestation since 9/11.[8] In its institutional foundations, though not necessarily its content, the journal symbolizes both the recycling, or rebranding, of formerly conservative or establishment postures and figures now marketed as liberal gatekeepers pushing boundaries, and the way in which the dominant discourses and categories of liberalism have themselves increasingly come to subsume more radical forms of Muslim critique and debate in the West.

This paper argues that this neglect has significant repercussions both for understanding the breadth of Muslim engagement with the West and for

7 Peter Mandaville has also noted this inhibitive polarity but has not focused his analysis on Muslim anarchism. Peter Mandaville, "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24/2 (2007), 101–15, 111.

8 Michael Muhammad Knight, "The Taqwacore Version", *Critical Muslim*, 2 (April–June 2012), 75–85.

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illustrating the intellectual and moral limitations of the discourses of Muslim liberalism. Distinct forms of radical anti-authoritarian Islam subvert the conventional approaches to Islamic hermeneutics which Muslim liberals espouse, by drawing on intellectual traditions and discursive strategies external to them. Rather than adopt or adapt to dominant discourses steeped in institutional design or rights-based discourses and centred on the state and institutionalized religious authority, they engage with Western countercultures which are anti-statist and against religious orthodoxy, most notably the avant-garde and countercultural aesthetics of surrealism, beat and punk. The paper thus distinguishes between Muslim liberalism, understood as a species of state- and authority-centrism, and radically anti-authoritarian forms of Islamic thought, the latter of which can be understood as variants of an emergent "Muslim anarchism".

I use the term "Muslim anarchism" in a qualified manner to describe specific examples of contemporary radical anti-authoritarian thought which self-identify as being Islamic and acknowledge affinities with anarchism. The paper is not concerned with mapping Muslim anarchism as a "tradition" of thought or a social movement, or with revisionist interpretations of Islam as being anarchistic.[9] In this sense, it is intended neither as a survey or typology of Muslim anarchism nor as implying that the specific writers under discussion here are representative of a wider Muslim anarchist tradition.[10] Muslim anarchism is thus a contested social and intellectual category which has, nonetheless, been used to describe radical forms of Islamic hermeneutics that lie at global Islam's very periphery. While a comparatively minor ideological outgrowth, there is now a marginal literature on the subject, mainly by its proponents, who self-identify as anarchists or draw on anarchism. In this sense, it can be viewed alongside other ideologized forms of Muslim activism which seek legitimacy through divergent hermeneutic practices. There is also a growing, largely activist, literature on the compatibility of religion with anarchism and studies of non-Western anarchism, within which Muslim anarchism has increasingly come to be situated.[11]

In this essay, I focus on three contemporary figures associated with radical anti-authoritarian readings of Islam who transcend the liberal–militant polarity: Peter

9 See, inter alia, Patricia Crone, "Ninth-Century Muslim Anarchists", *Past & Present*, 167 (2000), 3–28; Harold Barclay, "Islam, Muslim Societies and Anarchy", *Anarchist Studies*, 10/2 (2002), 105–18; and Ahmet Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Middle Period 1200–1550* (Oxford, 2006).

10 For a recent survey, including an attempt at typology drawing in part on the work of Sharif Gemie, see Anthony Fiscella, "Imagining an Islamic Anarchism: A New Field of Study Is Ploughed", in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, ed., *Religious Anarchism: New Perspectives* (Newcastle, 2009), 280–318.

11 See, inter alia, Christoyannopoulos, *Religious Anarchism*; and John Adams, *Non-Western Anarchisms: Rethinking the Global Context* (Santa Cruz, CA, 2003).

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Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), Michael Muhammad Knight and Yakoub Islam. Wilson is a long-standing American countercultural writer on a wide range of topics, known notably for his concept of temporary autonomous zones and his historical work on pirate utopias.[12] Knight, also an American, who has been influenced by Wilson, has emerged in recent years as a significant commentator on American Islam and a critic of prominent strands of Muslim reformism, mainly through a series of semi-autobiographical books.[13] Yakoub Islam, from Britain, is the author of the Muslim Anarchist Charter and has also written on Islamophobia and Muslim steampunk, the latter the focus of his current work.[14] Knight has kept a critical distance from self-identifying as Muslim anarchist. While Wilson and Knight have published several books, the majority of Yakoub Islam's work is self-published online. While their varied writings are relevant to wider debates about Islam's late modern "crisis of authority", existing understandings of Islamic pluralism find little room for forms of anti-authoritarian Islam largely considered heterodox.[15] They are also yet to find their place in contemporary studies of Islamic exegesis, including in more liberal readings.[16]

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12 See, inter alia, Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegadoes*, 2nd revised edn (Brooklyn, 2003); Hakim Bey, *T. A. Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchism, Poetic Terrorism*, 2nd edn (Brooklyn, 2003), Bey , *Immediatism: Essays by Hakim Bey* (San Francisco, 1994).

13 See, inter alia, Michael Muhammad Knight, *Blue-Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey through Islamic America* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York* (Oxford, 2008); Michael Muhammad Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter* (New York, 2011); Michael Muhammad Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. The Qur'an* (Berkeley, CA, 2012).

14 Yakoub Islam, "Bleedin' Islamophobia", *Q News*, 361 (2005), 12; Islam, "The Voyage In: Second Life Islamophobia", in S. Sayyid and Abdoolkarim Vakil, eds., *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives* (New York, 2011), 65–9. See also his blog, The Tasneem Project, at www.steampunkshariah.info, accessed 14 Sept. 2012. In August 2012 some previous notes on the book were removed from his online blog. I have reproduced those which were still available through the internet archive. His Muslim Anarchist Charter is available at www.steampunkshariah.info/manarchist.htm, accessed 30 March 2013.

15 Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for the New Ummah* (London, 2004); Mandaville, "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge"; Farid Esack, *Quran, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Inter-religious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, 2007); Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford, 2007).

16 Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (London, 2011); Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (London and New York, 2009); Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, 2nd edn (London, 2011); Mehran Kamrava, ed., *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2011).

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Such manifestations of anti-authoritarian Islam are thus separate from both Islamist militancy and reformist or liberal expressions of contemporary Islam. As examples of how antinomian religion is theorized without an institutionalized ideological base and outside a classical or liberal Islamic consensus, the distinctiveness of their intellectual postures demands alternative conceptual tools which reach beyond conventional categories of analysis. In this, automatism, a neglected concept in the study of socio-religious phenomena, provides a useful vocabulary for addressing the intellectual contours of the thought of Wilson, Knight and Islam which privilege radical autonomy and reject human and institutional mediation, control and conception. Through recourse to the mutuality between autonomy and automatism, I aim to elucidate the import of automatic transcendence and retro-futurist imaginaries as novel interpretative techniques for spiritual emancipation in these radically libertarian approaches to Islam.[17]

Automatism is a rich, multivalent concept often understood as being in opposition to autonomy and rarely allied to understandings of religion. It has been elaborated most deeply in branches of theoretical science, including neuroscience and quantum mechanics, and in psychology, which has given rise, via psychopathology and psychoanalysis, to its explicit treatment in both criminal jurisprudence and surrealism.[18] Where it has entered into philosophical reflections, it has been more commonly associated with scepticism toward religious claims, or anti-religion.[19] I use the term broadly to allude both to automatic techniques of individual emancipation in surrealism that treat automatism as a form of radical subjectivity and to retro-futurist imaginaries, grounded in an imagined past, which posit radically autonomous, spontaneous and self-regulating communities.[20] Such conceptions of automatism also harbour theological resonances: be that in surrealism's spiritualist leanings, in

[17] I use the term "retro-futurist" to denote the juxtaposition of alternative or imagined histories as models for future society, particularly, although not exclusively, those which focus on machine technology.

[18] J. L. J. Edwards, "Automatism and Criminal Responsibility", *Modern Law Review*, 21/4 (1958), 375–86; André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*, trans. and introduced by David Gascoyne (London, 1985).

[19] Many of the atheistic *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, however, such as Diderot, Helvetius and d'Holbach, were antimechanistic vitalists who only employed automatism as a mode of critique. In this regard, Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *Machine Man and Other Writings* (Cambridge, 1996); first published in 1748, can be seen as an exception rather than the rule.

[20] I use the term "imaginary" as a creative or imagined way of re-envisioning a discourse or practice for ideological purposes, be it literary, historical, technological or social. The concept can be traced to Jacques Lacan's treatment of it as a psychoanalytic category but it has been treated more widely, especially in its social dimensions, in addressing

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eschatological speculations on future human society, or, more broadly, in the ambiguous nexus between science and the occult.[21]

My aim in this essay is thus twofold: to show how the concept of automatism can be a useful way of elucidating the hermeneutics of specific strands of anti-authoritarian Islam today, and, relatedly, to challenge received understandings of radical Islam and the restrictive polarity between militancy and liberalism that has come to frame discussion on global Islam. The paper is in four parts. The first section introduces the idea of automatism, pointing to its mutuality with autonomy, as against the more common view of it denoting involuntary action, within the wider context of its various cross-disciplinary understandings. The next section explores ideas of spontaneity and immediacy in surrealist conceptions of automatic behaviour and their affinities with both anti-intellectualism and heterodox spiritualism. The following section applies these insights to an understanding of the nature of hermeneutic practices in the idea of "immediatism" in Wilson's writings and the "cut-up" technique, channelled via beat and punk influences, deployed by Knight.[22] The final section illustrates how machine aesthetics inform the retro-futurist "Muslim steampunk" of Yakoub Islam, which reaches back simultaneously to scientific innovation in twelfth-century Islam. It closes by addressing the reproductive dimensions of automatic behaviour via alternative or imagined histories as exemplars for spontaneously evolving, free-associating and self-regulating communities: in Wilson's invocation of Barbary Coast pirate utopias and Knight's meditations on indigenous American Islam in heterodox religious formations, notably the Nation of Islam, its precursors and offshoots.[23]

That Wilson, Knight and Islam are all Western converts to Islam and lie at the forefront of the most radical forms of Islamic hermeneutics today is revealing of both a neglected aspect of the globalization of radical Islam and of the hyper-acculturation rather than deculturation of Islam.[24] In fact, discourses of race and

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the nature of modernity. See, inter alia, Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC, and London, 2004) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996). See also John Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley, CA, 1984).

21 For science and spiritualism see John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death* (London, 2011).

22 Bey, *Immediatism*; Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. The Qur'an*.

23 Wilson, *Pirate Utopias*; Bey, *T. A. Z.*; Knight, *Blue-Eyed Devil*; Knight, *The Five Percenters*; Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*.

24 On the deculturation of religion from the perspective of comparative sociology see Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (London, 2010). Roy argues that deculturation "is the loss of the social expression of religion". Ibid., 8.

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ethnicity loom large in these accounts, suggesting also a curiously inverted form of orientalism.[25] Thus while jihadists might be considered exegetical heretics, they nonetheless work to subvert a broadly recognizable and accepted Islamic canon. The writers under discussion here, on the other hand, are far more radical in this respect as cultural interlopers deploying dissident traditions. Perhaps most significantly, while their work is often punctuated by recourse to Islamic spiritualism, not least in "anarcho-Sufi" references to Ibn Arabi and Rumi, such invocations tend to obscure their far deeper appropriation and deployment of Western countercultural forms as a method of critique.[26]

AUTOMATIC AUTONOMY

The idea of automatism has a long and protean intellectual history.[27] While often associated with a rigid conformity to external manipulation when applied pejoratively to human beings, it has not always been considered antithetical to autonomous behaviour. It has, for example, equally been the object of wonder or Promethean anxiety born of the threat of automatic or machine-like behaviour as a kind of rampant, enigmatic egoism not subject to human law, rationality or morality. Automatism's modern origins lie in philosophical materialism, which brings together reflections on human nature and society with biological and physiological concerns. While such notions were present in ancient Greek thought and were carried through to the Renaissance, they crystallized during the eighteenth century and were associated particularly with the atheism of the *philosophes* as well as with the fashion for mechanical, lifelike automata as objects of curiosity and entertainment, such as those of Jacques de Vaucanson.[28] Of the French materialists, for example, Julian Offray de La Mettrie's Enlightenment polemic *L'homme machine* (1748) presented a radically reductionist statement of the human body, mind, consciousness and soul as purely physical.

More recently, philosophical enquiry into automatism as relating to free will has drawn on leading-edge scientific investigation, principally on developments

[25] White European conversion to Islam is a central aspect of Wilson's historical pirate utopias, while in Knight's work race pivots around perceptions of his own white ethnicity and his interest in African American forms of Islam, most notably the Nation of Gods and Earths, or Five Percenters. Yakoub Islam has also broached the issue in his "White, Weird and Wonderful", available at www.tasneemproject.info/whiteww.htm, accessed 30 March 2013.

[26] "Anarcho-Sufi" is a term used frequently by Knight, including to describe Wilson.

[27] For its European context see Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

[28] See note 19 above.

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in neuroscience and quantum theory.[29] While artificial intelligence (AI) has brought into focus the mutuality between autonomy and automatism, on the one hand, and the nature of human consciousness, on the other, particularly in light of the ability of synthetic machines to learn and make independent decisions,[30] post-human conceptions reconfigure received understandings of human nature and autonomy, including by recourse to technological and biological advancements. The dissolving of the borders between man and machine, epitomized in the notion of the post-human "cyborg", for example, meld autonomy with automatism in a futurist teleology which represents the contemporary dystopian instantiation of La Mettrie's Enlightenment speculations. Here, binary distinctions between man and machine collapse while conventional categories of gender are also transgressed.[31] Extropian forms of transhumanism, on the other hand, posit the future radical dislocation of mind from body through the complete transmutation of the human brain and consciousness into an autonomous machine or computer-based system.[32]

Automatic behaviour has also long been addressed in the study of abnormal psychology and criminal jurisprudence. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the prominent American psychologist and physician Morton Prince addressed explicitly the relationship between self-determination and automatism. Automatism, he argued, "contains nothing which is not reconcilable with popular notions regarding mental freedom".[33] Instances of automatic behaviour are, in fact, legally codified as mitigating moral responsibility by virtue of not being considered voluntaristic acts, such as when one is in a state of somnambulism or severely psychologically disturbed.[34] "Human automatons" are in these instances divested of moral and legal responsibility for the acts they perform. Such instances can also reveal the nexus between psychological distortion and religious belief in a higher agency as determinants of autonomous action as, in secular thought,

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29 For a sceptical view of human free will see Benjamin Libet, "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8 (1985), 529–66.

30 Pamela McCorduck, *Machines Who Think: A Personal Inquiry into the History and Prospects of Artificial Intelligence* (San Francisco, 1979). For the concept of self-replicating machines, see John von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*, ed. and completed by Arthur W. Burks (Urbana, 1966).

31 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York and London, 1991).

32 See, inter alia, Nick Bostrum, "A History of Transhumanist Thought", *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14/1 (2005), 1–25; and Hans Moravec, "When Will Computer Hardware Match the Human Brain?", *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 1/1 (1988).

33 Morton Prince, *The Nature of Mind and Human Automatism* (Philadelphia, 1885), 132.

34 Edwards, "Automatism and Criminal Responsibility".

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both psychopathologies and religious conviction are also suggestive of fantasy, amorality or the deferral of morality.

Post-Marxists and post-structuralists concerned with anti-hegemony have also interrogated the relationship between autonomy and automation explicitly, including via mechanical analogies with the invisible hand of the market and critiques of capitalism. While Jacques Derrida's conception of "automatic autonomy" and Jacques Lacan's notion of "repetition automatism", which draws on Freudian psychology, see autonomy and automatism as opposed, Antonio Gramsci posited a more positive understanding of automatism *as* autonomy.[35] Gramsci described automatism as a "new rationality" and grappled with the question whether automatism was in conflict with freedom. In making a distinction between individual and group freedom, he argued that automatism "is in conflict with free will, not with freedom. Automatism is a group freedom, in opposition to individualistic free will".[36] Drawing on Gramsci, Augusto Ponzio's approach to semiotics also points to the treatment of positive automatism more broadly in the philosophy of language, including in the significance of technological developments such as mechanical translation.[37]

Though often oblique, the religious dimensions of automatism reach back into history. Ancient Greece produced ideas about the mechanical automatism of living things alongside more religious practices in the form of Gods as constructs which were often conceived as superhuman or as projections of perfect humans. In the medieval period, where perceptions of magic and science intersected, possession could be considered a kind of automatic behaviour which was either saintly or demonic, or else automata were identified with otherworldly, alchemical creations. During the Renaissance, the discovery of mechanical laws in an ordered universe was also tied to the human body's intricate machinery as reflective of God's own art, including in Cartesian dualist reflections on the body as a machine—a materialist atomism anticipated by the speculative Islamic Ash'arite theology and occasionalist philosophy of al-Ghazali (d. 1111).[38] Indeed, such conceptions of human beings as divinely constructed automata persisted

35 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. from the French by Betty Kamuf (New York, 1994); Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore, 1998), 28–55; Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. by Derek Boothman (London, 1995).

36 Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 179.

37 Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto, 2005).

38 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans., introduced and annotated by Malcolm. E. Marmura (Provo, UT, 2000).

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into the Enlightenment despite contemporaneous atheistic critiques of religion. The mythical figure of the golem in Jewish folklore, particularly its incarnation associated with the medieval mystic Rabbi Loewe, has had a more direct link to religious reflections on automatism and autonomy, including in Norbert Wiener's classic philosophical treatment of cybernetics.[39] More recently, Robert Geraci has pointed to the shared centrality of apocalyptic assumptions in both scientific speculations on AI and Judaeo-Christian religious thought.[40]

The idea of automatism as an autonomous and explicit act of free will can thus be tied to the many ambivalent and paradoxical attributes associated with the concept. While automatism commonly implies an absence of free will or involuntary action, it also suggests spontaneity, freedom from external conditioning—such as from forms of rationality and morality considered oppressive social constructs—and the uncovering of the unfettered unconscious or subconscious individual will. Automatism *as* autonomy finds its clearest expression in Dadaist and surrealist thought deployed as a cultural critique for achieving radical individual emancipation.

HERESIES OF FREEDOM

Surrealist autonomy was tied to a critique of human conventions, rationality and morality which automatism was seen to bypass in the service of the unencumbered liberty of the subconscious self. In this respect, it was anti-intellectual in that it regarded human rationality as a form of man-made manipulation. Immanent within the anti-intellectual aspect of surrealist automatism was the idea of experiential transcendence—of the mundane—through spontaneity and immediacy. Its method is epitomized in *The Magnetic Fields* (1920), one of the earliest modern examples of sustained automatic writing. Automatism acted as a critique of reason where rationality was seen to distort and manipulate rather than enlighten: where true enlightenment and liberty resided in a kind of metaphysical force or presence that lay beyond reason.[41] Rationality thus created an artificial intermediary which stifled a deeper, more immediate spiritual emancipation in the form of pristine human autonomy.

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39 Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 1964).

40 Robert M. Geraci, "Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 76/1 (2008), 138–66.

41 Pre-dating the surrealists by a century as a critique of artificial society, automatism was also deployed by Romantics of the early nineteenth century. See, for example, Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theater" (1810).

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The surrealists shared with post-Marxists, situationists and anarchists that came after them an attack against the inherently mediatory spectacle of everyday life in capitalist society which was seen to have alienated human beings from their true natures. However, it was within the very quotidian environment which stifled human autonomy that such a critique also came to be located. Thus while surrealists, notably André Breton, allied to the radical left for a period, it was the situationists who transformed the private automatism of the surrealist imagination into a form of radical politics by drawing on the idea that spontaneity and immediacy were intimately connected to individual liberty.[42]

Central to the view of automatism that the situationists imbibed from their Dadaist and surrealist forebears was that the performance of an action which avoided conscious thought or rationality was, nonetheless, a result of independent action rather than of dependence or domination. Such acts were "pure" acts of will unmediated by the dictates of received notions of rationality which were, in any case, socially constructed and thus susceptible to the hegemony inherent in capitalist relations of domination. The subversion of the preponderance of a perceived bourgeois rationality and logocentric thought was central to automatism. It also suggested new ways of autonomous activism—or direct action—including through free association, shock, hedonism and absurdity subsumed under the anti-rationalist, albeit ambiguous, concept of the "marvellous", which implied locating the extraordinary in the ordinary by transcending the mundane through the imaginative acts of subversion.[43]

If automatism as direct action was a form of spontaneity, it also involved the melding of the experimental with the experiential through immediate acts of transcendence. Critically, this was aimed at blurring the distinction between art and the artist and creating a revolution of the present through everyday acts of dissent. Such a focus on the immediacy of subversive acts located in quotidian environments was central to the situationist movement in particular. As Raoul Vaneigem asserted, "Immediacy is certainly the most succinct, but also the most radical demand that must characterize the new artists of today, who are destined to be constructors of situations to be lived directly."[44] The emphasis on immediate experiential practices both echoed and subverted that of the convergence of body

[42] For classic statements of Situationist thought see Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland, CA, 2012); and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1994). For an alternative recent history see Mackenzie Wark, *The Beach beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London, 2011).

[43] As André Breton described the term, "The marvellous is always beautiful, anything that is marvellous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvellous is beautiful." Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*, 167.

[44] Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 170.

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and soul in materialist conceptions of man as a machine whereby rationality was seen to be bypassed in order for the art created to commune directly with the artist. In this sense, as an aesthetic mode of cultural critique, automatism was principally aimed at discovery—of the self and of higher forms of consciousness—rather than at artistic creation. Creativity in its conventional sense was viewed as representing artifice unavoidably grounded in learned rules and the with moral constraints imposed upon the individual by social convention. As André Breton asserted in defining "pure psychic automatism", the automatic method was intended to "express verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought ... in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations."[45]

Notions of spontaneity and immediacy associated with automatic speech, writing, drawing and film were thus forms of direct action which freed human subjectivity from the machine of society. They were also tied to free association as the expression and projection of the dream-like states and desires of the subconscious. Dreaming, in turn, central to variant conceptions of automatism, was bound to the valorization of spontaneous and immediate, rather than contrived, thoughts, words and images.[46] The idea of human beings as mechanical cogs captive to a regimented societal machine was thus subverted, and with it the more commonly held view of human automatism as repressive or conformist. It was in such anti-intellectual practices which aimed to transcend the manipulation of the individual will by external man-made forces and social constructs that surrealism's more apparent affinities with spiritualism also harboured a deeper connection to religious behaviour that rejected human mediatory authority in the form of institutionalized clergy, interpretative canons and social practices.

The theological dimensions of surrealist automatism have recently been noted by Kate Khatib, who has argued that "surrealist discoveries such as automatism, chance and the Marvelous share striking aspects with the messianic notion of a return to an all but forgotten unity between the profane and the divine, the actual and the possible, and the real and the imaginary."[47] Surrealist notions of spontaneity and immediacy, as forms of radical autonomy in automatic behaviour, share affinities with religious practices delinked from more conventional forms of mediated religious thought and action. In both,

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45 Breton, *What Is Surrealism?* 49.

46 *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) is the classic filmic example of such projections. A collaboration between Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, it was described by Buñuel as the result of "conscious automatism".

47 Kate Khatib, "Automatic Theologies: Surrealism and the Politics of Equality", in H. De Vries and L. E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World* (New York, 2006), 617–33, 617.

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notions of liberty, secular and religious, can also be seen as heretical modes of emancipation.[48] Both also assert that automatism is in some senses opaque in that it cannot be rendered intelligible through the exercise of reason.

The automatism of the surrealists was, in fact, linked more directly to spiritual practices, not least in their interest in parapsychology, mysticism and the occult. This was expressed more explicitly in the influence of late nineteenth-century Christian spiritualists such as the psychic Helene Smith, and the "psychographer" William Stainton Moses. The intimate connection between surrealism, automatism and spiritualism is also reflected in the work of the English artist Austin Osman Spare, for whom automatic techniques were central and whose art drew on, among other things, heterodox Buddhism.[49] Thus, while surrealist automatism was an anti-authoritarian practice which valorized individual liberty and attacked all forms of domination, religious or otherwise, at its outset it also shared an intimacy with more radical forms of religious belief, ones largely regarded as heterodox and allied to anti-institutional readings of religion. Indeed, such an intimacy with the pseudo-scientism of spiritualism was not only the preserve of the avant-garde. As John Gray has noted in his historical reflections on discourses of immortality and the symbiosis of the occult, including automatist spiritualism and scientific enquiry, during the same period, "the line between science and pseudo-science is smudged and shifting; where it lies seems clear only in retrospect. There is no pristine science untouched by the vagaries of faith".[50]

Other connections between automatism, radical autonomy and spiritualism have also been forged. In her critique of the "machinery" of government in the early anarcho-capitalist tract *The God of the Machine* (1943), for example, Isabel Paterson argued that "man is a genuinely automatic machine, self-starting and self-acting, in the sense that no inanimate mechanism can be automatic."[51] Paterson melded capitalist ideals of freedom with those of human spontaneity through metaphors of mechanical engineering. Notably, Paterson's deism, which she viewed as reconcilable with capitalism, also gave her treatment

[48] It is interesting to note genealogies of heresy which tie anarchism to Pelagianism. See Richard Fitch, "The Pelagian Mentality: Radical Political Thought in Fifth-Century Christianity" in Christoyannopoulos, *Religious Anarchism*, 2–29.

[49] See Nadia Choucha, "The Surrealist Manifestos, Automatism and Austin Osman Spare", in Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester, NY, 1991), 51–75. For a recent biography of Spare see Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare: The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist* (London, 2012).

[50] Gray, *The Immortalization Commission*, 5.

[51] Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine* (New York, 1943), 84.

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of automatism an underlying religious character.[52] While representing, in many ways, the antithesis of the leftist proclivities of the surrealists and situationists, Paterson's recourse to automatic behaviour in her rightist libertarian philosophy is instructive of the deep affinities that are implicit between dissident libertarian thought and automatism.

FAITH UNMEDIATED

Despite the absence of its deployment in studies of Islam, automatism is not a concept which has been entirely alien to Islam. The rejection of human authority and the centrality of a radically individualist hermeneutics in forms of Muslim anarchism also allude to automatic autonomy at the very origins of Islam. The revelation of the Qur'an was channelled through the Prophet. In this sense, it might be said that a kind of divinely inspired automatic writing occurred at Islam's inception: a process modified only by the interposition of the Angel Gabriel between God and His Messenger where God speaks to, not *through*, Muhammad. It is perhaps no accident then that automatic writing, in its preoccupation with unconscious, otherworldly liberation and agency, ties obliquely the surrealist progenitors of situationism and Muslim anarchism to this transcendent, formative moment in Islamic history.

On a more mundane level, automatism in Islam can be situated in quotidian practices. The clockwork rhythm of the five daily prayers and the circumambulation of the Ka'aba, for example, are perhaps the clearest expressions of everyday automatism. They represent automatic religious behaviour as ritualistic and, in some sense, mechanical. Automatism has also had a more scientific presence in Islam, most notably in the work of medieval scholar al Jazari (d. 1206) and his *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (1206), a manual on constructing lifelike automata which prefigured modern Western technological treatments of the subject. Automatic behaviour is also more explicitly related to esoteric and mystical practices in Islam implying otherworldly access, which have parallels in Judaeo-Christian traditions. This is often understood in binary terms—as either divinely inspired or demonic—and sometimes related to the use of hallucinogens.

[52] The invisible hand of the market is also intimately connected to that of God in radical free-market approaches to Islam and deployed as a legitimization of capitalism. In such anarcho-capitalist readings, neglected in analyses of the ideologization of global Islam, the writings of Paterson's fellow libertarian Rose Wilder Lane play a significant role. Both were also close correspondents of Ayn Rand. See, inter alia, Imad Ad Dean Ahmed, "Islam and the Free-Market Economy", *Economic Affairs*, 29/2 (2009), 2–3; and Rose Wilder Lane, *Islam and the Discovery of Freedom*, with an introduction and commentary by Imad Ad Dean Ahmed (Beltsville and Bethesda, 1997).

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In Western interpretations, this has often led to parallels being drawn between conceptions of divine revelation and abnormal psychology: in an entry on *sihr*, or black magic, in E. J. Brill's *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, for example, automatic speech in this vein is discussed extensively.[53] Its transcendent dimensions relate to the concept of *firasa*, understood as foresight, intuition or discernment without reasoning, which looms large in Sufistic saintly traditions. Here automatism is identified with a metaphysically inspired intuition based on subconscious thought. Moreover, the significance of dreams and the subconscious, central to surrealist automatism, is also recognized in wider commentaries on Islamic thought, including martyrology, though not in relation to Muslim anarchist treatments.[54]

Both the concept of "immediatism" in Peter Lamborn Wilson's (Hakim Bey's) thought and avant-garde literary forms in Michael Muhammad Knight's writings, notably use of the "cut-up", illustrate how the atomized believer's unmediated relationship with God is reconciled in Muslim anarchism via a voluntarism counterposed to discourses of rationalism and intellectualism. Such techniques, characterized by spontaneity and immediacy, echo those of automatic transcendence. If the surrealists aimed their fire squarely at the repressive frameworks of bourgeois rationality, however, Wilson and Knight direct theirs at bourgeois practices and interests which they perceive to be preponderant also within Islam, notably in liberal Islam. This is not only evident in the use of shock and profanity as a tool for subverting discursive and linguistic convention, including, in Knight's case, through words used to describe prominent contemporary Muslim reformists, but, more deeply, in how Islam can be directly accessed by the individual in radically nonconformist ways. Muslim reformists whom Knight has criticized explicitly include Tariq Ramadan, Farid Esack, Ibrahim Hooper, Ingrid Mattson and Hamza Yusuf.[55] Such diverse figures are, in the main, self-appointed leaders or "representatives"—institutional or intellectual—of "progressive" or liberal Islam who have consciously courted high public profiles. Their target audiences are young, educated, middle-class professionals. In effect, they can be seen as an emergent body of religious entrepreneurs, engaged in the branding of their respective models of progressive Islam in the marketplace, who are symptomatic not only of the diffusion of Muslim liberalism but, perhaps more significantly, of the growing neoliberalization of Islamic authority.

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53 M. T. Houtsma, T. W. Arnold, R. Basset, R. Hartmann, A. J. Wensinck, H. A. R. Gibb, W. Heffening and E. Levi-Provencal, eds., *E. J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913–1936*, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1927–93), 411–18.

54 Iain R. Edgar, *The Dream in Islam: From Qur'anic Tradition to Jihadist Inspiration* (Oxford, 2011); Ozgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh, eds., *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies* (Albany, NY, 2012).

55 See Knight, *Blue-Eyed Devil*.

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"Immediatism"

Peter Lamborn Wilson's wide-ranging writings posit, among other varied philosophical themes not directly concerned with Islam, the flexibility of Islam through the foregrounding of heretical traditions. This is evident in his historical writings on pirate utopias as examples of what he terms "temporary autonomous zones", which I return to in the next section of this essay. But it is also apparent in his wider cultural critique of late capitalism embodied in the idea of "immediatism" which permeates his philosophy: a key aspect of his thought largely neglected in scholarly commentary on Muslim anarchism. Paradoxically, Wilson is both the most prominent figure in the genesis of contemporary Muslim anarchism and, however, the one (out of the three figures I am treating in this essay) whose work and world view are most tangential to Islam in that Islam is rarely the guiding thrust of his reflections. Neither are they related explicitly to his own religious identity as they are is in the cases of both Knight and Yakoub Islam. Latterly, his controversial views, including on "sacred pederasty", have courted criticism even from Knight, who had once considered him an early mentor. Nonetheless, it is difficult to take account of Muslim anarchism without recognition of his influence, which has also begun to reassert a presence in wider commentaries on radical thought.[56]

Wilson's notion of immediatism is defined as being against all forms of mediation and is characterized by an implicit automatism which is both aesthetic and political. As he asserts, in situationist tones, "All experience is mediated—by the mechanisms of sense perception, mentation, language, etc.—and certainly all art consists of some further mediation of experience."[57] As a strategy for countering the controlling mechanisms of society, Wilson's approach is directed mainly at the immanence of art as a revolutionary social practice. As with situationism, these aesthetic preoccupations have a deeper political import in that they act as a means of attacking hierarchy, alienation and mediation in order to create the environment for free association. Interestingly, Wilson distances himself from surrealism (though not from Dadaism) as a movement, which he sees as inherently susceptible to commodification, even as his own work echoes its philosophies. "The Surrealist liberation of desire, for all its aesthetic accomplishments", he argues, "remains no more than a subset of production—hence the wholesaling of Surrealism to the Communist Party".[58]

This attack on surrealism can be understood in the context of the social dimensions of immediatism, which is conceived by Wilson as a "movement" but "not in the sense of an aesthetic program," as that would imply its commodification and

[56] See, for example, the essays on Wilson in the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 4/2 (2010).

[57] Bey, *Immediatism*, 7.

[58] Bey, *T. A. Z.*, 78.

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use of the "publicity of the marketplace."[59] This leads him to privilege secrecy and esotericism as a vehicle for liberty, a strategy common to fringe critiques of purported hidden-world power structures that often allude to Masonic worlds and conspiracy theories. The clandestine and conspiratorial dimensions of Wilson's writings reflect the formative countercultural milieu in which his nascent thought was forged, which, in turn, often included idealized invocations of neo-pagan and occult societies. Such ideas were prevalent during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, particularly in America, and were epitomized in the publication of the Illuminatus! trilogy (1975) by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson. Indeed, Wilson's work converged more explicitly with that of his namesake in *Semiotext(e) SF* (1989), which they both co-edited with Rudy Rucker. Robert Anton Wilson's work in particular illustrates the nexus between the occult and speculative science in dissident anti-authoritarian thought; although, in his association with the more recent work of experimental cult conspiratorial literature, *Ong's Hat*, Peter Lamborn Wilson has also had a more explicit connection to it.[60]

In turning away from public orientation, the religious dimensions of immediatism also come into view in Wilson's treatment of heterodox and heretical Islam as a means also of retreating from the polluting environment of mediated society. In this, the Sufi writings of Ibn Arabi and Rumi and the mystical figures of Timothy Drew (Noble Drew Ali), founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, and Hassan I Sabbah, leader of the medieval Ismaili sect known in the West, pejoratively, as the Assassins, loom particularly large. Much of this is contained in his book *Sacred Drift* (1993), which he describes as "a series of attempts (essays) to revalorize the 'romantic' image of Islam", but is also apparent in his scattered works, notably *Scandal* (1987).[61] While these works are not directly concerned with elaborating his notion of immediatism, their concern with demonstrating a "relief from the obscene banality of simulation" echoes surrealist themes of automatic transcendence.[62] Indeed, Wilson points to this connection explicitly in his preface to *Sacred Drift*. "Islam (whatever that may be)", he states, "is present, here in New York, Paris, London, Berlin; the other is within the self alien and sibling at once—and our everyday life is situated with a strange and precise grace for what Surrealism called the penetration of the marvellous."[63]

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59 Bey, *Immediatism*, 10–12.

60 See Michael Kinsella, *Legend-Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat* (Jackson, 2011); and Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, 201–8.

61 Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam* (San Francisco, 1993), 7. See also Wilson , *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (Brooklyn, 2007).

62 Wilson, *Sacred Drift*, 8.

63 Ibid., 8.

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Wilson's preoccupation with heresy as anti-authoritarian critique is closely related to a particular conception of hedonism in which he attempts to distance his view of liberty from libertinism. As he observes, "One of the commonest misapprehensions about antinomianism claims that it causes (or is synonymous with) libertinism—doing 'whatever you want' regardless of other peoples' values or lives."[64] Related to the need for esoteric forms of knowledge and insight are Wilson's melding of mind, body and soul as an act of emancipation—a convergence common to automatic transcendence. In *Immediatism* (1994), he again ties this to the concept of the "marvellous", arguing that the "penetration of everyday life by the marvellous—the creation of 'situations'—belongs to the 'material body principle', and to the imagination, and to the living fabric of the present."[65] In criticizing the "infinite access to knowledge that simply fails to interact with the body or with the imagination", he goes on to assert, "What we know and how we know it must have a basis in the flesh."[66] This is echoed in his frequent recourse to heterodox Islamic religious practices, including permissive aspects of Sufi practice in, for example, his essay 'The Anti-Caliph'.[67]

The idea of playfulness, central to situationism, also plays a pivotal role in immediatism and can be related to Wilson's libertarian conception of Islamic liberty as a form of licence. It is presented as being against mediated experience by creating "situations" in everyday life and implies the transgression of ordered, regulated society. For Wilson, "Real art is play, and play is one of the most immediate of all experiences."[68] "Immediatism", he argues, "wants to be a game, not a political movement, and certainly not a revolution with the power to abolish any medium".[69] Here, Wilson's notion of liberty can also be tied to his celebration or idealization of abnormal psychology or neurosis as liberty-enhancing. This transgressive element is also central to both psychoanalytical and surrealist conceptions of automatic behaviour. Much as the surrealists dabbled in shamanism and the occult, Wilson also ties these practices to the liberating necessity for altered states of consciousness: "Higher states of consciousness are not mere spooks invented by evil priests", he argues; "The orient, the occult, the tribal cultures possess *techniques* which can be appropriated in true anarchist fashion."[70] Yet by deploying this eclectic method through which the path of emancipation lies, Wilson's statement is also revealing of

64 Ibid., 70.
65 Bey, *Immediatism*, 4.
66 Bey, *Immediatism*, 53, 55.
67 Wilson, *Sacred Drift*, 55–80.
68 Bey, *Immediatism*, 9.
69 Ibid., 36.
70 Bey, *T. A. Z.*, 62–3, original emphasis.

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his fundamentally instrumental use of the "Orient" and Islam. In effect, Wilson's idealized and objectified vision of an anti-authoritarian Islam can be seen as a necessary construct which is deployed to critique hierarchical society via Western countercultural methodologies.

The "cut-up"

The influence of Wilson weighs heavily on Knight, not least as channelled through the meta-influence of William Burroughs, who was a personal acquaintance and admirer of Wilson. Like Wilson, Burroughs also held a particularly deep fascination for Hassan I Sabbah, around which he built his own mythology. In his *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), prefaced by a saying supposedly attributed to Sabbah ("Nothing is true. Everything is permitted"), Burroughs's fictional historical excavations of Barbary Coast insurrectionary communities also anticipate Wilson's own pirate utopias,[71] although, unlike Wilson, Burroughs was not concerned with their Muslim contexts. But it is in the channelling of Dadaist automatism via the "cut-up" technique, which Burroughs developed with the artist Brion Gysin and which characterizes his experimental Nova trilogy, that his influence on Knight is most apparent.

Knight has kept a critical distance from self-identification with anarchism and, while drawing heavily on Wilson's work, has begun to distance himself from him. His work is often provocative, candid, self-reflexive and compassionate. The latent automatism in his interpretative approach to Islam has become increasingly visible, most explicitly in his recent book, *William S. Burroughs vs. The Qur'an* (2012), which is itself, in part, an account of his shifting relationship with Wilson. Knight's semi-autobiographical style and preoccupation with both literal and metaphorical travel or road trips, redolent of beat literature and its countercultural aesthetics, have led to several critically praised books making him probably the most widely known current figure associated with Muslim anarchism, even though he tends to reject any label. Unlike the more philosophically abstract thought of Wilson and Yakoub Islam, Knight's focus is largely on mining an alternative, marginal narrative of indigenous American Islam and locating his personal place in it.

The disarmingly frank confessional tone of Knight's writings can also be viewed as a way of transgressing the constraints of more conventional, polite forms of literature; although while assertive, it is rarely magisterial. In this, his juxtaposition of shock, sometimes sexual or irreverent in content, with a spiritual quest for higher forms of transcendence of the mundane, also chimes with surrealist techniques aimed at subverting conventional morality and rationality

[71] William S. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (London, 2010), xviii.

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through unexpected combinations of discourses. In Knight's case, however, such seeming digressions are normally located within a coherent line of thought or argumentation, rather than non sequiturs. This sets Knight further apart from discernible anti-authoritarian traditions, including surrealism and situationism, than either Wilson or Islam. More explicitly, however, the automatic tenor of his originally self-published, influential fiction about Muslim punks, *The Taqwacores* (2003), which has inspired a novel, if minor, real-life social scene, is focused on accessing the divine directly through acts of immediacy that bypass mediatory authority and meld bodily acts with transcendent ones.[72] The more general blurring of the line between fact and fantasy, and reality and dreams, in Knight's writings points to the import of unconscious, twilight perceptions as a means of gauging truth, aspects inherent in surrealist automatism. Moreover, the first-person inner narrative style of his work and his sometimes self-acknowledged disturbance at his own thoughts intimates the centrality of altered psychological states as both a means of escape from the constraints of repressive conventional mores and a method for truth-seeking and achieving greater autonomy.

In *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, Knight takes automatic transcendence further by applying the cut-up technique to Qur'anic interpretation. As he boldly asserts, "Writing's a technology, and the Qur'an's a machine."[73] In its avant-garde experimental method, Knight's approach to Islam's most sacred text is, in one sense at least, the most controversial form of hermeneutics yet applied to the Qur'an in light of the emphasis Muslims place on its pristine and unaltered nature as being the cornerstone of the faith. The act of "cutting up" the text also implies physical desecration, which is anathema to Muslim sensibilities and, in fact, in its literal sense, considered a serious criminal act in interpretations of Islamic law. Knight is, of course, well aware of the gravity of his method and that it might be considered a deliberate provocation. While he is critical of detractors who regard such strategies as being for mere shock value, they can also be tied to the philosophy of cutting through the banalities of the mundane by subverting everyday practices in order to critique the straitjacket of convention: a technique central to surrealism and situationism. In Knight this thereby acts to promote forms of religious questioning, spiritual emancipation and ultimately revelatory power.

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72 Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Taqwacores* (Brooklyn, 2004). This scene is explored in the films *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* (2009), a documentary by Omar Majeed, and *The Taqwacores* (2010), a feature-film adaptation directed by Eyad Zahra.

73 Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, 236.

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Knight sees the cut-up method as fundamentally creative and democratizing. "It is democratic that way", he writes, "no need for scholars spouting off about historical contexts and classical Arabic".[74] In this, Knight's criticism of Muslim liberalism or reformism, evident in his other works, as, in fact, neither democratic nor liberal enough, is also encapsulated. As he states, "a cut-up of the revelation saves me from ever having to be treated as a credible Islamic reformist again".[75] Pointing to what he regards as the pernicious, though deeply embedded, exclusionary and divisive practices of Islamic reformism, he elucidates the cut-up as a kind of politics of protest. As with Wilson, it is only in the dissidence of its very heresy that such critique can be located: "Cutting up the Qur'an makes for off-the-chart sacrilege, but also the most intellectually honest act of piety that I have. It's what everyone wants to do: the progressives, the conservatives, all of them claiming to own the book and denouncing each other as misreaders."[76] Turning conventional interpretative practices against themselves, Knight also sees the cut-up as the logical end of Islamic hermeneutics as widely practised. In effect, he views all attempts at Islamic hermeneutics through the ages as a form of cut-up, "every prayer in which verses are extracted and quoted out of their contexts, every *tafsir* in which verses are pasted to hadiths".[77] In the cut-up, the flexibility of heresy, central to Wilson's thought and to surrealist conceptions of liberty, is embodied in the multitextured nature of the Qur'anic text.

DESIGNS FOR LIFE

While aspects of Wilson's and Knight's thought can be gleaned through the prism of automatic transcendence, the techno-futurist and reproductive dimensions of automatic behaviour also shed light on radical visions of anti-authority in Muslim anarchism. Here, automatism as autonomy takes on a peculiarly fictive and utopian aspect in the service of anti-hegemonic cultural and religious critique. In this final section I address the presence of automatism in Muslim anarchism in two ways: first in machine aesthetics which play a central role in the "Muslim steampunk" of Yakoub Islam, which simultaneously reimagines scientific innovation in twelfth-century Islam; and second in the alternative or imagined histories of Wilson's pirate utopias and Knight's genealogies of indigenous American Islam, which are marked by automatic notions of Islamic social reproduction as spontaneously evolving, free-associating and self-regulating.

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74 Ibid., 239.
75 Ibid., 239.
76 Ibid., 240.
77 Ibid., 240.

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Dream machines

While Wilson has criticized what he terms the "technopathocracy" of late capitalist society, which, he argues, destroys human autonomy, Yakoub Islam celebrates technology as a form of liberation. Islam, a writer and blogger known also for his "Muslim Anarchist Charter" and his writings on Islamophobia in mainstream literature, has begun to explore a particular approach to Islamic hermeneutics based, in part, on the Western cultural, aesthetic and literary genre of steampunk. This aspect of his writings is very much a work in progress which is continually shifting in content and focus; what follows is, therefore, a brief and necessarily tentative analysis.

Machines have played an ambivalent role in countercultural aesthetics, both in the atavistic critique of a technologically driven dislocation from humanity's true primal nature, and in their valorization as mediums for transcendent beauty and (often sexual) liberation, the latter epitomized, for example, in the role of motorcycle symbolism in Kenneth Anger's cult underground film *Scorpio Rising* (1964). Steampunk is among the more recent of these transmutations, and focuses on the aesthetics of power associated with steam technologies. It remains an ambiguous, protean category most frequently associated with reimaginings of nineteenth-century Victorian industrial society and reaching back to the fictions of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells in particular.[78] Central to its many forms are narratives of alternative history in which anachronistic technology (especially steam-driven automata), science fiction and fantasy meld with the supernatural. The punk element derives from its style aesthetic, often kitsch, in which such anachronistic juxtapositions are reflected—including in sartorial codes, deportment and comportment—and, more broadly, its radical reimagining of history and society. Its preoccupation with and nostalgic fetishization of steam-era innovation, however, has also rendered its relation to hegemonic discourses of science and empire, particularly the British Empire, somewhat ambivalent, despite its radical aspect.

It is both unsurprising and ironic, then, that Yakoub Islam conceives of his own "Muslim steampunk" as being a kind of postcolonial Muslim anarchism, located during the twelfth-century premodern imperial flowering of Islamic science. It is perhaps also no accident that, as a British convert to Islam, he should situate the countercultural dimensions of his anarchism within a genre which frequently references Britain's counterfactual pasts, presents and futures. When compared to Wilson's and Knight's channelling of surrealism via a chiefly American

[78] Rebecca Onion, "Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice", *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1/1 (2008), 138–63; Cory Gross, "Varieties of Steampunk Experience", *SteamPunk Magazine*, 1 (2006), 60–3.

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countercultural heritage and milieu, this only reinforces the observation that global Islam's current decentralization is also leading to novel forms of hyper-acculturation embedded within alternative but concrete discursive and cultural genealogies. As with opposing trends toward the centralization of authority, apparent in the current strategies of major centres of classical Islamic learning as well as in Muslim reformism in the West, this is a development obscured by the increasingly dominant scholarly view of global Islam as culturally disembodied, atomized and standardized.

The ideological deployment of future imaginaries is rare in Islamic activism, which more often reaches back to idealized historical models of Muslim society to mobilize Muslims in the present. In this sense, Yakoub Islam's retro-futurism is both common to and a radical departure from classical, liberal and militant forms of Islamic hermeneutics. In an interview with the online "Islam and Science Fiction" website in which he discusses his forthcoming novel, *The Muslim Age of Steam*, he describes his project as a combination of "the aesthetics of the 12th century Middle East and Mediterranean and pre-modern Islamic science, with an imagined steam technology developed from the Greek Hero engine".[79] He states explicitly that the project is "British, Muslim and Anarchist". The novel is "centred around the reimagining of a journey to England made by Muslim geographer Muhammad al Idrisi in the twelfth century."[80] In it, Islam posits steam power as being invented in the Middle East in the twelfth century, as a means of representing an alternative narrative of intellectual and scientific progress to that of Western modernity.

Islam views his critique as a subversion of modernity echoing Knight's and Wilson's deconstructions of Western liberal notions of linear progress and rationality. In this, one of Islam's main themes is the reconfiguration of the relationship between knowledge and power through the emphasis on excavating the technological acuity of premodern Islam. The instrumentalization of such imaginaries is grounded in Islam's conscious framing of his approach as a form of mythopoesis—where Islamic history is reimagined as a tool for transcending the "otherness" and implicit backwardness of both Islam and premodernism. In this, automata, as signifiers of technological accomplishment, are central to his revisioning of Islamic society with "the engine" viewed as a "technical narrative" and descriptions of clockwork limbs, for example, as "developed from automata

[79] Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmed, "Islam Sci-Fi Interview with Yakoub Islam", 2010, available at http://islamscifi.com/islam-sci-fi-interview-of-yakoub-islam, accessed 14 Sept. 2012. See also Rebecca Hankins, "Fictional Islam: A Literary Review and Comparative Essay on Islam in Science Fiction and Fantasy", *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 105 (2009), 73–92.

[80] Ahmed, "Islam Sci-Fi Interview".

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technology".[81] Indeed, in posthuman tones, Islam envisions a steamship as a central character in his future novel.[82]

The mythopoetic and automatic aspects of his conception of Muslim steampunk converge more specifically in his use of the symbolism of the simurgh, a posthuman mythical winged creature in Persian and Sufi mysticism made famous in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (977–1010) and Farid ad-Din Attar's *Conference of the Birds* (1177). Islam alludes to its mechanical creation by the Andalusian inventor Abbas Ibn Firnas (d. 887). "The *first* piece of Muslim Steampunk tech readers encounter in The Muslim Age of Steam", Islam notes, "is The Simurgh, an unpowered aircraft developed from the glider design of Abbas Qasim Ibn Firnas".[83] Sometimes invoked as a metaphor for God or the inner self in Sufi teachings, Islam's deployment of the machine simurgh also provides a metaphor for the role of mechanical invention in both spiritual emancipation and transcendence in the wider aesthetics of his retro-futurist transglobal geography.

Imagining the caliph's death

The anarchist history of Islam has rarely been a theme ploughed explicitly in mainstream scholarship, though it has been the subject of occasional reflection on early Islamic theology, heterodox formations and contemporary militancy.[84] Both Wilson and Knight deploy historical imaginaries to posit examples of spontaneously evolving, self-generating and self-regulating ecologies of radical Islamic liberty devoid of centralized religious authority or guidance: Wilson in his invocation of pirate utopias and Knight in his depiction of indigenous American Islam. These examples of Islamic social reproduction can be seen as structural incarnations of automatism in that they represent the societal dimensions of self-generation, self-regulation and spontaneity associated with automatic behaviour:

[81] Yakoub Islam, "The Steamship Solehah", available at www.steampunkshariah.info/maos/solehah.htm, accessed 14 Sept. 2012.

[82] "I want to make the ship a character in the novel. The choice was whether to make the vessel historical or magical, and in deciding to give the ship a speaking role, for want of a better phrase, I'm plumping for the latter." Available at http://web.archive.org/web/20100729005015/http://www.steampunkshariah.info/mmoct09.htm, accessed 14 Sept. 2012.

[83] Available at http://web.archive.org/web/20101027113510/http://www.steampunkshariah.info/steam.htm, accessed 14 Sept. 2012, original emphasis.

[84] See Crone , "Ninth-Century Muslim Anarchists"; Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, and John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern* (London, 2007).

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such conceptions of automatism are, for example, particularly prevalent in genetic and quantum science.[85]

Pirate utopias

Wilson sees his historical rendering of pirate utopias as a form of creative history and is self-consciously aware of its instrumental value in harking back to a forgotten, if idealized, age of Islamic anarchism. Toward the end of the eponymous work, he states, "I can't say that these scattered images of *Renegado culture* add up to anything like a hypothesis or a theory or even a very coherent picture."[86] Yet he also regards this method of history as penetrating hidden stores of insight about actually existing communities which "real" historians fail to capture, alluding to his wider critique of the constraining nature of intellectual conventions. "I can only say that I've satisfied my own curiosity to this extent", he writes, "That something like a Renegado culture *could have existed*; that all the ingredients for it were present, and contiguous, and synchronic."[87] As he pointedly observes, "The notion of a *pirate society* is a contradiction in terms in most theories of history, whether Marxist or otherwise", including within this view Christopher Hill, whose Marxist analysis of "radical pirates" was largely responsible for reviving scholarly interest in the subject.[88]

In his wider philosophy, pirate utopias play an integral part in Wilson's concept of "temporary autonomous zones". In this respect, they are also integral to a deeper anti-authoritarian strategy which is retro-futurist. Citing Bruce Sterling's prescient notion of the "net" in his cyberpunk science fiction work *Islands in the Net* (1989), in a brief discussion of pirate utopias in his own book *T. A. Z.* Wilson intimates the collapsing of time and geography in his schema more explicitly: "I believe that by extrapolating about past and future stories about 'islands in the net' we may collect evidence to suggest that a certain kind of 'free enclave' is not only possible in our time but also existent."[89] In Wilson's view, the disparate insurrectionary communities present in Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Rabat and Sale can be understood as constituting discrete and coherent social phenomena akin to short-lived anarchical societies. Deployed as imagined geographies, they form "temporary autonomous zones"—anarchical milieux which lie outside the

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85 See Von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*. For the concept of "memes" as self-reproducing ideas or cultural idioms in society, which draws on genetic science, see also Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976).

86 Wilson, *Pirate Utopias*, 187.

87 Ibid., 187, original emphasis.

88 Ibid., 190; Christopher Hill, "Radical Pirates", in Hill, *Collected Essays*, 3 vols. (Amherst, MA, 1986), 3: 161–87, original emphasis.

89 Bey, *T. A. Z.*, 96–7; Bruce Sterling, *Islands in the Net* (New York, 1989).

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parameters of governmental, legal or religious authority or jurisdiction. Pirate utopias are the historical template for such autonomous communities, which Wilson sees as spontaneously evolving and self-regulating in that they are not a product of conscious ideological design, nor are they governed in any centralized fashion.

Wilson traces the phenomenon of European conversion to Islam from the late sixteenth to eighteenth centuries via engagement with Muslim societies on the so-called Barbary Coast. Known in the Christian world at the time as "Renegadoes" who had rejected their own faith, Wilson numbers these converts in the many thousands. He locates these pirate utopias within his wider preoccupations with heresy, particularly "as a means of cultural transfer" and of social resistance. "When a religion from one culture penetrates another culture" he argues, "it frequently does so (at least initially) as 'heresy.'"[90] Not unlike Yakoub Islam's historical excavations, which are intentionally situated during the ecumenical period of *la convivencia*, Wilson is concerned to break down the notion of Muslim "otherness" by pointing to the cultural and intellectual symbiosis inherent in the constitution of pirate utopias. He calls this idea "the positive shadow" of Islam as a way of understanding "the enigma of apostasy", pointing, in particular, to purportedly intimate connections between Islamic esoteric heterodoxies and the secretive religious brotherhood of Rosicrucianism and other forms of Hermeticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[91] For Wilson, pirate utopias were thus also instances of proto-intercultural exchange: the spontaneous communion of outsiders in an unwritten dissident history. As he remarks, "only later do the Orthodox Authorities arrive to straighten everyone out and make them toe the line".[92]

Positioning his study within wider literature on pirate history, including the anarchic vision of Libertatia in *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724–8), pseudonymously authored under the pen name Captain Charles Johnson (and often attributed to Daniel Defoe), and Marxist and pro-capitalist renderings, he also makes the distinction between pirates and privateers to make the case for pirate utopias as self-generating and self-regulating anarchical communities of class solidarity. "Scholars who see them simply as proto-capitalists are making a big mistake", he writes, and neither do pirates "fit the Marxist definition of 'social bandit' (i.e., 'primitive revolutionary') because pirates have no 'social' context, no society of peasants for whom they serve as focal elements of resistance."[93]

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90 Wilson, *Pirate Utopias*, 200.

91 Ibid., 203.

92 Ibid., 200.

93 Ibid., 145. For a distillation of the divergent ideological uses of pirate history in contemporary scholarship see Caleb Crain, "Bootylicious", *New Yorker*, 7 Sept. 2009.

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In this way, pirate utopias function in Wilson's imaginary as automatic social ephemera whose very transient autonomy is instructive of the necessity for non-permanence, institutional or otherwise, in the achievement of true liberty.

Gods and monsters

If anarchical Muslim communities lost to history preoccupy Wilson's attempts at fashioning a model of autonomous self-regulating society, historical excavation of a more literal kind permeates Knight's meditations on the unmapped genealogies of American Islam. Knight's preoccupation with grave visitation of notable heterodox Islamic figures in his "road trip" across America chime with popular rites in mainstream and folk traditions in Islam, but also with the implicit tying of such rites to countercultural hero worship: in a kind of equivalence to teenage sojourns to Jim Morrison's grave at Père Lachaise, this is reinforced by his collecting the "autograph" of Elijah Muhammad as a "private relic" in the same breath as that of Charles Manson and his invocations of "Shaykh Kerouac."[94] They are at once subversive artefacts of saintly devotion and ephemera of pop culture. As a novel modality of Islamic worship, albeit one imported from Western pop-cultural practices, it allows Knight to piece together a hidden, imagined genealogy of indigenous American Islam marked by the coexistence of outlying communities of free association, cross-fertilization and self-regulation quite detached from dominant, authority-centred narratives of Muslim liberalism and militancy.

It is revealing of Knight's critique of Muslim reformism that the more conventionally regarded "radical" figure of American Islam, Malcolm X, who is currently being coopted by Muslim liberals as a role model for re-visioning an Islam to appeal to Muslim youth, does not loom particularly large in his reflections, despite a reading of his autobiography impelling Knight towards Islam in his teenage years.[95] The rehabilitation of Malcolm X as a Muslim reformist has increased in recent years, most commonly in efforts to posit alternative forms of Muslim dissent as against violent radicalization and narratives of Islamic militancy.[96] It is perhaps not coincidental that, as Malcolm X ultimately

94 Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, 104.

95 Knight has returned to Malcolm X in a recent piece, however. Michael Muhamad Knight, "Lifetime's Assassination of Malcolm X", *Vice*, 7 Feb. 2013, available at www.vice.com/en_uk/read/lifetimes-assassination-of-malcolm-x, accessed 31 July 2013.

96 See, for example, the Radical Middle Way's ideological deployment in their "I am Malcolm X" programme of events, available at www.radicalmiddleway.org/event/i-am-malcolm-x, accessed 30 March 2013; and the academic seminar at which Tariq Ramadan spoke, available at www.soas.ac.uk/cems/events/21feb2012–the-legacy-of-malcolm-x.html, accessed 30 March 2013.

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converted to an orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam and was courted by the Salafi–Wahhabi establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood, among others, this current mobilization is being driven largely by more conservative elements in reformist Islam. In this view, Malcolm X's belated "discovery" of a staid and institutionalized Muslim orthodoxy arguably played a part in rendering him as conservative and non-radical as his opponent Martin Luther King.

Pertinently, in light of the retro-futurism of Wilson and Yakoub Islam, speculative science plays a role in the mystical imaginings of the heterodox formations which pivot around the Nation of Islam, its precursors and offshoots to which Knight turns his historical focus.[97] While this is apparent in the Nation of Islam's cosmological mythology of the "Mother Plane", it is particularly evident in Knight's exploration of the Nation of Gods and Earths, or Five Percenters, which informs his self-conscious subversion of Islamic practices, including the hajj. For example, he writes, "performing an *umrah* on Azreal's behalf, contemplating my seven circuits around the Ka'ba through Supreme Mathematics, and interpreting the story of Abraham and his son through *Return of the Jedi*."[98]

Knight sees the Five Percenters, founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X, a student of Malcolm X, as a more anarchistic, decentralized movement than the Nation of Islam. As such, they fit with his representations of the possibility of an Islam based on radical autonomy and emancipation as against institutional Muslim reformist projects tied to restricted notions of authenticity. As he states in *Blue-Eyed Devil*, "These are the holy monsters that redefine Islam, not your harmless ivory-tower muezzins. Tariq Ramadan's not reaching me with *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* or *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*."[99] At the same time, their esoteric methodologies, embodied in the concepts of "Supreme Mathematics" and the "Supreme Alphabet", are redolent of the occultist and heterodox Sufistic elements which stand in opposition to more rationalist, and therefore hegemonic, discourses of religion. In this, they also echo the use of mystical numerology in Kabbalah and, more obliquely, the imagery of monsters and devils in the mythical figures of Azrael and the golem—the latter an automaton—in esoteric Jewish traditions. As part of the mythologies that pivot around the ambiguous figure of the Nation of Islam's founder, Wallace Fard Muhammad, the Five Percenters can also be located within the wider constellation of Knight's imagined history: this reflects a deeper conceptualization of indigenous American Islam as a radical, free-associating ecology of divergent

97 See Yusuf Nuruddin, "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology", *Socialism and Democracy*, 20/3 (2006), 127–65.

98 Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, 102–3. Knight is known as Azrael Wisdom (Azrael #2) among Five Percenters.

99 Knight, *Blue-Eyed Devil*, 83–4.

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heterodox formations. For Knight, the heresies of freedom in African American Islam point the way to a model of Islamic society which has arisen not by the conscious design of the dominant narratives of authoritarian religion but by spontaneous, aleatoric encounters in which Islam's peripheries are instructive of its anarchical futures.[100]

CONCLUSION

Walter Benjamin's recounting of the famed eighteenth-century spectacle the mechanical Turk was intended as a metaphorical critique of orthodox Marxism and alluded to his own distinct conception of messianic time, with the hunchback dwarf hidden inside the automaton symbolizing "theology", and the automaton itself historical materialism.[101] In light of my focus on the automatic aspects of Islam, it is perhaps both ironic and apposite that von Kempelen's automaton was represented in the Muslim garb of a Turk, born of the orientalist imagination yet suggestive of a magic and wonder that transcended rationality. Benjamin's deployment of automatism also extended to his innovatory study of art history. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) he turned his critique to mass culture and the implications of technological replication in the capitalist age, which signalled both art's demystification and its revolutionary potential. As he wrote, "being reproducible by technological means frees the work of art, for the first time in history, from its existence as a parasite upon ritual".[102]

For Benjamin, automatism represented an ambivalent autonomy at the hand of historical forces, theological and material. In highlighting the multivalence of automatism, I have pointed to the ways in which automatism can be understood as being allied to autonomy in order to elucidate strains of Muslim anarchism

[100] For alternative accounts see, inter alia, Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY, 2002); and Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (New York, 2005).

[101] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 389–400, 389. The chess-playing automaton was the creation of the Hungarian inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen (d. 1804). It has frequently been the subject of theological, literary and philosophical reflections, including by Edgar Allan Poe in his "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" (1849) and, more recently, Slavoj Žižek in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). See also Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, 176–81.

[102] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London, 2008), 11–12.

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as distinct forms of radical religion. While some scholars of Islam have now begun to mine the symbiotic cultural development of radical Islamic thought and practice in an era of globalization, the study of Muslim radicalism is still very much beholden to linear genealogies.[103] Such readings of radical Islam encourage the binary view of it being coterminous either with globalized violence or else with the need for an innovative liberal synthesis. They also stand in a long line of social practices of anathematization and intellectual closure within Islam which abjure nonconformism. Muslim anarchism stands outside the discursive polarity of these discourses both in its aims and in its methods. As such, it is also instructive of the deeper structures of domination that have been inherent in Islamic hermeneutics, including in classical, liberal and militant approaches.

In positing rebel cultures of global Islam, Wilson, Knight and Yakoub Islam point to a transmutation and revisioning of Islamic culture rather than to Islam's deculturation through globalization processes. In this sense, Muslim anarchism also signals a different trajectory of religious conversion than that prevalent in discussions of radical Islam where the significance of discrete cultural and ethnic contexts can be obscured in characterizations of Islam's multicultural appeal. Thus, in the case of Wilson, Knight and Islam, a "radicalization" is driven by white Westerners imbibing esoteric Western aesthetics, rather than in, for example, black conversion to Salafism in the West's inner cities, which, it is sometimes argued, expresses the now disembodied cultural appeal of global Islam.[104] As a truly outlying phenomenon, their writings are also more intellectually subversive of Islamic thought and practice than even global jihadism, reflecting a curious reversal of the creative friction between global religion and indigenous culture arising from adaptations of global Islam via culturally specific traditions of Western rebellion.

The dissident imaginaries of Muslim anarchism under review in this essay may appear to confirm their fanciful irrelevance, steeped as they are in the pseudo-science of spiritualism, magic, conspiracy theories, abnormal psychology, neurosis, (science) fiction and the imagination. This has also been common to

[103] For recent studies that challenge such linear genealogies see Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* (London, 2008); and Peter Mandaville, "Global Islam, Subalternity and Urban Islam in the West", in Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Contextualising Jihadi Thought* (New York, 2012), 31–51.

[104] This ethno-cultural factor is captured in Knight's *Blue-Eyed Devil*, which traces, in part, his own search for the identity of the Nation of Islam founder Wallace Fard Mohammed, itself a subject of some racial controversy. Knight also has a chapter in a recent edited volume among essays which specifically address the cultural politics of race in the punk movement. See Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, eds., *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London, 2011). For anarchism and punk see the relevant essays in Jeff Shantz, ed., *A Creative Passion: Anarchism and Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010).

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criticisms of anarchism more generally as utopian whimsy. But these symbolic references, permeated by automatism, tend to function more as techniques or strategies for radical spiritual emancipation through religion than as intrinsic beliefs (though this distinction is ambiguous in Wilson's thought). In this way, the automatism of Muslim anarchism points the way to the excavation of radical ideas of autonomy and cultural critique, absent in liberal Islam, that aim to transcend the social construction of conventional rationality and rationalist constructs of history as a linear progressive force.

However, in reading Islam through a Western optic, such modalities of Muslim anarchism also harbour an unstated orientialist paradox which posits implicitly that Islam can only be rendered truly legible through a hermeneutics grounded in Western avant-garde practices. In this sense, they arguably parody the Islamic world as a perennial site for otherworldly fantasies of exoticism and spiritualism in the Western imagination, even as they seek to challenge hackneyed perceptions of Islam.[105] Moreover, it is the very lack of Islamic cultural and religious baggage weighing down on Wilson, Knight and Islam that facilitates their peculiarly Western-inflected heterodox visions of Islam. With their divergent varieties of nonconformism, self-images of anti-leadership, and the intellectual constraints of their pronounced recourse to a particular mode of late modern counterculture, they are likely to remain an insurgent presence at the very margins of global Islam. Their anchoring on such historically contingent countercultural moorings may ultimately render their insights an ephemeral curiosity among the now increasingly diffuse hermeneutic practices at play in global Islam: in fact, such modes of critique have long since been commoditized in the West, increasingly sanitizing their vitality and radical import. But the critiques of Islamic authority which such readings of anti-authority offer usefully puncture the hermetic polarity between Muslim radicalism and Muslim liberalism that has come to frame so much discussion of global Islam. By providing an alternative to the institutional politics of creating a "European" or "American" Islam—projects to which Muslim liberals are increasingly tied—they also point the way to forms of aesthetic, cultural and intellectual radicalism that illustrate how Islam's engagement with the West (and vice versa) might be deeper and more creative on the fringes than at any centre.

[105] Knight acknowledges the irony explicitly in relaying a conversation with Wilson: "Peter laughs at that dumb white man dualism of Spiritual East vs. Material West, though we're both white men who have been guilty of it at some time." Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur'an*, 6.

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