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## Constructing an 'Outlandish' Narrative of Self: The Role of Music in Muslim Experience

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the way in which Muslims, particularly those in the Diaspora, use music as an alternative medium to negotiate a narrative of self that reflects their performance of their faith and the issues that concern them. The focus will be on the music of the Danish based music group Outlandish. Specifically, music has become an important space to dismantle and reformulate discussions on identity and offers insight into the way language, religion, and resistance are deployed in a medium with increasing currency. Outlandish has garnered an international audience; through mediums such as YouTube, their music resonates with Muslims and other minority groups in the diaspora faced with similar issues of identification. This paper addresses the questions: how is music employed to construct narratives of self that challenge boundaries? How does music engage the issue of representation for those who face exclusion? How can their work be read in the contemporary setting where globalization has brought different cultural worldviews into contact, at times producing dialogue and constructive exchange and at other times leading to discernible violence, engendering a more pronounced sense of alienation and exclusion?

Through their music, Outlandish expresses the ways in which what differentiates between people binds them through a process of recognition, to borrow from Judith Butler. Focusing on Outlandish's music, I examine the role of music in the negotiation and construction of narratives of self by contemporary Muslims that counter those that have been constructed for and against them.

**Key words:** Identity, Islam, Narrative, Muslims.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Underlying national narratives is what constitutes a nation, who is a citizen, and who is the other. Such narratives entail a process of remembering, forgetting, and reproducing the nation so that a homogeneous, and oftentimes singular identity represents a diverse reality. There have been explicit and implicit gestures to delineate boundaries and to reproduce nationalisms that do not acknowledge internal diversity. This divisive discourse has led to a perception of a world in which gray areas no longer exist, at least not in a way that pushes towards a constructive heterogeneity. These representations highlight differences between those who belong and those who do not rather than the overlap between experiences. The problem, however, with the “us” versus “them” rhetoric is that the possibility of clear and consistent demarcations between peoples is merely an illusion—it always has been. All nations make use of such narratives to imagine “a polity built around linguistic homogeneity of a body of people” (Cooper, 2005, p.156) Different groups have utilized various strategies to challenge narratives that aim to marginalize their experiences and to silence their voices. These interventions take the form of poetry, prose, music, *et cetera*. While immigrants, have always been faced with the challenge of belonging, after 9/11, it is Muslims (this word, itself, in need of unfolding) who are faced with the urgent need to express themselves and voice their own experiences. This need is now anchored and problematized simultaneously by the fact that many of these Muslims now belong to the nations that seek to ignore their presence. The problem of course with this gesture is that many of these nations espouse egalitarian principles of liberty, freedom, the right of participation, and tolerance and yet construct their national narratives through exclusion. Minorities demanding the right to participate in the public sphere and laying claim to the fruits of modernity that these Western nations assert distinguish them from non-Western nations must find ways to challenge these exclusionary narratives that do not reflect the realities of these nations or the ideals of modernity. Music offers one medium to do that. There are numerous musicians who in one form or another engage and explore the issue of Muslim identities and belonging in specific and general imaginations, but here the focus will be on, specifically, the work of the hip hop group Outlandish.

## 2.0 Methodology

The theoretical framework of this paper is informed by discussions like those of Benedict Anderson, Frederick Cooper, and Jurgen Habermas that examine the construction of national identities and historical narratives that depend on a process of exclusion and inclusion in these imagined communities. In addition, the work of Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Hisham Aidi that explores belonging and access to these narratives and the way that music, specifically hip hop and rap, have been utilized to by various communities to challenge narratives that exclude their experiences also contribute to the framework of this paper.

## 3.0 Outlandish's music and its challenge to exclusionary narratives

Music has opened its own public sphere where ideas are exchanged albeit in a manner not accounted for in Jurgen Habermas's framework on the bourgeois public sphere; nonetheless, the public sphere that music has created in this highly globalized context reflects the ideals outlined by Habermas and modernity by allowing individuals to exchange ideas, produce discussion, and most importantly to represent themselves. More specifically, according to Habermas it was the rational-critical debate in places such as salons and coffee houses that formed something that would be called the public” (Habermas, 1994, p.73) Reading, especially, argues Habermas, led to political involvement and eventually to change in the status quo: “Thus critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes”(Habermas, 1994, p.33) In the 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois society, literary exchange, therefore was the conduit through which discussions would

extend to other aspects of society that required change; however, in the 21<sup>st</sup>, the conduits by which this kind of change is produced has broadened to include the internet, film, and music in the sense that they allow more individuals to participate in rational-critical debate on equal footing: “The issues discussed became ‘general’ not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate” (Habermas, 1994, p.37). Thus, the general sense that emerges from the criteria of the public sphere set up by Habermas is an egalitarian spirit that would include a wide range of private individuals in rational-critical debate on topics of relevance to all. It is this egalitarian spirit, although many times only in theory, along with rational-critical debate as a central activity that made the bourgeois public sphere a force of mediation and change and now makes the public sphere produced by music a force for change. It is also these egalitarian principles that those who are excluded are making claim to.

Music has become an important space to dismantle and reformulate discussions on narratives, and thus experiences. Through music, the artist is able to relay their message in a different forum to a much broader audience. Although Outlandish is based in Denmark, they have an international audience, including listeners in the United States. Moreover with internet mediums such as YouTube, their work has become relevant to a much larger audience and their message pertinent to many in the Diaspora faced with similar issues of identification, a point that Andy Bennett articulates in *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*: “Music, it has been illustrated, can bond displaced peoples, effectively bridging the geographic distance between them and providing a shared sense of collective identity articulated by a symbolic sense of community” (Bennett, 2004, p.4) Rap and hip hop as genres of music according Awad El Karim Ibrahim: “... must be read as an act of resistance” and have “been formed as a voice for voicelessness and performed as a prophetic language that addresses silence, the silenced, and the state of being silenced” (Ibrahim, 1999, p.365-366) through music, Outlandish is able to speak to issues that many minorities share, to deconstruct narratives that exclude them, and to redirect the discussion to broader and more inclusive understandings of belonging that mirror the realities of these nations.

Outlandish is comprised of: Isam Bachiri, who is Danish of Moroccan descent; Waqas Ali Qadri, who is Danish of Pakistani descent; and Lenny Martinez, a Honduran living in Denmark. Bachiri and Qadri are Muslim and Martinez is a Catholic. They began singing in 1997, but their debut album *Outland's Official* was released in 2000. They followed this album with *Bread and Barrels of Water* released in 2002 and deemed to be their true break-through, followed it with *Closer than Veins* released in 2005, *Sound of a Rebel* in 2009, and released their most recent album *Warrior//Worrier* in 2012. They have located a space for their music and have received international acclaim. In their music, they engage issues of discrimination, assimilation, media representations of particular groups, immigrant experiences, the role of religion, the role of language, the right of participation, the role that hegemonic narratives play in the construction of identities, and the possibility for different more inclusive narratives. By featuring six different languages in their music—English, Spanish, French, Urdu, Arabic and Danish, as well as various musical traditions, Outlandish further destabilize any clear demarcations that would suggest the possibility of a homogenous space within Denmark and beyond.

Hip hop, as a genre, provides them with a space to engage in a discussion—to participate in the public sphere—that they have been excluded from. Hisham Aidi in “Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories’” underscores the fact that hip hop is used among minority groups, specifically in Europe, to generate a youth activism, combat racism, and to create the broader coalition based on parallel experience. Musicians, like Outlandish, draw inspiration from the music itself but also the historical context out of which hip hop and rap emerged. Hip hop offers a space in which interconnectedness is the reality that is infused with the particular experiences of the musicians and the experiences of the people they are trying to represent and reach out to. Therefore, there is a local and international aspect to hip hop and music in general that these musicians utilize in order to complicate the national narratives and also to call for an internationalism that draws from diasporic and local cultural elements. For this reason, Outlandish’s use of five languages in their project not only adds more musical depth to their work, but more importantly illustrates the possibilities of interconnectedness in

achieving change, a point Aidi emphasizes: "Cultural flows can spark forceful challenges to state-imposed identities and the claims to Western nationalism" (Aidi, 2003, p. 52).

The need to reproduce the Danish nation has now been heightened by a growing immigrant minority, the largest of whom are Muslims. Denmark, like other European nations, is faced with the reality of "others" who are demanding the right to participate in the public sphere of the nation that they inhabit and thus must be accounted for in discussions of belonging to the nation. The obstacle that these minorities face is the kind of definitions of nation, such as that articulated by theorists like Benedict Anderson who see the nation and its citizens as easily defined within a framework that often reduces the nation to a singular conceptualization, which proponents of a reproducible Danish nation and national narrative draw from. To follow Anderson's account of the nation, for example, would mean that a nation like Denmark could continue to construct a national narrative that purposely excludes parts of the population. In his famous book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson defined the nation as "...imagined political community" where every member "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p.15). In other words, the nation is a large group of individuals who share a national identity and idea of what it means to belong to that space; it is a community because it is "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1991, p.16). Moreover, Anderson emphasizes, as part of the community of comradeship, the limitedness of this national consciousness so that there are clear boundaries for the nation and thus what it means to belong to that limited space: "The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them... has finite, if elastic boundaries... no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (Anderson, 1991, p.16). Thus, globalization, immigration, exchange, and interconnectedness do not factor into the national imagination. The problem of course with this conceptualization of the nation is that it does not account for cultural difference—which defines by and large the reality of all nations—and assumes that clear boundaries even within the imagination are possible or that each member of the community engages in the same imagination in a similar fashion. Outlandish's music shows their rejection of exclusion in the nation that they are citizens and constitutes a home for them; moreover, their music highlights the aporias in arguments such as Anderson's by demonstrating the complexity that exists in the Danish nation that cannot be disregarded, especially in a nation which claims to adhere to an egalitarian spirit of tolerance.

Although Muslims make up less than 3% of the Danish population (Simonsen, 2003, p.122), the increased visibility of immigrants has led to more discussion around the social and economic ramifications of immigration, at the heart of which is the question of who constitutes a citizen. This has become more urgent now with children of immigrants who were born and raised in Denmark, who were brought up in the country, speak the language, are educated, and fulfill the demands of Danish society. If there is any acceptance of these populations, the rhetoric has leaned towards assimilation where the call is for immigrants "to think and act like decent Danes" (Pytel and Roper, 2002). However, complete assimilation is impossible, especially for Muslims, because according to Per Mouritsen in his discussion on Islam in Danish political culture:

...the equation between national Lutheranism and autonomy/tolerance consistently carries the conclusion that atheists, other Christian denominations and *particularly* Muslims are not natural carriers of a truly liberal political culture... Muslims practicing or not, by virtue of never having been Lutherans, will be less liberal than native Danes (Mouritsen, 2006, p.80).

Thus, by equating civic values and Danish cultural values, the strongest determiner of which is religion, in order to create a homogenous Denmark, those who do not meet the exclusive criteria are permanently set outside the parameters and will never be able to "to think and act like decent Danes" and belong. What is more problematic about this equation is that it counters the very concept of a modern nation state that is secular and allows for all its citizens to participate in the public sphere.

Since the members of Outlandish experience this effort to exclude them on multiple levels, they use their music to unravel the narratives that do not represent the Danish reality—of which they are a part—and to locate themselves within the Danish cultural, linguistic, and religious landscape. In other words, they reject the efforts to marginalize them and use music to reflect the multiplicity of their experiences that includes their Danish identity. From the outset, their project is apparent from the way they deploy two key terms in their work: ‘outlandish’ meaning foreign and alien and the Spanish term ‘moro’ a derogatory term for an Arab, Moor and/or Muslim. By actively referring to themselves as both outlandish and moros, they empty the terms of their negative meanings, engaging in a reversal, in order to reappropriate them as their own. This reappropriation is infused with the multiplicity and thus becomes a powerful device by which to demonstrate the way language is employed and how it can be redirected. When they use the term ‘Moro,’ therefore, it is more than simply a reversal where a positive notion of Arab or Muslim or immigrant is relayed; rather, the term is complicated time and again to encompass all three of their lived experiences.

In fact, one of their songs is called “El Moro” and examines the struggle they face in Danish society for acceptance. The first few verses in the song outline this:

Face the fear  
 ‘Cause you will never make it here  
 I’m making it clear  
 You better disappear  
 Something rotten in Denmark like in Shakespeare...  
 Worldwide like H.C. Andersen, I won’t quit  
 Don’t depend on the rap game, I depend on my brain  
 Ya stereotype me; I knock you out like prince Naseem (Outlandish, 2002)

The first five verses represent the voices in Denmark who aim to exclude the experiences of these three individuals. Specifically, they play with the reference to the quote from Shakespeare to underscore that in the nationalist rhetoric immigrants are what is rotten in Denmark and thus must be marginalized. They then dispute this marginalization by locating themselves firmly within the Danish narrative with the reference to H.C. Andersen, the famous Danish writer. They do this by first suggesting that they are like Andersen, now a quintessential representative of Danish folk culture, and will not quit their project of situating themselves within the Danish narrative and complicating it, and second by saying that they will fight the attempts to identify them as not belonging like Prince Naseem a British boxer of Yemeni descent. In other words, by juxtaposing these two referents (H.C. Andersen and Prince Naseem) they reveal how numerous narratives inform their individual narratives as well as the national narrative(s) that they are all a part of. In another song titled “Peelo,” which features English, Urdu and Spanish, Outlandish once again queries the idea that they do not belong to the Danish national imagination: “Some say I don’t sound like hip hop is supposed to sound/Ain’t got no L.A., N.Y., Dirty South type of sound/That’s what I’m trying say/I was born raised here/Copenhagen” (Outlandish, 2002). The last two verses, specifically, underscore the fact that a part of their experience is their Danish identity that cannot be stripped from them and informs their narratives. In both “Peelo” and “El Moro,” Outlandish problematize the politics of inclusion and exclusion not only in Denmark but in hegemonic narratives that actively seek to construct a singular notion of who belongs.

In conjunction with the effort to complicate the national narratives that reproduce the nation in a particular way, Outlandish examines the processes by which the ideas are anchored. Representation, thus, occupies a central role in the discussion. Among the most salient examples of the mechanisms by which images are constructed has occurred in the realm of the media, which has participated in reducing and fixing individual and collective identities such that differences are suppressed and false homogeneity created. In a song about the media entitled “Just Me,” Outlandish contests the images that are circulated about immigrants and minorities:

Switch on the TV what do I see  
Yet another guy that looks just like me  
Another picture, Another story, Another tale, Another piece  
Some guy who got shot  
Young guy left to rot  
Lady got robbed  
Some guys who got stopped  
Open the paper in search of news and enlightenment  
Met by some story about hate and incitement  
Half the stories in the paper bout us  
Another woman got assaulted on the bus  
There's a piece about young immigrants and thugs  
Another article 'bout brother selling drugs  
Turn the page hurt my eyes enough  
Yo this bs everyday is tuff  
It's just me, just me (Outlandish, 2005)

In these verses, they refer to immigrants in Denmark or in fact in many Western contexts, many of whom are Muslims, by the recognition of the person on the TV based not just on physical appearance, but on the similar obstacles that they face. According to Outlandish, all the stories in the media portray immigrants engaging in social ills. Even the reference to the assault of the woman, displaces the responsibility to the immigrants and not to the societal intolerance that the media fuels. The power of the images is that they prevent a more nuanced analysis on the part of the audience of the internal economic, cultural, and political diversity of the nation; immigrants remain a permanent and problematic other.

Outlandish's project, however, is partly to contest these problematic national narratives that are anchored by such images but also to demonstrate how numerous narratives inform their complex identities and can be thought in tandem. By constructing their own notion of their identity, they suggest an alternative reading of the realities of others who face similar obstacles. They offer a reading that underscores overlap and hybridity in the place of homogeneity. Each of the three suggest various narratives that are significant to their notion of self and to a larger collective. For example, Martinez in the song "Introspective" underlines the three spaces and memories that inform his identity when he sings, "This is my life I've got a voice/That is just how it is/I have to say what I think, I reflect what I feel/Honduras, Cuba and Denmark I get to represent/These thoughts, they flow from the street" (Outlandish, 2005). All these spaces represent a part of his narrative and destabilize any notion of a singular point of origin. For Bachiri and Qadri, their religious identities constitute a large part of their larger narratives. It is this aspect of their music that has received attention among Danish nationalists who have called for the boycott of Outlandish's music and accuse Bachiri and Qadri, especially, of being Islamists, which somehow prevents them from also being Danish. However, their music is not limited to Bachiri and Qadri's Muslim identity in relation to their Danish identity but includes Martinez's Catholic experience also in conjunction not only with Danish identity but with his fellow Muslim citizens. This is an important point to highlight. The focus on religious identity is another gesture to dismantle narratives that refuses to recognize the possibility of coexistence. In a song entitled "Una Palabra (One Word)," they engage the policy of assimilation and integration, as well as how faith relates to the possibility of realizing either one. In the first 7 verses, they highlight that the reason that assimilation is impossible stems from the drive for separation and maintenance of the image of the immigrant in the national discourse to construct the notion of the citizen:

How can you tell me 'bout participation  
When all you really want is segregation  
Is it my religion—you keep seeing as a threat

You think it's all about murder, violence and death  
 But do you care to find—find the truth...  
 Second class citizen in my own home  
 Been 30 years gone—and still no dome, still gotta stay strong.  
 (Outlandish, 2005)

The question of participation returns to the idea of assimilation and/or integration and the possibility of realizing either one. As members of Danish society, according to Habermas's account of the public sphere, they should have access to participate; yet they are prevented from that exchange. Moreover, the "imagined community" outlined by Anderson does not address the situation of members of society like these three young men who do not have a part in the comradeship. For this reason, the immigrant and minorities will always be second class citizens in what is their home. Moreover, they question the portrayals of Islam that minimize its adherents who live not only Denmark but in many Western nations to homogenized and fixed images that lead to exclusionary discourse. In the following verses, therefore, they call for the right to the freedom of speech (not hate speech however), practicing of faith, and most importantly to be recognized as part of the national narrative:

Product of your society, adopted your values in their entirety  
 You like it or not, player—I'm here to stay  
 We walk the same streets, breathe the same air  
 Add to this state, but do you even care?  
 Guess you gotta reciprocate  
 Want us to be people of faith or people of hate?  
 You got your deen [religion], I got mine—okay? (Outlandish, 2005)

Here they reiterate that they are a part of the Danish society by virtue of their acceptance of the ideals of the society. Not only do they accept the ideals but they contribute to the state and this should be reflected in the Danish national narrative. The tension between Islam and the state, therefore, does not stem from something inherent in the faith but rather the rejection and/or marginalization of the Muslim minorities and in fact any religious minority that does not belong to the Danish State Church. The last verse especially captures this message since it is based on two verses in the Qur'an in a chapter which addresses the basis for tolerance between adherents of Islam and non-Muslims: no compulsion in faith but tolerance of difference by saying you have your faith and I have mine. Thus, by making reference to this verse, Outlandish is suggesting an alternative to the tension, fear and intolerance that excludes groups from the national narratives and call for narratives that not only recognize internal diversity but recognize that how we perceive ourselves is already linked to the other and thus the process of constructing a narrative should be based on recognition and not exclusion. Through their music, they are able to explore the various narratives that inform their sense of self as well as forming a larger collective identity that includes diverse experiences. It is within this framework that Outlandish uses music to engage in their own intervention in the discussion of who belongs not only to the nation but to the world community. Their work calls for a broader understanding of belonging that extends beyond the national borders to include the experiences of others. Music, therefore, becomes an important space to tell another version of the story that is based on inclusion rather than exclusion. Thus, Outlandish draws from their local surroundings that include their own experience of being Danish, Muslim, Catholic, Moroccan, Pakistani, and Honduran to construct multiple narratives.

National narratives are not the only hegemonic narratives that Outlandish challenges in their music. They also reject religious narratives that seek to determine who adheres to the faith and who is outside the fold through rigid constructions. Throughout their music, specifically in their albums *Bread and Barrels of Water* and *Closer than Veins*, they offer their own constructions of Islam and Christianity. Religion, in their music depends on recognizing our interconnectedness rather than our differences. Their imagination of both faiths, therefore, leads to identifying social problems and working towards resolving them. In other words, religion in their music depends on accepting the difference of the

other's faith but recognizing common challenges and working together to alleviate social injustices. This notion of religion can be located in a number of their songs by tracing the religious references and the contexts in which they occur. One song in particular titled "I Only Ask of God" specifically connects awareness of God to awareness of suffering.

I only ask of God  
He won't let me be indifferent to the suffering  
That the very dried up death doesn't find me  
Empty and without having given my everything  
I only ask of God  
He won't let me be indifferent to the wars  
It is a big monster which treads hard  
On the poor innocence of people  
It is a big monster which treads hard  
On the poor innocence of people  
People...people, people  
I only ask of God  
He won't let me be indifferent to the injustice  
That they do not slap my other cheek  
After a claw has scratched my whole body  
I only ask of God  
He won't let me be indifferent to the wars  
It is a big monster which treads hard  
On the poor innocence of people  
It is a big monster which treads hard  
On the poor innocence of people  
People...people...people (Outlandish, 2005)

By using the term "people" in a general sense they make suffering not specific to any particular group. Thus, action to stop suffering is seen as a common goal that is framed by a shared awareness of a God. In another song titled "Look Into My Eyes" (Outlandish, 2005) together they criticize a specific instance of injustice that remains unresolved. This song is based on the poem of Jihad Ali, a Palestinian teenager, in which he expresses the plight of those suffering from America's foreign policy with regards to Israel and Palestine. In this song, they address the global community and question their role in this conflict. Their criticism, however, is not limited to the West or Israel, it extends to their own groups and it is framed within a call for action. Their song "Kom Igen" ends with the lyrics in Arabic:

Tell me, people of God  
How many of us have to die in cold blood  
Innocent victims, ruins and prisons  
Murderers killing as well, even racism.  
Look at our countries, nothing but poverty  
No food, no rights, my heart stays empty  
I look unto the sky and ask God for His mercy  
Protect us from hell and Satan's conspiracy  
You can't buy your ways into heaven  
No Dinar, no Dollar, no Euro will do nothing, could save you  
This is a message from the grave, Allah is Great! (Outlandish, 2005)

Religion in their music is not rigid, exclusive, or free from critique if it moves away from a focus on social justice.



## 4.0 Conclusion

While immigrants have always been a part of Western nations, the nationalist rhetoric continues to focus on homogeneity and exclusion, in the post 9/11 world, this rhetoric has heightened and expanded in ways that render Arabs and Muslims, specifically, and immigrants in general as outsiders and strangers to the Western nations that they live in. Rhetoric that portrays Arabs and Muslims as violent by nature and detached from humanity and portrays immigrants as a constant inassimilable 'other' continues to delineate and consolidate more borders in an extremely interconnected world. There continues to be a process of forgetting that refuses to acknowledge the diversity and a process of remembering that is filtered through false constructions so that immigrants and following generations are inevitably excluded despite their ties to the imagined nation that they live, work, and form their individual and collective narratives in. Outlandish's music reveals that there is a process at work and seek to disrupt it through a nuanced and complex cross-cultural exchange which creates a space for a new reformulation that reproduces the national narratives and inevitably other problematic narratives through a process of recognition, inclusion, multiplicity, and interplay of ideas.

"Wherever I find myself/Where ever I go/That's my house/That's my home." "Wherever"  
(Outlandish, 2000)

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