

# Rumi: A Cosmopolitan Counter-Narrative to Islamophobia

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## ABSTRACT

I present the poetry and life of the influential Sufi scholar Rumi in order to counter the prevalent Islamophobic images of Muslims in the media. Rumi's philosophy epitomizes a cosmopolitan sensibility that embraced cultural diversity. One of Rumi's most important legacies for our contemporary world is how his work creates bridges between Western and Islamic cultures. I suggest that the true cosmopolitan value of Rumi's poetry can be realized if Rumi's poems and philosophy are situated within their specific cultural and historical context, and are appreciated alongside the works of contemporary artists from the Islamic world who carry on Rumi's legacy. As such, the artwork of Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat is also discussed in relation to Rumi. I argue that art educators can play an important role in combatting bigoted perceptions of Muslims by incorporating the art of significant artists from the Islamic world, both past and present – such as Rumi and Neshat – in their curriculum.

**KEYWORDS:** Muslims, Islamophobia, Rumi, Shirin Neshat, Cosmopolitanism

In July 2012, a fourteen-minute amateur film called the “Innocence of Muslims” was released on Youtube, depicting Prophet Muhammad as “a womanizer, a homosexual, a child molester and a greedy, bloodthirsty thug” (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This resulted in outrage and deadly clashes on the streets of Cairo, Benghazi, Tunis, Sydney, and Paris. On November 13, 2015, three teams of Daesh (ISIS or ISIL) fighters carried out a coordinated terror attack in various parts of Paris. The attackers killed and wounded hundreds of innocent individuals as a way of spreading their apocalyptic, anti-western, fundamentalist Islamic ideology (Wood, 2015). In the aftermath of this tragedy, Marine Le Pen's National Front party won two regional elections in France, giving voice to the growing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments (Chrisafis, 2015). These events demonstrate a growing presence of far right parties in European Parliaments as a result of mounting fears of Muslims invading Europe (Allen, 2016). In the United States, Donald Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy is a testament to anti-Muslim and anti-Immigration attitudes. At the

time of this writing, Trump has notoriously called for an all out ban of Muslims from the country. Judging solely by these events, there seems to be a fundamental conflict of morals and values between the West and Islam. To describe this conflict, Samuel Huntington (2011) coined the term “the clash of civilizations.” According to his influential thesis in the book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (2011), cultural and religious differences were to become the primary source of conflict in the post-cold war world.

Fortunately, there is a counter-narrative to the theory of the clash of civilizations. Just as in the West, Islamic societies are diverse and heterogeneous. Within this diversity, there are many individuals and factions who aspire for basic human rights and democratic values. In the Sufi tradition of Islam, for example, there is also long history of inclusivity and openness to all individuals, in spite of religion, race, creed, or class. The poetry of Rumi personifies the cosmopolitan spirit of Sufism. Rumi's wisdom and philosophy still resonate deeply in the contemporary context, providing art educators with a compelling artistic figure whose life and poetry challenges prevailing negative stereotypes of Muslims.

In this essay, I use the words of Rumi to counter the notion of the “clash of civilizations.” I argue that Rumi's life and poetry embodied a cosmopolitan philosophy, which views humans of different cultures as belonging to the same community in spite of differing values, beliefs, politics, cultures, and religions. This open and inclusive view of humanity, which has historical roots in both Eastern and Western philosophy, provides a much needed bridge among cultures. Art educators can play a key role in countering Islamophobic views by engaging in cosmopolitan conversations with great artists from the Islamic world. There is much to be learned from the unique cultural heritage and universal humanity of artists like Rumi.

## Islamophobia in Western Media

Let us begin with a simple exercise. Write the word “Muslim” on a blank sheet of paper and draw a circle around it. Then begin to mind map any words you associate with this word. According to Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008), most Americans who have been asked to do this exercise associate “Muslim” with violence and oppression using terms such as Osama bin Laden, 9/11, suicide bombers, jihad, veiling, and the Middle East. The authors raise the astute question: why, for so many Americans, has “Islam become synonymous with the Middle East, Muslim men with violence, and Muslim women with oppression?” (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 4). Such pervasive stereotypes have deep historical roots. In his seminal work on orientalism, Said (2003) traced the roots of modern representations

of the East to the early nineteenth century, which saw a proliferation of interest among Western thinkers, politicians, and artists in the vast regions that extended from China to the Mediterranean. Said (2003) posited that even the most sympathetic and romantic depictions of the East were always inextricably linked to the imperialist ambitions of Western colonial powers. In art and literature, this has led to gross misrepresentations that conflated cultures and places and reduced people from diverse regions into a few essential qualities.

In many ways, this fixed overgeneralization of diverse cultures and peoples has taken a sinister turn since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The menacing images of fundamentalist terrorists ardently determined to destroy the civilized world are common within the popular imagination. On any given day, one can flip on the television and hear about ambitions of Daesh to install an Islamic caliphate, or watch fictional television shows such as *Homeland* and *24* about a terrorist plot being disrupted by the heroics of some protagonist. Yet, one is hard-pressed to find any portrayals of the considerable divergence of attitudes, political views, and cultural backgrounds of Muslims around the world. Equally rare are positive images of well-known Muslims representing their own heritage and politics in the popular discourse. This lack of representation, along with harrowing images of senseless violence, are two key factors responsible for exasperating racist stereotypes of Muslims, and also many non-Muslims who appear to be of Middle-Eastern descent.

### Definition of Islamophobia

The Runnymede Trust (1997), a British think-tank founded to promote racial equality, produced an influential report titled “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All” in order to address growing concern over the exclusion and discrimination against Muslims in the United Kingdom. This document first brought the term Islamophobia into common usage. The pressing question has been raised as to whether this term represents a phenomenon distinct from other forms of xenophobia, and researchers have identified many similarities among Islamophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigration attitudes (Allen, 2010; Helbling, 2010, 2012). Yet, the complex and at times turbulent history of interactions between the West and Islamic world and the political conflicts that dominate the news and ignite the popular imagination with images of violent, radical Muslims warrant a unique framework for examination.

According to the Runnymede Trust (1997), Islamophobic attitudes can be characterized with eight “closed” viewpoints of Islam, which include viewing Islam as a monolithic bloc, inferior to the West, violent, aggressive, and antagonistic to Western values. This “closed”

perception of Islam fails to account for many basic facts. For one, Islam is not reducible to any particular culture, language, or politics. Muslims live all over the world—in South and East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America—and have vastly differing views on religion, politics, and ethics, depending on where they live. Moreover, within Islam, there are traditions that are inclusive and open to cultural and religious diversity. Rumi is one example of a great Muslim teacher, poet and philosopher.

### The Poetry of Rumi

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim  
Not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen  
Not any religion or cultural system.  
I am not from the East or the West  
Not out of the ocean, or up from the ground  
Not natural or ethereal  
Not composed of elements at all  
I do not exist.  
I am not an entity in this world or the next  
Did not descend from Adam or Eve  
or any origin story.  
My place is the placeless  
A trace of the traceless  
Neither body nor soul  
I belong to the beloved  
have seen the two worlds as one  
and that one called to, and known  
first, last, outer, inner  
only that breath breathing human being. (Rumi, 1997, p. 32)

These are the words of thirteenth-century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi, or simply as he is known to much of the world, Rumi. Rumi was born into a family of theologians, and as such he had been schooled in the knowledge of his day at a time when the Islamic world was flourishing in the fields of physics, mathematics, astronomy, and theology. At the time of his father’s death—at the age of twenty-five—he took over the role of Maulvi (spiritual master) at his father’s school, and went on to live an ordinary life of a religious scholar: teaching, meditating, delivering sermons, and helping the poor. The ordinary was transformed into the extraordinary upon a chance encounter with Shams of Tabriz, a beggar in rags who became Rumi’s friend and spiritual guide. The two would spend tireless nights talking and discussing matters of the soul. Of those nights, Rumi wrote:

When I am with you, we stay up all night.  
When you're not here, I can't go to sleep.  
Praise God for these two insomnias.  
And the difference between them. (Rumi, 1997, p. 106)

On one such night, Shams disappeared without a warning, never to be seen again. Rumi was devastated and began searching everywhere for his kindred spirit and master. The futility of his search led him to the realization of the ultimate union.

The minute I heard my first love story  
I started looking for you, not knowing  
how blind that was.  
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.  
They're in each other all along. (Rumi, 1997, p. 106)

Rumi was a poet of the heart, and love was at the core of his poetry. Although this love was often expressed towards Shams of Tabriz, this was not meant as an expression of a romantic relationship. Rather, Rumi viewed this love as the force that binds the universe, in a similar vein that physicists talk about the gravity, magnetism, and the strong and weak forces. For Rumi, all the various forms of love, from the love one has for one's children to the love between teacher and disciple, were connections to the divine. Thus, in Rumi's poetry one encounters an Islamic scholar who embraced the sensuous beauty that is universal to all humans.

If you want what the visible reality can give, you're an  
employee.  
If you want the unseen world, you're not living your truth.  
Both wishes are foolish,  
but you'll be forgiven forgetting, what you really want is love's  
confusing  
joy. (Rumi, 1997, p. 92)

It is not only what Rumi wrote that was significant, but also how he composed his poems. Many of Rumi's poems were not written down by him, but were in fact spoken while he engaged in ecstatic dancing as he listened to music. Often, he would simply take hold of a column and spin in circles, while his students noted the words that streamed out of his mouth. Rumi's spontaneous outbursts of singing and dancing in crowded markets and on empty sidewalks became more frequent and fervent after his encounter with and the subsequent departure of Shams. His dance was an outward expression of a deep spiritual longing. Rumi's dance also became the inspiration for the iconic Whirling Dervishes, who still perform their ritualistic dance to audiences all over the world. Every gesture of the Dervishes' dance is now stylized and has symbolic and spiritual meaning. The Dervishes'

dance is an act of aligning the corporeal with the movements of the earth, sun, moon, galaxies, specs of dust, cells in body, and atoms that make up matter. They hold one hand open and point at the sky, receiving God's benevolence, while the other arm is directed to the ground, because one must always be rooted in the earth.

Watch the dust grains moving  
In the light near the window.  
Their dance is our dance.  
We rarely hear the inward music,  
But we're all dancing to it nevertheless. (Rumi, 1997, p. 106)  
In your light, I learn how to love  
In your beauty, how to make poems.  
You dance inside my chest,  
Where no one sees you,  
But sometimes I do,  
And that sight becomes this art. (Rumi, 1997, p. 122)

Through creative raptures, Rumi intuited a sense of beauty and oneness with the universe. The residue of this process was his poems, which embody a deep wisdom and love. Yet these poems can also make a profound impression on the reader, provoking thought and reflection about one's own inner being. As such, writing poetry in this manner was for Rumi a means of generating and deepening knowledge and understanding. This knowledge is not merely an abstraction of facts and concepts, but it is rather always intertwined with one's being and life. For Rumi, poetry was ultimately the process by which one's life is lived.

### Rumi's Life as a Cosmopolitan

Rumi was born in September 1207 in the eastern edges of the Persian Empire near the modern day city of Balkh, Afghanistan, which was inhabited by Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews during his lifetime (Lewis, 2003). Rumi's father, Baha al-Din Valad, was a prominent member of the local religious community as a Quran scholar, teacher, and Sufi mystic. When Rumi was a child, his family relocated from his birthplace in part due to the advancements of Genghis Khan's Mongolian army. At first, his family settled in the city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan, which was a major hub on the Silk Road. This ancient trade route connected merchants and travelers from China to the Mediterranean. A few years later, the family moved again, heading for a pilgrimage towards Mecca and eventually settling in the city of Konya, Turkey (Lewis, 2003). Along this journey, Rumi encountered the rich cultural mosaic of an ancient land.

The decision of Rumi's family to settle in the western regions of

Anatolia may have been influenced by the possibility of living in a cosmopolitan center that had recently become Islamicized. Living in Konya offered Baha al-Din, and later Rumi, the prospect of reaching a wide and diverse audience to teach “the rites, beliefs and theology of Islam” (Lewis, 2003, p. 12). The population of this area had historically been mostly Greek, but in the eleventh century it was conquered by Seljuk Turks and populated by Turkmen tribesmen and Turkish Muslims. Furthermore, many people from Persia and Central Asia fleeing Genghis Khans’ encroachment had found their home in Konya. During the Seljuk era, neighborhoods in major cities tended to segregate along religious lines, “with Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Muslim quarters, and the Muslim population further tended to congregate along sectarian lines” (p. 284). Although a Sunni Muslim, Rumi maintained cordial relations not only with Muslims from various schools, but also with the diverse population of thirteenth century Konya. In his life, Rumi was a cosmopolitan who had been exposed to different cultures and belief systems by travelling to different parts of the world, and living in a multicultural urban centre. Rumi’s openness to different cultures was inspired by Sufi philosophy, which views all humans as belonging to one human community regardless of race, culture, class, or creed.

### Sufism as a Cosmopolitan Philosophy

Rumi’s cosmopolitanism was rooted in the context in which he lived and the basic beliefs and assumptions he held as a Muslim. Rumi’s worldview derived from the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic philosophy. Rumi was also a Sufi, and his life’s work was deeply inspired by other mystic poets and teachers that preceded him, including Attar, Sanai, and his father Baha al-Din. Sufism is a mystical subset of Islam, which had its beginning shortly after Mohammad’s death. However, many of the central tenants of Sufism can be traced to traditions that pre-date Islam, and Sufism shares common tendencies with other mystical traditions (Shah, 1968). A key philosophical belief of Sufis is that the individual has a direct connection with the divine. A common literary trope utilized by Sufi writers is to refer to various forms of human love as allegorical to the love of the divine.

As a Sufi, Rumi also believed that the essence of divine love was not limited to any social class, race, or religion. In his poem, Rumi spoke of his essence as being that of a “breath breathing human being,” and this basic humanism permeates his poetry and teaching, in which one encounters numerous stories and folktales from religions and cultures other than his own. Rumi often told stories about Moses, Solomon, and Jesus, and expounded on these tales to draw out deeper philosophical ideas. Equally common were stories about the delight of being drunk on wine or sexual pleasures, which, in spite of being

blasphemous to orthodox Muslims, were used by Rumi as allegorical devices to grab the attention of common people to reveal deeper spiritual meanings. Rumi told these stories in part to appeal to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace of Konya.

During his lifetime, Rumi’s sermons grew in popularity and were attended by peoples of all faiths. Among his disciples were Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Rumi spoke several languages to communicate with the local populace. He was a master of his mother tongue, Farsi, and as a Muslim scholar, he had also acquired expertise in both colloquial and classical Arabic. As a result of living in Konya, Rumi had learned some colloquial Turkish and Greek, which he incorporated in his sermons (Lewis, 2003). Rumi’s openness to various cultures, languages, and religions was also reflected in the reaction to his death in 1273, which resulted in a funeral that was attended by Muslims, Christians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, and Persians mourning his passing (Wines, 2004).

Rumi’s openness to the diversity of cultures and religions is also a core tenant of Sufism. As Shah (1968) pointed out:

The connection between the ancient practical philosophies and the present ones is seen to have been based upon the higher-level unity of knowledge, not upon appearances. This explains why the Muslim Rumi has Christian, Zoroastrian and other disciples; why the great Sufi ‘invisible teacher’ Khidr is said to be a Jew; why the Mogul Prince Dara Shikoh identified Sufi teachings in the Hindu Vedas, yet himself remained a member of the Qadiri Order; how Pythagoras and Solomon can be said to be Sufi teachers. (p. 124)

As a Sufi, Rumi understood that there are many paths to the divine, and all religions and doctrines were external manifestations of a deeper knowledge that binds all sentient beings. As Rumi said, his origin was “the placeless,” and he was not confined to any particular “religion or cultural system” (Rumi, 1997, p. 32). However, Rumi’s poetry and teaching were simultaneously infused with symbols and allegories from the specific cultures and religions common to the place and time in which he lived. As a teacher, Rumi understood the sensibilities of his local audience, and he used various techniques such as poetry, jokes, tales, whirling, and dancing to allow his disciples to enter into a knowledge that transcends race or creed. Rumi’s teachings were firmly rooted in his local milieu, in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious city of Konya. As such, Rumi’s teachings are in many ways inseparable from the local context for which they were intended. However, the core of these teachings strived for a form of knowledge that

transcends place and time. Rumi's poems are of their place and time; simultaneously they are "placeless" and "timeless." In his life, Rumi embodied a cosmopolitan sensibility of openness to dialogue with various cultures. In a similar spirit to cosmopolitan thinkers that came after him (Appiah, 2006; Kant, 1992; Nussbaum, 1997), Rumi's cosmopolitanism was rooted in his local context, while affirming a universal sense of moral obligation to all human beings.

## The Legacy of Rumi in the Contemporary World

Today, Rumi is a global phenomenon. In Turkey, his legacy has been carried on by his followers after his death, along with the foundation of the Mevlevi Order. The ceremonial dance of the Whirling Dervish is performed by this order today. Further, Rumi's mausoleum in Konya is among Turkey's major attractions, drawing in thousands of tourists from all over the world. In Iran, there has been a proliferation of scholarship about the mystic's life and poetry in the last fifty years, and his major work, the *Masnavi*, is often colloquially referred to as the Persian Bible. Rumi is also an inspiration to a generation of Iranian artists, including the classical musicians Shahram and Hafiz Nazeri, who reinterpret Rumi's lyrical poems through their compositions. Similarly, Rumi's poems are incorporated in the Qawwali music of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, in the work of renowned artists such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who reanimates his words in Urdu and Punjabi. In the spirit of Rumi, these artists bring to life his cosmopolitan sentiments by performing to audiences all over the world.

In the West, Rumi's fame has grown considerably in recent decades. In 1997, the *Christian Science Monitor* declared Rumi the best-selling poet in America (Marks, 1997). Rumi's inspiration can also be felt in the works of several contemporary artists in various domains. For instance, in 1998, New York fashion designer Donna Karan released her spring line with musical interpretations of Rumi's poems by Deepak Chopra playing in the background. In the same year, Philip Glass and Robert Wilson (1998) released "Monsters of Grace," which is a multimedia chamber opera with libretto from the works of Rumi. This work draws on the translations of American poet Coleman Barks (1997), who has made Rumi's words accessible to anglophone audiences by re-interpreting them in free verse. Barks often recounts an encounter with friend and fellow poet Robert Bly who handed him several scholarly English translations of Rumi's work and asked him to release the poems from their scholarly cage (Barks, 1997). Barks' accessible re-interpretation of Rumi is one important factor in the widespread appeal of Rumi in America today. Furthermore,

this widespread appeal to audiences in both the East and West has meant that a key legacy of Rumi in our contemporary world is in creating bridges among cultures. It is for this reason that on the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rumi's birth, UNESCO named 2007 the year of Rumi (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007).

## Lost in Translation

Rumi's poetry embodies a cosmopolitan spirit that transcends cultural and religious boundaries in our contemporary world. However, several authors have raised concern over the manner in which anglophone readers have adopted his poems. One source of contention simply lies in the difficulty of translating the poems into English. Rumi had a masterful command of classical Persian, and he artfully manipulated the rhyme, meter, syntax, and grammatical structures of the language to convey tone, mood, and meaning. Moreover, his poems are rich with allegories and symbols that are largely foreign to readers who are not acquainted with his culture. Most anglophone readers, however, encounter Rumi through the free verse translation of Coleman Barks, who neither speaks nor reads Farsi. Barks relied on existing scholarly translations to create his renditions. A comparative analysis of Barks' translations and the earlier scholarly versions revealed that while the scholarly versions were mostly accurate but at times too literal, in Barks' translations, many of the references to Islamic ideas were omitted for the sake of clarity and readability (Thornton, 2015). For El-Zien (2000), a more serious concern is the Western commercial adoption of Rumi's work. El-Zien (2000) stated,

The popular...perception of Rumi's Sufi tradition in the United States does not capture the perennial philosophy to which Rumi belongs. Instead, it brings a form of vague spirituality entangled in relativity and temporality. Rumi's verse is seen as an enjoyable spiritual product to be consumed in order that one may relax and become more productive after listening to it. (p. 83)

El-Zien coined the term "New Sufism," in reference to the New Age movement, to describe what he deemed to be a purely commercial venture. To make his case, El-Zien examined four key tenants in Sufi philosophy, including the relation of human love to divine love, both in scholarly and popular translations. He concluded that in all cases, the "New Sufi" approach strips these concepts from their Islamic roots. Furlanetto (2013) argued that many of the contemporary popular adaptations of Rumi fail to realize the cosmopolitan potential

of Rumi, instead falling into the representational traps of orientalism. In Said's (2003) analysis, many of the representations of the "Orient" were produced in the West for Western consumption, failing to account for the particularities of the cultures they represented. Likewise, Furlanetto (2013) argued that a discussion of the historical specificity and philosophical traditions to which Rumi belonged are largely absent in popular translations.

These critiques of the translation of Rumi for Western audiences reveal some of the underlying challenges in developing a cosmopolitan outlook in the contemporary world. On the one hand, Rumi's poetry aspires towards a universal ideal that is embracive of cultural and religious differences. As such, his poetry can play a vital role in building bridges among people all over the world. Translations that make Rumi's poetry accessible to wide audiences are vital for creating bridges. However, the act of translating the writings of an ancient Muslim thinker for Western audiences is not an innocent nor neutral endeavour. Translators make crucial choices in terms of what they include and omit, and there is evidence that significant aspects of Rumi's Islamic heritage have been omitted to appease a wider readership. The act of translating a Muslim poet is inexorably tied to questions of representation and appropriation. In the contemporary milieu, it is vital to draw links among cultures based on our similarities and shared humanity. Equally important is the need to be respectful of differences and attend to the specificities of other cultures. This paradox calls for a more nuanced and critical understanding of cosmopolitanism.

## Cosmopolitanism

In a general sense, cosmopolitanism refers to the belief that all humans belong to a single community, and have a shared morality in spite of differing values, beliefs, politics, and religions. This term derives from the Greek "kosmos," meaning world, universe, or cosmos, and "polis," or citizen; thus, a cosmopolitan can be understood as "a citizen of the world." This notion dates back to the fourth century BC, and the philosophical tradition of the Cynics. For the Cynics, being a citizen of the world meant rejecting allegiance to a specific city or state. This view was characterized as a negative formulation of cosmopolitanism that rejects local allegiances and obligations (Kleingeld, 2012). The Stoics later took up this term in the third century BC, developing a more positive conception differing from that of the Cynics. For the Stoics, cosmopolitanism meant affirmation of moral obligation toward all people regardless of origins (Kleingeld, 2012). The Stoics affirmed local affiliation, believing that every citizen simul-

taneously belongs to their local community and to humanity at large (Nussbaum, 1997). In this formulation, a world citizen is a member of a single moral community, and at the same time, a citizen of a particular city or state. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant elaborated on the Stoic's moral theory of cosmopolitanism by developing a legal, political, and economic framework for world citizenship. In the *Perpetual Peace*, Kant (1992) proposed a model for peace amongst nations, which was rooted in the cosmopolitan principle of moral obligation to humanity. Kant regarded cosmopolitanism as an attitude of being open and morally concerned about all human beings, in spite of culture or creed, as members of a global community. For Kant and the Stoics, cosmopolitanism necessitated moral commitment to local states and nations, as well as the global community. For instance, in today's world, a sense of moral commitment means supporting all victims of terrorism, including refugees fleeing attacks in Syria and Iraq. Rather than viewing refugees with fear and suspicion because they are Muslim, a cosmopolitan would recognize the basic humanity of these individuals in spite of the differences in their cultures, religions, and belief systems.

## Rootless and Rooted Cosmopolitanism

Today there is a discrepancy in how cosmopolitanism is understood. Contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism can be divided in two categories: one derived from the Cynics' expression of extreme individualism, and the other from the Stoic and Kantian ideals of moral commitment to all humans (Lettevall, 2008). The former represents a kind of rootless cosmopolitanism where the individual rejects any connections to his or her culture or history. The latter is a form of cosmopolitanism in which an individual's connections to his or her roots are affirmed, and differences among cultures and individuals are considered to be an integral part of global citizenship. The question of how we can respect our moral obligation to all humans while affirming our differences is particularly pertinent in the twenty-first century, given that in our interconnected world, fundamental differences exist among cultures, religions, and individuals. In this context, it is vital to resist rootless forms of cosmopolitanism that deny the connection of the individual to culture, politics, or history. The antidote to the fallacy of "the clash of civilizations" is not extreme individualism, but rather an understanding of cosmopolitanism that is rooted in the local, open to difference, and committed to moral obligations to all human beings. It is inevitable within the global context that univer-

sal moral concerns will clash with local customs, beliefs, and values. Choosing between local affiliations and global humanitarian obligations can be a complex matter. As a response to this complexity, Appiah (2006) suggested a theory of cosmopolitanism based on the model of a conversation. He explained,

there are some values that are, and should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local. We can't hope to reach a final consensus on how to rank and order such values. (p. 31)

For Appiah (2006), conversations among people from different ways of life can enlighten and inform, and in some instances these conversations can be vexing. A cosmopolitan understands that people are different, and "there is much to learn from our difference" (p. 19). In our contemporary milieu, encountering different cultures, world-views, and ways of life is inevitable. One does not need to be a world traveler to encounter different cultures. In most North American cities, communities from all over the world co-exist. We encounter other cultures through our television and computer screens, through movies and popular culture. It is also possible to encounter different cultures through art, music, and poetry. There exists no culture on the planet that does not have an artistic tradition. There is much that can be learned by engaging in cosmopolitan conversations through art. Therefore, educators can provide powerful counter-narratives to the negative images of Muslims by looking at Muslim artists, musicians, and poets who also embraced the cosmopolitan ideal of belonging to the human community.

### Contemporary Reinterpretation of Rumi by Shirin Neshat

Similar to other Sufi masters and poets before and after him, Rumi was a man of "timelessness" and "placelessness," who brought his knowledge and experiences "into operation within the culture, the country, the climate in which he" lived (Shah, 1968). However, the cultures, nations, and political atmospheres of the places that Rumi lived in Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey have inexorably changed since Rumi's time. Rumi's world was in many ways dissimilar to the interconnected, globalized world we live in today. Fortunately, neither Rumi nor his cultural heritage are merely relics of a distant past. Rumi's poems continue to inspire contemporary artists in the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. These artists are also members of the global community, which today is connected through the intricate webs of emails, websites, mobile devices, and economic and geo-

political landscapes. Certain artists who share a cultural heritage with Rumi provide powerful and pertinent reinterpretations of his poetry within the contemporary milieu. These artists offer valuable insights for our cosmopolitan conversation by connecting Rumi's cultural roots to the realities of our contemporary world.

The Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat is a salient example of a cosmopolitan who treads between two cultures. Through her photography, films, and videos, Neshat explores themes of gender, identity, and her complex relationship with her homeland, which she was forced to leave due to the Islamic revolution. In her renowned photographic series *Women of Allah* (1993-1997), for example, Neshat explores femininity in relation to Islamic fundamentalism and the military in Iran. In *Turbulent* (1998), Neshat draws on the poetry of Rumi to deliver a critique of the Islamic Republic's prohibitions on public performances by female artists. In this two-screen video installation, the viewer encounters two singers. The male singer on the left screen is Shoja Azari, an Iranian-American filmmaker and visual artist, and the female singer on the right is Sussan Deyhim, an Iranian-American Sufi singer, performance artist, and human rights activist. The theatre on the left is occupied by a handful of men, wearing the same formal white shirts; the theatre on the right is empty. At first, the male singer steps onto the stage to applause, and delivers a heart-rending performance of one of Rumi's "Poems of Passion." This song is a recording of the famed Iranian classical singer Shahram Nazeri. While the man is singing, we can see the silhouette of the female singer facing the empty theatre on the left. Once the male singer is finished and receives his applause, the muffled voice of the female singer starts to take over, and the camera on the left begins rotating to reveal her face. The recording was done by Deyhim, who delivers a jarring, passionate, and enthralling vocal performance that defies the conventions of classical Persian music. For Neshat, Deyhim "subverts every rule of traditional music and pioneers a style of her own, while the male singer remains with the perimeter of convention" (Neshat, Danto, & Abramovic, p. 45).

In Neshat's articulation, the female singer is not a passive victim of Islamic patriarchy. She is a creative force that contributes to her culture by transgressing its conventions and boundaries. On the one hand, Neshat is deeply rooted in the philosophy, music, and poetry of her culture. On the other hand, she challenges the cultural conventions that relegate the creative expression of women to the realm of the private. She does this by using poetry. About poetry, Neshat said:

Whatever I do is deeply rooted in the poetic language that I really believe is inherent in Iranian blood. When you look back at Iranian history, particularly modern history, an



history textbook, which included entire chapters on Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism. There was also one chapter titled *Non-Western art and cultural influences*, which lumped together various unrelated artistic forms from Asia, Africa, and South America (Brommer, 1996). All artistic traditions have historical roots and local idiosyncrasies, which ought not be diminished. Cosmopolitan conversations in art education need to account for this specificity. When discussing Rumi, for instance, it is vital to consider the religious, cultural, and historic context in which they were created. Rumi's cultural roots inspired his creations, and learning about his cultural context enriches any reading of his poems. In fact, one of the great values of encountering art from other cultures is that works of art provide a window into different beliefs, values, and ways of life. It is also vital for us to be cognizant that cultures change and evolve over time; as such, the understanding of any artistic tradition ought to account for contemporary beliefs, values, and ways of life as well. The potential of Rumi's poetry to engender cosmopolitan conversations between the West and Muslim culture will only be fully realized if Rumi's words are rooted within his cultural context on the one hand, relating his cultural legacy to the contemporary world on the other.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that Rumi offers a cosmopolitan counter-narrative to the media's Islamophobic representations of Muslims as a monolithic bloc opposed to Western values. In his life and poetry, Rumi embodied a cosmopolitan sensibility that was simultaneously rooted in the particularities of its time and place, and appealed to our shared humanity. However, the translations of Rumi from the original Persian to popular English versions have tended to uproot Rumi from his historical and cultural roots in order to appeal to the sensibilities of the Western market. The accessibility of these translations has made Rumi a well-known literary figure in America; as such, they have played a tremendously important role in building bridges between the West and Islamic culture. However, I have also cautioned that the cosmopolitan potential of Rumi's poetry will not be fully realized if historical context and cultural specificity are absent from exploration and discussion. This is because, as Appiah (2006) pointed out, cosmopolitanism is not a final solution to a problem that must be solved, but rather an ongoing cross-cultural conversation that acknowledges cultural difference and specificity. We stand to learn a great deal about our common humanity from our differences.

In order to situate Rumi's poetry and teaching within his cultural heritage, I suggested a strategy of reading his poetry alongside the reinterpretations of contemporary artists from the Islamic world. Particularly, I discussed the artwork of Shirin Neshat because her

work explores the intricacies, contradictions, and complexities of Muslim identity in the contemporary world. Neshat's body of work is simultaneously critical of Islamic fundamentalism and rooted in the rich traditions of Persian culture that have been shaped by Islamic doctrine since the seventh century. As such, Neshat's translation of Rumi epitomizes a cosmopolitan spirit that is rooted in the specific culture of contemporary Iran, and at the same time, strives for universal human values of freedom, democracy, and gender equality. Rumi and Neshat are two examples among many great Muslim artists that art educators can use in their classrooms to counter narrow perceptions of Muslims. Knowledge about their artistic forms and expressions can shed some light on the complexities, heterogeneity, and basic humanity of Islamic cultures. The knowledge and teaching about cosmopolitan Muslim artists would be an antidote to fear, bigotry, and terrorism that is widespread in Western media and culture.

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