

## Interview - Juliane Hammer

Written by E-International Relations

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Juliane Hammer is an Associate Professor and the Kenan Rifai Scholar of Islamic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her interdisciplinary work of the last decade has focused on women, gender and sexuality, and Qur'anic interpretation in contemporary Muslim contexts, especially within American Muslim scholarly production and communal life. Hammer is the author and editor of several books and academic articles in Religious Studies and Middle Eastern Studies and lectures widely on women, gender and sexuality in Islam. After publishing *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More than a Prayer* (2012), she has turned to two related book projects. The first focuses on American Muslim efforts against domestic violence, which traces religiously framed efforts in Muslim communities to raise awareness of domestic violence. The second approaches discourses and practices regarding marriage and family in Muslim communities in the United States at the intersection of marriage ideals, religious discourses and interpretations. It also look at the ways in which Muslim practices as well as ideas are simultaneously framed by American marriage debates and Muslim reevaluations and reinterpretations of religious tradition and normativity.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research happening in your field?**

The answer to this question depends a little bit on how I define my field. If it is the study of American Muslims, then the most exciting developments concern negotiations of race and culture in American Muslim communities. There is very challenging work taking place that explores the ways in which American Muslims at least since the turn of the twentieth century have been carving out spaces in a racially divided American society while attending to issues of social justice and equality within their own ranks. There are many ways in which American Muslims have actively participated in anti-racist struggles while others have attempted to attain whiteness and thus protection from a racist system that has excluded and marginalized them.

If I define my field as women and gender studies and especially the intersection of Islamic studies and gender studies then I would have to say that the most interesting developments pertain to a more serious, theoretically sophisticated, and intellectually critical application and exploration of gender as a category. There is so much research on Muslim women that it is necessary and important to take the next step and explore gender beyond women, to include men, but also to get away from gender binaries. Even further, the connection between gender and sexuality, which is often rhetorically advanced, is being taken seriously and has produced some of the most exciting new research.

In religious studies, my official discipline of teaching and research, we continue to debate questions of normativity, the need for public scholarship, and the continued significance of religion in people's lives as well as global and local politics.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) prompted the most**

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### **significant shifts in your thinking?**

Since growing up in East Germany, going through the German academic system by getting an MA and PhD in Islamic studies after German reunification, and then moving to the United States to teach and conduct research, my understanding of the world has shifted significantly and more than once. Somewhere in the process I realized that I have been an activist since I was a teenager: for me being an activist means feeling and being responsible for changing the world, however small the steps. I am also, and perhaps intrinsically linked to my activism, an intellectual, someone who not only studies society but sees the production of knowledge both as a responsibility and as a deeply political and public act.

The world I live in has changed so much in the past twenty-five years that it is sometimes hard to recognize it. Along with those sweeping changes — some positive and others very negative in my view — I have come across, learned from, and been changed by many people, including scholars, intellectuals, activists, and artists. I count among them (this is not an exhaustive list): Edward Said, James Baldwin, Tracy Chapman, Mercedes Sosa, Amina Wadud, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and many others. I have also been shaped by my own academic and activist contemporaries who continue to change and challenge my ideas and views.

Perhaps the most profound change to my view of the world has come through my two daughters who make it both urgent and significant to change the world into a safer, better place for them and to model rather than teach them that each of us matters and that what counts in the end is to have tried.

### **In what ways, through theory or method, can scholars of Islam integrate gender as a category of their work, outside of its current sanctioned place in work on and by Muslim women?**

I'll start with the ways in which it is hard: scholarship on Muslim women was, beginning in the 1970s, an important corrective to existing work on Muslim societies as well as Muslim histories and texts in which men as the norm were largely taken for granted. However, this corrective came with a heavy price: it worked on the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed and in need of liberation, a claim that itself has problematic ties to European colonialism and the colonization of Muslim-majority societies. Once scholars moved on to Muslim women's agency and resistance to their oppression, there were more openings for critical scholarship but also for the inclusion of Muslim women's own scholarly perspectives and ideas.

It is hard to complain about these necessary historical steps. More recently, however, I have come to see the now seemingly obsessive focus on Muslim women, aided by global events and politics, as a serious impediment to critical analysis of how gender is constructed and negotiated in Muslim societies and communities, beyond the female-male gender binary and always in close proximity to questions of sexuality, sexual nature, and practice. Both benefit from the inclusion of more than women in our considerations. One way this has played out in my own work is by focusing on marriage and sexual practice, which are not always easy to research but by their very nature as topics require reaching beyond women's discourses and practices.

A key challenge I see in recognizing work on gender is that unless women or gender are mentioned in the title or abstract of a particular work, it is precisely in the organic inclusion of gender as a category that it becomes difficult to find such work and hold it up as gender work.

Lastly, in the study of gender among Muslims, the focus away from women and towards gender also raises important questions for activism as well as for the application of Euro-American and often universalized gender theory to Muslim contexts. Activists might need to insist on their focus on women in order to change the societies and communities they are working in and it takes additional theoretical work to show how changes in any society can only be achieved when both women and men are included as agents of change. In terms of theory, I wrestle with the question of what it means to apply gender theory that posits either gender or both sex and gender as constructed, and also pushes against a gender binary, in the face of communal realities and theological commitments that are left behind in the process. In other words, how can I question the gender binary or posit sex as constructed when many Muslims read the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, and their interpretive textual tradition as firmly

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representing a divine mandate for a male-female binary?

**How do you wrestle with the Catch-22 of advocacy against gender violence within American Muslim communities in the context of the pervading colonial investment by Western powers and some feminist writing in saving Muslim women from Islam?**

The short answer is that I wrestle with this Catch-22 every day of my life and how I approach it depends on the day as well as on my audience. I have come to realize that sometimes it makes sense to verbalize and thus call out into the open the fact that this predicament is a trap set by society and that I want to negotiate my way out of it. It helps to frame this verbalization as part of what Miriam Cooke has called 'multiple critique.' Many Muslim women scholars have used versions of this concept to say that it is both possible and necessary to critique capitalist 'western' societies for their marginalization and violation of Muslim communities and societies while also levelling a sustained critique towards our own Muslim communities and societies for their continued victimization and violation of women. It also helps to demand nuance; there is a difference between analysing and critiquing structures and systems in a society that oppresses and marginalizes women, including economic, political, cultural, social, and religious factors, and to claim that 'Islam' (itself a construct) oppresses Muslim women or that all Muslim men always oppress all Muslim women. It is more complicated than that and I insist on attending to that complicatedness.

**Are there necessary limits to the exploration of diverse Muslim perspectives on gender with a commitment to what you call 'feminist normativity'? Why have you chosen to continue to self-identify with the term 'feminist' given the suspicion around this title in American Muslim communities?**

I see my commitment to feminist normativity and my own identification as a feminist as an act of honest engagement. I was a feminist before I became a Muslim (at age 27) and my commitment to the full humanity of women and to critiquing patriarchy (that is what defines my feminism) has come with me into my Muslimness. I am also a white, European Muslim woman which carries with it a certain privilege to practice critiques of European and American feminisms as an insider to them and not as someone who has routinely and consistently been excluded from such discursive production. This exclusion is the case for women of colour who wrestle with the white, middle class, and Euro-centric narrative assumptions of feminism by finding space through designations such as womanism and mujerista feminism.

I do not embrace the term Islamic feminism because it carries normative baggage but I am comfortable calling myself a Muslim feminist. My contribution hopefully lies as much in challenging feminism to consider other ideas and perspectives and become less Euro-centric, secular, and white, while also allowing me to challenge the Muslim communities I am involved in to consider feminist critique. And yes, there are times when I experience limitations in my access to Muslim individuals and communities that reject my requests and also my arguments because I identify as a feminist. I see the greatest danger in not being able to access those who need to be challenged the most: Muslims who are at the other end of the spectrum with regards to gender roles and rights from where I position myself. Change will be difficult if I/we do not engage with that other side but it is very hard work to sustain conversations when the strategy of that other side is silencing and ignoring our ideas.

**How does your work account for the extensive growth of queer theory as well as gender and sexuality studies beyond a gender binary? In what ways are these developments meaningful to work on communities that want to retain their theological interpretation of a gender binary in Islam?**

Honestly, I am at the very beginning of a challenging road. I want to engage with cutting edge gender and sexuality theory and find some of it very compelling. One danger is the tendency of theoretical frameworks in these fields to deconstruct everything. Deconstructions comes before as well as after critique and I get that — if the system fails to be just and to provide everyone a good life, it needs fixing. However, deconstructing everything is also causing deep anxiety and uncertainty, especially for people who want to hold on to precepts and ideas because they make them feel safe. That is not an excuse but it accounts for the enormous resistance to much of post-modern theory. I want it to do work for me but I don't want to be expected to perform theory in one particular way. And because I see no boundary between my work and my life — I never stop thinking, analysing, critiquing, and changing — I also want to

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be certain about some things. I am relatively comfortable with ambivalence, perhaps also because I am a migrant and an intellectual exile, but I have a longing for both a community to belong to and ideas, beliefs, and perhaps material realities to hold on to. This ambivalence about questioning all categories and exploring their power in shaping but also breaking people's lives extends logically into my work with sex and gender as constructed categories. I find myself speaking to and about people who identify as men and women and being comfortable with that. This relative comfort is only broken when Muslims who do not identify as such or self-identify as queer come onto my radar and it is clear that their lives and experiences are anything but comfortable. I am always with the oppressed, always, and this commitment carries through here as a challenge to myself to be less invested in the gender binary and more open, not only when I see oppression directly, to theoretical work and community activism in that direction.

**You do not identify as a theological writer yet are invested theologically in your academic work. With whom do you feel theological community as a scholar and how does that boundary extend when working on ethnographic projects beyond academia?**

I am cautious about the word theology as applied to Muslims — it is after all a Christian term for a very Christian activity, namely to contemplate what to believe about God. Muslims have ideas about that but perhaps it makes more sense to think in broader terms of interpretation of scripture, wrestling with discerning the will of God through ritual, as well as ethical and legal practice. I also teach at a public university, in a department of religious studies that has very little room for theological inquiry or religious normativity. My work on the various normative commitments that scholars in the humanities have and that cannot be avoided by scholars of religion(s) is an attempt to chip away at the rigid boundary between those supposedly analysing religion rationally and those who work prescriptively within their own religious tradition. There are many more ways to be insiders or outsiders to communities, systems, and traditions than to say I am Muslim and thus an insider or I am not a Muslim and thus an outsider. As discussed above, I identify as a Muslim feminist but that makes me an outsider to many Muslim communities regardless of what I claim to be myself. I am also a critical insider which puts me at the margins of some communities.

The question of religious more than theological community is a difficult one. I have already mentioned my longing to belong to a community. I have built relationships with other Muslim women scholars and activists and a few male Muslim allies and have decided that these connections are community for me. I do not want to compromise my commitments and ideas in order to be accepted. Many people are part of this network while others are intellectual and religious inspirations and foremothers to the struggle for non-patriarchal Muslim communities and societies in which people of all gender identities are accepted as equally human and only distinguished by their *taqwa*, their God-consciousness. I have also built relationships, often through my ethnographic work in Muslim communities with people who would disagree with my feminist commitments but who do have ethical commitments when it comes to respecting differing ideas and opinions. And especially in my work on Muslim efforts against domestic violence I have met many people who I feel connected to as part of Muslim communities in the struggle for ending domestic abuse. A shared cause can be the basis for a powerful and lasting connection. And perhaps it is here that I would qualify my religious commitments as deep ethical convictions and a foundational belief in God's intent for humans to strive for a just society for all.

**If a textual focus on Muslim women theologians and activists helps to undo the reductive reading of women writers according to their personal biography, where is there space to still build with and from women's personal experience in order to develop a 'critical consciousness'?**

That is a very good and challenging question especially considering that the significance of individual experience is both an important claim of some feminist theory and practice that has come back into focus in the work of some Muslim women scholars as well. On the one hand, it is important not to reduce the work of women, people of colour, LGBTQI people, or anyone who is perceived as different/other to their personal experience, thereby claiming that their lives are of no significance beyond them. This is particularly problematic when one refuses to see their oppression, marginalization, violation, and isolation as part of systems of exclusion and oppression. Refusing to recognize systemic structures of exclusion, hierarchy, and power differentials is a powerful tool for maintaining the status quo and for diminishing and crushing resistance to that status quo. Often, reducing scholars and activists to

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their biographies also takes on tones of psychoanalytical reduction and the imposition of constructed ideas of what it means to be mentally stable, healthy, or normal. If we can explain someone's feminist and/or anti-racist activism by finding instances of personal abuse, we absolve ourselves and the system that is our society from any responsibility for patterns of such abuse or negative personal experience. This also makes it possible to ostensibly distinguish between 'real' and 'felt' abuse. There is a long history in western societies of victim-blaming that is based on precisely this pattern, again, to absolve society and the state from the responsibility to affect change.

On the other hand, taking seriously the textual production of people, including Muslim women, claims and occupies spaces in areas of research, publishing, and teaching in which they historically had no place and were not recognized as full participants. They have agency in this process but also have to struggle to be recognized as scholarly and/or religious authority figures by building communities of interpretation and/or communities of shared methods and theories. The project of crossing borders — here the borders of academia, the borders of patriarchal interpretation, the borders of racist societies — comes full circle when scholars and activists acquire space to do their work and then insist that they will reconfigure the rules of scholarship and activism in the process. If Muslim women scholars write, publish, teach, and work in communities simultaneously, which is hard and can cause burn out, they can insist in those spaces that their experiences are part of who they are but that they cannot be reduced to them. Religiously speaking, I find it most compelling to think of personal experience as part of God's self-disclosure beyond revelation. As such, experience like revelation becomes both an opening and a command for interpretation and meaning-making.

**In bringing an intersectional critique of normativity to scholarship, how do you incorporate and interrogate how race is discussed in the study of Islam in America? How does solidarity work being undertaken by Muslim women with other marginalized women, especially women of colour, move beyond assumptions of what Muslim activism looks like?**

There are at least two questions here. The first about the intersectional nature of critique and constructive scholarship is one in which I still lean heavily on my thoughts and ideas about gender equality in order to approach a better understanding of race. This is especially challenging in the study of American Muslims because many American Muslims — particularly those who are not African American — have found it difficult to acknowledge the enormous power of American racism in shaping their lives but also their perceptions of racialized otherness. There is still a severe lack of solidarity with Black Muslims along with other Black communities in the United States. To change that, I have found it useful to point out the connections between anti-Muslim hatred and hate crimes and what is often called Islamophobia and racist discrimination and violence. In fact, I see 'Islamophobia' and anti-Black racism, as well as other forms of racism and racialization, as part of the same system. It is in the interest of that system that these overlapping and/or parallel ways of discrimination should not be recognized as connected.

Here is also where gender comes back in for me. Feminist critiques of patriarchy have the potential to recognize parallel systems of oppression even if feminist ideas have been, and continue to be, used to aid colonialism, capitalism, and thus racism. I find that in scholarship on American Muslims the problem is often that scholars either do gender well or they do race well — it is much harder to find scholars who can and will, in sophisticated and accessible ways, do both. I am striving to become more familiar with critical race theory and anti-racist activism in order to see race and address it even in those spaces where the communities I study do not.

**How does the use of the concept or trope 'border' and its metaphorical logic help or block your thinking about gender, specifically in the context of feminism and Islam?**

When I first got involved with the borderlands/border thinking project I was concerned that it would not be enough to think about borders between groups of people in my research between people in American society. I argued that there are borders within American society that are constructed and maintained along lines of religious as well as racial otherness, often at the intersection with gender. It is after all the paradox of American Islamophobia that the industry that produces and perpetuates images of Muslim women portrays them as both the 'reproducers' of a fifth column of dangerous Muslim terrorists while also arguing that Muslim women are oppressed by Muslim men and Islam and need to be saved by American society and especially American feminists. Muslim women have borne the

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brunt of hate crimes and harassment, so the anti-Muslim sentiments are enacted on their bodies and through that on their families and communities.

There is also a blurry line between Islam and racial otherness, sometimes expressed in terms of cultural otherness (which I think obscures the racialized nature of it) and the ways in which Muslims are told that they just cannot be American while also insisting on being Muslims. There is of course a geopolitical and global dimension to this perception, but it nevertheless demands of Muslims that they surrender their distinct Muslimness and become assimilated into an imagined mainstream. I think it politically prudent at this juncture in American history to demand acceptance because of difference and not in spite of it. It is not a matter of being tolerated or continuously having to prove sufficient similarity or sameness to be included, but quite the opposite.

I continue to be fascinated by the rather uneasy inclusion of religion as a category in the border thinking project. The dynamics of decolonizing the production and dissemination of knowledge takes on very interesting and different tones and shades when considered in the context of Muslim majority societies and Muslims in minority contexts like the settler colonial state that is the United States of America.

And to come back to feminism and Islam, my colleague Fatima Seedat in South Africa has recently written about the possibilities inherent in having the concepts Islam and feminism speak back to each other, so that Muslim feminists and those invested in gender justice can contribute and teach from within their Islam while also learning and taking ownership of the diversity of feminisms that exists and might be possible (see Seedat 2013). This is a very different idea from insisting that 'Islamic feminism' is a movement and a thing. Borders are conceptual in this way and I find it both inspiring and challenging to consider borderlands as spaces of opportunity. Even if a border is described as porous, a space of exchange rather than separation, it is still a border. It may just be that this borderlands thinking is the way of those without much power to make sense of their situation and claim agency from within those limitations. This thinking does make the border real, though, and thus by recognizing it as an opportunity of sorts it still legitimates its existence.

And lastly on this question, the borders imposed by particular gender binaries commonly found in Muslim discourses past and present make it difficult to apply some ideas from feminist theory without questioning the very foundations of one or the other. This is, for me, a productive space because I have come to a tentative peace with the ambivalence involved.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of borders, borderlands and border thinking?**

I take it this question implies that I am an older scholar. Hm. I would start by saying that like with any alternative approach to the academy there is risk involved, both on the level of career advancement and acceptance as a scholar and in the ways in which a concept like border thinking cannot be unthought. The intellectual project of the humanities rests on a set of Euro-centric assumptions *and* the academy is part of a capitalist system in which we produce things that can be sold. Both intellectually and financially it is risky to unravel the system that you are part of. That does not mean you should not do it. But you should both be aware of the risks and take them intentionally or postpone doing so, and I think I have learned as a feminist scholar in the academy that risk assessment and strategies to deal with that risk require both mentors and peers. The academy can be a lonely and deeply competitive place and transformational work is never to be achieved alone. Building networks like the one reflected in this volume, seeking validation and advice, and offering support are as important as advancing ideas. And lastly, I have found it liberating to see and occupy the academy as a transformative space in which subversion of the stated goals of higher education is possible even if not often welcomed by our administrators, donors, and politicians. There is enormous power in even reaching one student, one reader, one activist and help shift their way of thinking about the world.

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*This interview was conducted by Katherine Merriman.*

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