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**Abstract Only – Work in Progress**

**“Student-Travelers and the Politics of Knowledge”**

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Many young Muslim Americans are moving in multiple and unexpected directions, playing a pivotal role in raising the moral consciousness of their communities. By tracing the spiritual journeys of Muslim American youth who travel to the Middle East for “traditional” religious education, this paper provides one model for understanding the complex ways religion functions in culturally fragmented contexts and the processes that create new and deeper connections that transcend borders. Often against their parents’ wishes, and in spite of the student-cum-mujahid John Walker Lindh controversy, young Muslim Americans continue to leave home to study Islam for months and even years in totalitarian states in the Middle East where this quasi-illegal activity comes under heavy surveillance, with sometimes dangerous consequences. These Muslims engage in what they call a “traditional” education, informal, undocumented, and unstructured by their US university standards. Still, this complex blend of oral and textual instruction is structured in that it is very hierarchical, accompanied by detailed intellectual genealogies and strict codes of etiquette. Most return to the US, bringing back the knowledge they believe will help them reform Muslim American communities that are riddled with racial and class stratification and often contradictory religious and cultural understandings. In light of these conditions and the contested nature of Islamic authority, the constructions of authenticity define the religious discourse. Through the narratives of these young peoples’ willed displacement, this paper explores the ways Muslim Americans construct and exist in the social space between the US and the Middle East.