

A Brain Full of Contraband: The Islamic Gonzo Writing of Michael Muhammad Knight

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The narrative punk rock Muslim writings of Michael Muhammad Knight can be examined through the lens of Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism. One result is a conceptual definition of Gonzo journalism.

Over the past forty-plus years, the term “Gonzo” has insinuated itself into everyday usage. What began as a style of writing rooted in 1960s drug-fueled counterculture has been transformed into the name of a popular Muppet, a style of marketing,¹ a realistic genre of participant-filmed pornography,² and a lecture style used in higher education business courses.³ The precise origins of the term are shrouded in myth and difficult to determine with any certainty.⁴ A common etymology of the term places it in Irish South Boston slang that denotes “those who use craziness as a form of self-expression, who push it too far just to push it.”⁵ Other synonyms include *insane*, *wild*, *bizarre*, *confused*, *unrestrained*, and *extravagant*.⁶

What is clear is that the term is inextricably linked to the writing of Hunter S. Thompson, who is universally acknowledged as the originator of Gonzo journalism. Since the term was coined in 1970, many writers have adopted a similar visceral, over-the-top first-person approach to storytelling. One such writer, Michael Muhammad Knight, first arrived on the literary scene in 2004 with a rude indie novel titled *The Taqwacores* before turning to a series of first-person nonfiction books.

But is Knight’s work Gonzo? In order to discuss the Gonzo characteristics of Knight’s work, it is necessary to thrash out a framework for the nature of Gonzo itself precisely because there is no coherent academic construct for the

term.⁷ In what is possibly the most un-Gonzo endeavor possible, this article posits a framework for discussing Gonzo journalism. The ubiquity of the term would suggest that it has usefulness beyond Thompson's oeuvre. But in order to talk about it, we must understand what differentiates Gonzo from other types of reportage.

This article suggests a conceptual definition of Gonzo journalism as an energetic first-person participatory writing style in which the author is a protagonist. It also posits that Gonzo journalism draws its power from a combination of both social critique and self-satire. Using that framework, this article examines the themes of identity formation and liberation in Knight's nonfiction work. It also examines Knight's use of Gonzo writing as part of an attempt to find a place for both Muslims in America and Americans within Islam. As he wrote in *Journey to the End of Islam*, Knight attempted to negotiate his identity as a Muslim-American at a time when it was Islam's turn to be "maybe the most un-American religion in our whole history . . . Which I found amusing, because I understood Islam in such a thoroughly American way that it all but cut me off from the rest of the Muslim world."⁸

BUY THE TICKET, TAKE THE RIDE

Originally self-released in photocopied form, *The Taqwacores* combined do-it-yourself punk-rock iconoclasm with the spiritual yearnings of a young convert to Islam. It centered on a group of flamboyant young Muslim college students living communally in an off-campus house. The characters in the novel drank, had sex, smoked pot, and engaged in other behaviors typically prohibited in Islam. The soundtrack for this lifestyle was a fictitious genre of music called "taqwacore"—a combination of *taqwa* (the Islamic term for "piety" or "God consciousness") and the hardcore variety of punk rock. The novel's narrator described the connection between the two:

Punk rock means deliberately bad music, deliberately bad clothing, deliberately bad language and deliberately bad behavior. Means shooting yourself in the foot when it comes to every expectation society will ever have for you but still standing tall about it, living who you are and somehow forging a shared community with all the other fuck-ups . . .

Taqwacore is the application of this virtue to Islam. I was surrounded by deliberately bad Muslims but they loved Allah with a gonzo kind of passion that escaped sleepy brainless ritualism and the dumb fantasy-camp Islams claiming that our deen [religion] had some inherent moral superiority making the world rightfully ours.⁹

While in no way biographical, the plot of *The Taqwacores* was inspired by Knight's own life. As a child, he and his mother suffered abuse at the hands of Knight's paranoid schizophrenic white supremacist father. Mother and son fled the abuse, and after a turbulent childhood that featured his mother getting re-married and divorced, Knight converted to Islam at the age of sixteen after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. At seventeen, Knight traveled to Pakistan to study Islam at the Faisal Mosque. While there, he flirted with the idea of joining the jihad in Chechnya, but was dissuaded. Instead, he returned to the United States, where he quickly entered a period of crisis in his faith. He went to college and began partying and started an underground wrestling ring. In the ensuing years, Knight found himself increasingly committed to Islam while at the same time flamboyantly critical of the hypocrisies he found in mainstream Islam.¹⁰

Knight told the *New York Times* that he wrote *The Taqwacores* "to mend the rift between his being an observant Muslim and an angry American youth."¹¹ In a remarkable example of life imitating art, this gritty novel provided the inspiration for other observant and angry Muslim-Americans to create a real-life taqwacore scene. Bands like The Kominas perform songs with provocative titles like "Sharia Law in the U.S.A." and "Suicide Bomb the Gap." This burgeoning scene sparked concert tours, a documentary film, and a feature film adaptation of *The Taqwacores*.

Following the success of *The Taqwacores*, Knight turned to nonfiction works, writing a series of books using a similar over-the-top taqwacore approach to detail his quest to discover a true American Islam—a hunt reminiscent of Thompson's lifelong Gonzo work chronicling the death of the American dream.¹² Knight's publisher, Soft Skull Press, even billed him as "both the Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson of American Islam."¹³

DEFINING GONZO

The origin of the term "Gonzo" is typically attributed to *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* editor Bill Cardoso, who used the adjective to describe Thompson's 1970 article for *Scanlan's* about the Kentucky Derby. As Thompson recounted, "I'd heard him use the word *Gonzo* when I covered the New Hampshire primary in '68 with him. It meant sort of 'crazy,' 'off-the wall'. . . . But Cardozo said something like, 'Forget all the shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is a start, keep rolling.'¹⁴ It was a development that Thompson called "an almost accidental breakthrough—a whole new style of journalism which now passes for whatever Gonzo is . . . accident and desperation."¹⁵

At its simplest, Gonzo journalism can be defined as a subjective form of nonfiction storytelling featuring a narrator who is also a protagonist¹⁶ or as “a journalism that self-consciously goes over the top in challenging sacred conventions, and in the challenge lies a journalistic end in itself.”¹⁷ Wright described Thompson’s trademark Gonzo style as a mixture of overstatement, wild exaggeration, and self-indulgence.¹⁸

One of the primary characteristics of Gonzo is a high-energy participatory writing style. Describing Thompson’s style in an anthology of the so-called “New Journalism” movement, Wolfe defined Thompson’s Gonzo approach as “a manic, highly adrenal first-person style in which Thompson’s own emotions continually dominate the story.”¹⁹ Hames-Garcia, in his analysis of the work of Thompson’s partner-in-weirdness Oscar Zeta Acosta, described the Gonzo style as “marked by an emphatic author-participant-protagonist, a figure who speaks neither from a detached position nor as a communal voice.”²⁰

A part from style questions, implicit in Gonzo journalism is a strong sense of social critique. Sefcovic extended the Gonzo concept beyond Thompson to a group of British cultural critics whose approach to research “attempted to integrate, extend, and illuminate modern social and critical theory.”²¹ These critics applied Gonzo techniques to ethnographic research, which Sefcovic described as “a style that combined journalistic sensationalism with an extreme form of ethnographic participation.”²² Hames-Garcia noted that the Gonzo approach helps the researcher “view cultural identities as theoretical explanations that refer to causal features of a social world.”²³ Similarly, John Hartsock pointed out the research utility of Gonzo journalism techniques: “Simply, we have a need, at least culturally, to account in language for what cannot be accounted for rationally—that eviscerating rational world divided into the seemingly discrete categories of the social scientist.”²⁴

The final characteristic of Gonzo journalism discussed here is an inward-directed satirical outlook.²⁵ Such self-mockery is what makes Thompson’s work effective, Wolfe wrote, “because Thompson, for all his surface ferocity, usually casts himself as a frantic loser, inept and half-psychotic. . . .”²⁶ In Thompson’s work, such self-satire particularly took the form of depictions of his own drinking and drugging. His classic book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* begins with one of the most famous first lines this side of “Call me Ishmael”—“We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.”²⁷

While Gonzo journalism draws its moral authority from its implicit social critique, the inclusion of self-mockery on the part of the author-protagonist serves to lend the work credibility. This technique suggests that even the writer is not spared disparagement, therefore lending credence to the disapproval leveled at others.

Based on this review of previously suggested meanings, a preliminary summary definition of Gonzo posited here is of an energetic and iconoclastic first-person writing style in which the author has also adopted a performative role in the text. Further, as a style, Gonzo draws its power from a combination of social critique and self-satire. And, as will be suggested in the next section, Knight's work meets that definition of Gonzo journalism.

ANY KIND OF STUPID ACTION

One of the primary defining characteristics of Gonzo journalism is its use of a first-person writing style. As Mikal Gilmore described, Thompson "was inside his story—documenting his own reactions, state of mind, following loopy digressions until they landed in unanticipated pools of revelation."²⁸ Thompson himself addressed the personal nature of his work when he described his writing as "a kind of therapy," adding that "one of the few ways I can be almost certain I'll understand something is by sitting down and writing about it. Because by forcing yourself to write about it and putting it down in words, you can't avoid having to come to grips with it. You might be wrong, but you have to think about it very intensely to write about it."²⁹

Similarly, Knight's work contains a large degree of therapeutic self-reflection presented in an energetic first-person writing style. Each of his nonfiction books—*Blue-Eyed Devil*, *The Five Percenter*, *Impossible Man*, and *Journey to the End of Islam*—takes on a distinct topic but features a strong stream-of-consciousness presentation and, in many ways, ends up being as much about Knight as the topic at hand. For example, in this passage from *Blue-Eyed Devil*, Knight describes a road trip to find the grave of Nation of Islam founder the Honorable Elijah Muhammad:

It was November 19th and there was supposed to be a meteor shower that night. I made a few turns and got on Interstate 90 westbound from Buffalo feeling like I had busted out of jail and stolen that '97 Skylark and had a lusty time lined up in the Windy City with booze and coke and girls and maybe a fistfight on the sidewalk (insha'Allah). I was twenty-six years old in real life orbits of the ard around the shams but for all intents and purposes on that very night I wasn't a second over seventeen, and felt liable for any kind of stupid action with all the windows down in late November going seventy-two, slapping my knee, singing along to the Subhumans—ARE YOU PREPARED TO DIE FOR YOUR BELIEFS OR JUST TO DYE YOUR HAIR?³⁰

Even though there is a strong presence of the author's internal life in Gonzo writing, it does not devolve into solipsism or narcissism. Gilmore noted that Thompson was "outside the scenes he wrote about; that is, he was a misfit, chronicling systems of accepted values that really had no value at all."³¹

Similarly, Knight's books feature strong observation and character development of the people he meets in his travels. Knight imagined a friend criticizing his work, saying: "You're in no shape to tell the story of American Muslims because you think that only weirdoes are worth writing about."³² But Knight remained committed to the styles of Islam practiced by members of the underclass—people with whom he identifies.

Such a focus on so-called weirdoes is exactly what Thompson cited as a strength of his own work. Writing about his seminal proto-Gonzo book *Hell's Angels*, Thompson noted, "This subject was so strange that for the first time in any kind of journalism, I could have the kind of fun with writing that I had had in the past with fiction. I could bring the same kind of intensity and have the same kind of involvement with what I was writing about, because there were characters so weird that I couldn't even make them up."³³

In many ways, Knight's work performs the role of Gonzo ethnography outlined by Sefcovic, who wrote that it "rejects the notion of any privileged vantage point for observation, insists on recognition of the participatory dimension of the researcher's role, and urges experiments with research methods and reporting practices that can liberate and empower general audiences."³⁴ By focusing on the Islam of the underclass, Knight provides valuable insight into the lived realities of American Muslims, rather than the institutional frameworks of the faith.

A second component of the personal nature of Gonzo narrative is that the author not only is a protagonist in the text but also performs a role. For Thompson, the role was as a deadline-pushing, doped-up gun nut with a righteous sense of justice.

Knight, on the other hand, plays the role of the uncompromising critic who is willing to criticize Islamic orthodoxy as well as American oppression as he struggles with his own relationship to his faith. Sometimes Knight's own performative role crossed into dangerous territory. In *The Taqwacores*, the burqa-wearing riot grrrl Rabeya crossed out a verse in the Qur'an that advocates wife-beating—an act that Knight himself emulated in a feature film adaptation of the novel (and wrote about in his nonfiction book *Journey to the End of Islam*). And in an article for the website ProgressiveIslam.org about a controversial woman-led prayer in which he took part, Knight wrote, "If the Prophet wouldn't have liked it, then in 2005 the Prophet is wrong, shit on him."³⁵ Knight's blunt language was off-putting to many Muslim scholars. It also presented a potential hazard when he visited Pakistan, a country with strict laws against defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammad and the desecration of the Qur'an.

“In the course of pinballing in and out of the faith, I’ve been guilty of both offenses; and now, for the first time since even considering this trip to Pakistan, I realized that I would be a criminal here, that I had smuggled in a brain full of contraband,”³⁶ he wrote.

A CRITIQUE OF WAL-MART ISLAM

In his Gonzo works, Thompson was merciless against his political enemies. “There are a lot of ways to practice the art of journalism, and one of them is to use your art like a hammer to destroy the right people—who are almost always your enemies, for one reason or another, and who usually deserve to be crippled because they are wrong,” he wrote.³⁷ Knight also employs this technique, taking aim at prominent (and so-called “mainstream”) Muslim figures in the United States Knight lashed out at Imam Siraj Wahaj for allegedly homophobic remarks and skewered Republican Muslim activist Asma Gull Hasan, who unsuccessfully sued Knight for defamation.

A perceived conflict between “America” and “Islam” is one of the defining tensions of early twenty-first century media and political discourse. Knight uses vivid description and sharp social critique to examine the personal dimensions of Islam in America and offers a blistering critique of this so-called “Clash of Civilizations” paradigm. Knight’s goal is to reformulate the boundaries of Islamic identity, critiquing both American Islamophobia and the Saudi-led homogenization of Islam worldwide that oppresses local variants of the faith and excuses oppression particularly of women and the LGBT community. In the process, he hopes to uncover the potential for liberation within the faith. Knight refers to Saudi Arabia’s attempt to globalize its own brand of Wahhabi Islam as “like the Wal-Mart of Islam coming in and wiping out unique downtown Islams to make it all the same convenient price-cutting religion everywhere.”³⁸

This homogenization of Islam runs counter to Knight’s reasons for converting to the faith—“because it was the religion of Malcolm X, a language of resistance against unjust power. But in Pakistan, Islam was the unjust power, or at least part of what kept the machine running. Pakistan’s Islam was guilty of everything for which I had rebelled against Reagan-Falwell Christianity in America.”³⁹ In this short passage, Knight identifies the emancipatory power of Islam, implicitly critiques oppressive power relationships in the United States, and explicitly criticizes the hypocrisy and corruption in much of the Muslim world.

However, Knight also takes aim at some of the hypocrisies in mainstream Muslim practice, such as strict anti-apostasy laws in the Muslim world which may have had a role in the early days of Islam but seem oppressive to Knight

now. “That’s fine for history, but what the seventh century ate isn’t making me poop; death over a change in conscience couldn’t work in the only historical setting that really mattered, the one in which I lived,”⁴⁰ he wrote.

Ultimately, while Knight decries Islamophobia in the United States, he acknowledges that his own crazy quilt of Islam was only possible in the United States:

My relationship to Islam could fly only in America with no apostasy laws or religious police to enforce the sect of the rulers and ban the rest. I’d rather be a Shi’a in New York than in Cairo, or a Sunni in New York than Tehran. I’d rather be an Ahmadi in New York than in Lahore, and I’d rather be a Sufi in New York than in Mecca; is that a shitty thing to say?⁴¹

AN INCONSISTENT GOOFBALL

Knight frequently mocks his own background, describing himself as “a fifteen-year-old white kid with Dad a diagnosed schizophrenic, rapist and racial separatist and Mom fresh off her second divorce” when he converted to Islam.⁴² Further, Knight mocks himself for his own conflicted relationship with Islam. In the Qur’an desecration scene of the film version of *The Taqwacores*, Knight himself bought a copy of the holy book and crossed out that verse with a felt-tipped Sharpie pen. Yet even as he suggested that parts of the book could be desecrated if they are incompatible with human rights, he mocked himself, writing “even after defacing the words, I still couldn’t put the book on the floor; had to find a high place. What an inconsistent goofball.”⁴³

While Thompson’s self-satire focused primarily on his own drinking and drugging, Knight centers his on fornication and self-abuse. He often depicts himself as a chronic masturbator, as in this passage from *Journey to the End of Islam* in which he re-enacts a key scene from *The Taqwacores* after filming is complete.

I reached behind me into the plastic bin bearing the word PROPS written on a strip of masking tape, recognized the feel of Rabeya’s burqa, and pulled it out. The light blue one, with her feminist patches and pins, the stained one that she had lifted up to spit semen (a vanilla frosting-and-water concoction I had made in the punk house kitchen) at the Wahhabs. I put it on, looked through the fabric grid and the windshield to the parking lot—no one around. No gas station attendants, no Hollywood actors. The parking lot and the novel belonged to me. Made the mess into a spare T-shirt but it wasn’t a sex thing, it was an author-and-character thing. Ritual is imitation. Then I took off the burqa and got back on the road to go home.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

There is no question that Thompson is the primary avatar of Gonzo journalism. Yet there seems to be a desire among scholars to make use of the term in other contexts and in reference to other writers.⁴⁵ In fact, when responding to an early version of this article, a colleague suggested that Mark Twain might have practiced Gonzo journalism. The lack of a coherent definition of Gonzo journalism makes it difficult to make such comparisons with authority—a lacuna that this article attempts to address.

Based on the definition posited here, it seems appropriate to classify Knight's nonfiction writing as a current-day example of Gonzo journalism. What is perhaps most valuable about Knight's work is that it fulfills the role of Gonzo ethnography in a way that shines a light on the wide diversity that exists within Islam. That diversity, literary critic Edward Said wrote, is largely absent from media discourse on Muslims.⁴⁶

Muslim playwright Wajahat Ali singled Knight out when he wrote of the need for American Muslims to seize the Islamic tradition of storytelling and "become heroes of our own narratives," adding that Muslims "must follow the traditions and values of Islam and America by being generous and inviting with our narratives. We must tell stories that are 'by us, for everyone,' thus accurately reflecting the spectrum of shared common values that exist simultaneously within the Muslim and American spirit."⁴⁷

For his part, Knight continues to plumb the stories of marginalized Muslim-American communities while interrogating issues of race and class: "Imam Ali himself said that the Mahdi would come as a poor stranger unknown and uncared for, not a Ph.D. of anything, not a tenured professor of anything anywhere, and he'd start out like a tired old camel lowering its head, wagging its tail but from that point he'd build the Empire of God."⁴⁸

Future scholars should endeavor to examine the works of other Gonzo writers using a similar approach to offer refinements to the framework suggested here. While Gonzo journalism is filled with bluster and fury, the social messages at the center of the form are important enough to merit scholarly inquiry into exactly what's going on there.

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