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TEACHING ABOUT ISLAM IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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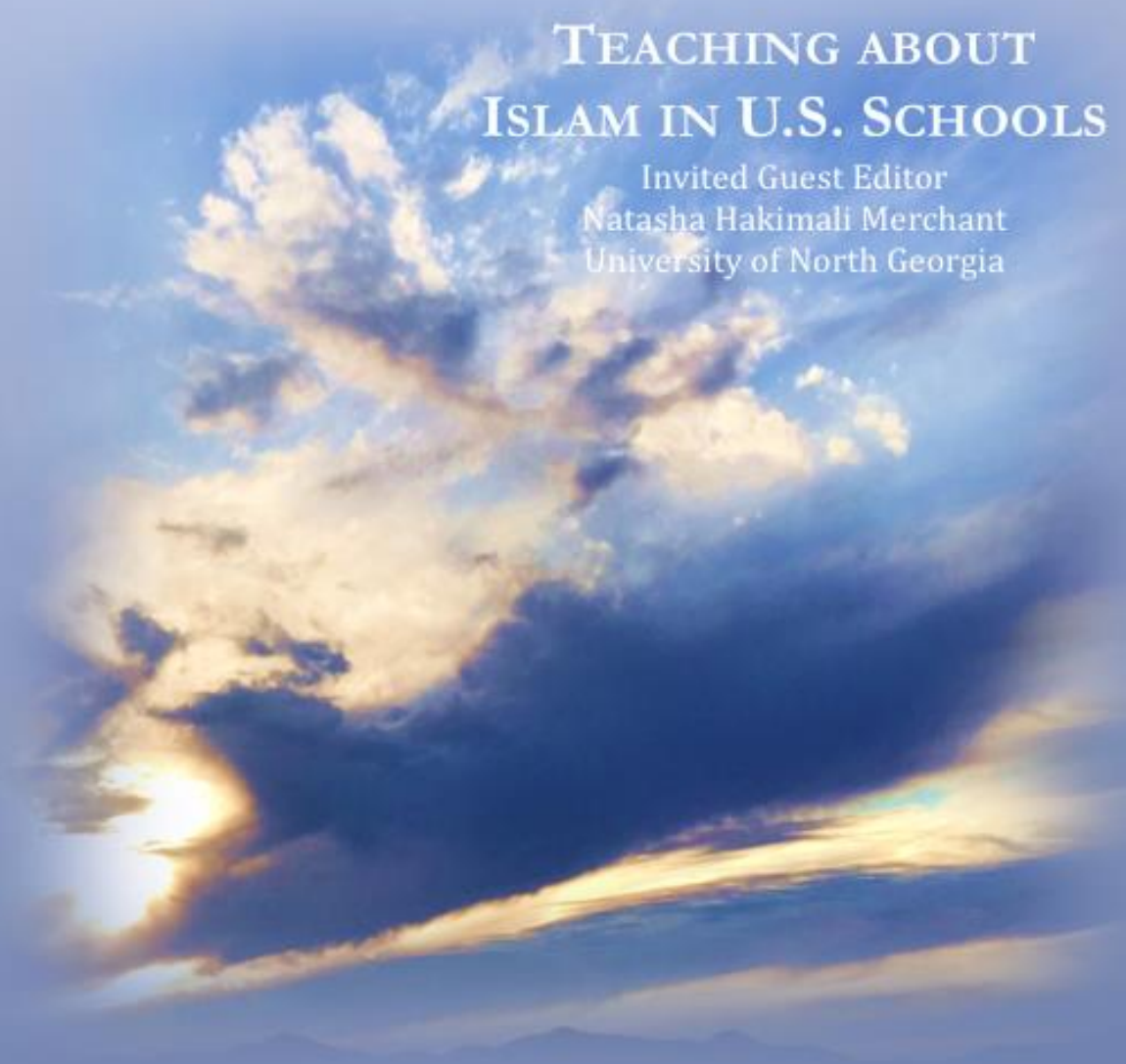

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Teaching About Islam in U.S. Schools

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Introduction: Teaching About Islam in U.S. Schools

Natasha Hakimali Merchant

Abstract

This issue of Thresholds in Education, addressing teaching about Islam in U.S. schools, brings together a diverse set of articles each threaded together by a common desire to respond to the question: what does it mean to be educated about Islam? Though the articles speak to a variety of diverse platforms including textbooks, secondary classrooms, and institutions of higher education, they all call into question the ways in which Islam is currently approached and offer new frameworks for understanding curricula on Islam. After outlining a brief summary and the sequence of articles in this series, the author of this introductory essay asks the reader to consider how each of the articles addresses curricula on Islam through the lens of the curriculum box, including explicit, implicit, and null curriculum (Eisner, 1985).

Keywords: *curriculum on Islam; religious literacy; Islamophobia; curriculum box*

This issue of *Thresholds in Education*, addressing teaching about Islam in U.S. schools, emerges at a time when the sociopolitical landscape grows in its explicit hostility towards Muslim-bodies. Incidents of hate-crimes against bodies perceived to be Muslim have only increased, and the fervor has permeated school walls with reports of teachers lashing out against Muslim students inside schools and through social media. While this reality is worthy of attention and outrage, the set of articles in this issue address the larger, pre-existing orientations of dehumanization that have fostered the fertile ground from which nonsensical policies such as "The Muslim ban," and systematic state surveillance of Muslim communities (Ali, 2016), flourish. More specifically, these articles address the production and dissemination of knowledge on Islam and Muslims and its manifestation within school curricula.

While this set of articles addresses different sites of knowledge production, including higher education institutions, textbooks, teachers, and secondary education classrooms, they all acknowledge and critique the ways in which epistemologies of dominance, such as Orientalism and White Supremacy, have shaped what counts as official knowledge (Apple, 2000). As the authors in this issue point out, the subtlety with which oppressive frameworks have become commonsense, make it difficult to imagine what teaching beyond the current curricular frame might look like.

Another impossibility to imagine in an environment of dehumanization is the luxury of asking: what do students need to learn about Islam in order to be considered "educated?" While, nothing can be extricated from context, all too often scholars, teachers, and cultural workers center dehumanizing discourses about Muslims and Islam and create curriculum with the intention of responding to the oppressive frame. This practice is ultimately self-defeating as it continues to allow dehumanizing discourses to dictate the contours of curriculum. For example, a common

practice among well-intentioned teachers is to emphasize commonalities between Islam and other Abrahamic faiths in hopes that understanding Muslims as "not that different" will quell anti-Muslim sentiment. This, once again centers the norm as Christian-centric and only allows for acknowledgement in relation to itself. These articles, while grappling fully with the troubled notion of "Islamophobia," offer an affirmative approach to teaching about Islam rather than focusing on strategies of curricular responses built to satiate the curiosities of those who take-up dehumanizing dispositions. After all, one doesn't need to know anything about Islam to know that discriminating against Muslims is morally reprehensible.

The first article in this issue asks the question that all of the other articles, in one way or another, grapple with. That is, *what does it mean to be educated about Islam?* It does so by calling into question the assumptions that learning about Islam will quell Islamophobia. Unearthing assumptions made by many well-intentioned educators, I lay out some of the ineffective teaching strategies commonly used for the purposes of responding back to Islamophobia, which ironically end up reinforcing many of the precepts of Islamophobia. I posit that teaching with an epistemology of complexity is more fruitful for creating a critical mindset poised to resist facile ideologies like Islamophobia. Given the current curricular constraints, prioritizing this epistemology might mean sacrificing our commitment to teaching "the basics" of Islam.

While the first article engages with the broader landscape of curriculum, the second article written by Al Sager and Zagumny, reports on a critical discourse analysis of textbooks used to teach about Islam in secondary classrooms. In an environment where most teachers have little critical knowledge about Islam, it is incredibly likely they would rely on the textbooks as a source of knowledge. Al Sager and Zagyumny find patterns of dehumanization of Muslims and their faith-tradition by categorizing attributes assigned to Muslims and Islam in the textbooks. These categorizations, while based on contemporary texts, mimic an Orientalist perspective.

Rashid's article picks up on the vitality of the Orientalist lens in curriculum by focusing on knowledge production in institutions of higher education, sites where knowledge is authorized for dissemination in K-12 contexts. After offering analyses on the connections between categorizations of *othering* within the higher education context and its translation in secondary education, Rashid challenges the common dichotomy within Orientalist studies of "the west" and "the other," by revealing how Orientalism, among other factors, has shaped the way Islam is understood as a timeless monolith, rather than a focus on situated localities. He does this through the case study of Shi'ism, arguing that when curricular decisions are made about what is included in the curriculum box, Shi'i traditions, among others, are often made marginal. This, in turn, results in Shi'i traditions presented in K-12 contexts as deviant offshoots from what is "authentic Islam." While acknowledging the myriad of practical challenges in offering a variety of perspectives within the situated realities and histories of Muslims, Rashid gives a caution that a cultural studies approach which values context and diversity, should not devolve into relativism.

Henderson's article, much like Rashid's, understands curriculum as a tool of dominance, which acts as a gatekeeper for who is considered worthy of full humanity. By framing official knowledge within the context of White Supremacy, Henderson elucidates several ways in which an educational investment in whiteness continues to *otherize* that which isn't white. In an effort to analyze knowledge production through the lens of White Supremacy, while also resisting the uptake of the limited frames offered by dominant white-centric constructions, Henderson employees Islamic frameworks as analytic tools. In an educational context where religious illiteracy abounds (Moore, 2007), Henderson's move to write from within critical discourses of Islam, by using the concepts of *shirk* and *ummah* as analytical frames, is a bold methodological

challenge to the facile ways in which Islam is often reduced in arenas of Western knowledge, including academia.

The final article, authored by Meymand, focuses what is at stake as we grapple with the question of what it means to be educated about Islam. After discussing a framework of Critical Southwest Asian Studies, the author recommends that educators adopt Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy for teaching Muslim students. While the sociopolitical situation rests on the bedrock of centuries old dichotomies of West vs. the rest, too often our students are framed in the spaces between hyphens. The Orientalist obsession with labeling and disciplining subjects into their proper categorization lives on in the way we strategize teaching our "diverse" students. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy resists the hyphens and dichotomies by offering students opportunities to live their humanity more fully in classroom spaces.

Throughout this special issue the authors have attempted to bring forward, not only the problems of dominant discourses about Islam and Muslims, but have also recommended ways to counter these discourses in order for all students to benefit. The process of improving our educational approach in classrooms must start with a deep study of what is presently in the curriculum box. Using Eisner's (1985) framework, educators and academics can reflect on the three strands of curriculum: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. In this issue, Al Sager and Zagumny most directly take up what is explicitly taught about Islam through their textual study and Meymand suggests explicit ways to redirect that instruction. While all authors touch on the implicit curriculum and its antecedents, Merchant, Henderson and Rashid attempt to unearth how dominant discourses control and discipline what we learn as official knowledge (Apple, 2000). The null curriculum, a set larger than any other, is addressed in Rashid's case-study of Shi'I Islam in higher educational institutions, which is so minimally taught that it can be considered null.

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When Exposure Falls Short: Islamophobia Beyond Islam

Natasha Hakimali Merchant

Abstract

With the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, educators are well poised to respond to the current climate of intolerance through religious literacy. While the mission for many educators and scholars is clear, the way forward is less so. This article critiques a common assertion upon which many educators rely in order to thwart Islamophobic sentiments in their students; that is the assumption that exposure to Muslims will produce religious literacy thereby reducing Islamophobia. After deconstructing this assumption, the article posits a critical curriculum frame as a more effective means of teaching against Islamophobia.

Keywords: *Islamophobia; critical curriculum studies; religious literacy; Islam*

Introduction

Religious literacy has become particularly compelling because of the rise of hate-speech and hate-crimes against Muslims in the United States and Europe. When religious literacy is framed as a strategic response to this crisis, it may constrict the conceptual rigor and depth of what counts as literacy. The presumed cause and effect relationship between exposure to Muslims with a reduction in hate-speech/hate-crimes against Muslims, creates an ideal environment for educators to disseminating facile and simplistic information about Muslims and Islam. After all, if ignorance is the real problem, it follows that facts will fill the knowledge gap, thereby reducing prejudice. This has led to an increasing focus on religious literacy in K-12 schools. While this knee-jerk reaction to a manifestation of oppression is a worthy project, I posit that attention to educating for critical frameworks and thought-processes is a more meritorious pursuit, not only for combatting Islamophobia, but for preventing the spread of oppression more generally. In what follows, I analyze assumptions inherent in educational discourses on religious literacy after which I offer a critical curriculum studies approach to advocate for a more robust, and distinct prejudice reduction curriculum.

The Incompleteness in Frames of "Ignorance"

In the spring of 2017, Teaching Tolerance released a feature article titled *Expelling Islamophobia*. After outlining the phenomenon of anti-Muslim hate crimes and widespread ignorance about Islam in the United States, Sean McCollum, author of the feature, turned to what could be done to expel Islamophobia. One of the essential problems identified by the author was highlighted using a Pew study, which stated "nearly half of Americans report not knowing anyone

Muslim" (McCollum, 2017). A strong underlying assumption of religious literacy is the assertion that more "exposure" will allow non-Muslim students to know real-Muslims and therefore understand real-Islam.

As stated in the feature, "The goal is to remove the label of "other" from Muslims by helping people recognize all they have in common with their Muslim neighbors, colleagues and classmates" (McCollum, 2017). Quoting Hanif Mohebi, the San Diego chapter's executive director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the article went on to explain, "Whether it's students or teachers, there is nothing more powerful than actually experiencing communication, in this case between the Muslim community and people with little experience with Muslims" (McCollum, 2017). While well-intentioned advocates against Islamophobia further the precept that exposure to Islam and Muslims will combat Islamophobia, there are two underlying assumptions that warrant further analysis.

First, we turn toward the assumption that exposure to Muslim individuals will facilitate a natural deconstruction of what is termed "Islamophobia," or anti-Muslim sentiment. While, there are a myriad of reasons why individuals harbor Islamophobic sentiments, it is necessary to critically examine the term Islamophobia that connotes a fear of Islam or Muslims. Certainly, the paranoia of individuals and even nation states, such as the United Sates (which has implemented policies that undermine civil liberties and basic human rights, presumed on a statistically baseless fear that Muslims are a threat to life) continues to flourish (IRDP, n.d.). However, without a more complete analysis of why this fear persists, and even how it was manufactured, the solutions to said fear, are likely to fall short. While it is outside the scope of this article to analyze the sources of anti-Muslim sentiment, it is pertinent to unearth the assumptions underlying the claim that fear drives anti-Muslim sentiment, and, even more assumptive, the exposure to the Muslim-other, will quell the fear. While it would be difficult to find data to prove this assumption one way or the other, we can turn to examples of "others" who have been, and continue to be, the subjects of oppression, manufactured fear, and hatred.

The on-going institutional racism against Black communities in the United States, would suggest that exposure alone, does not quell fear. And perhaps, despite the attempts by individuals and institutions to integrate communities, both through living spaces and through educational efforts, oppression and marginalization is resilient and still persists (Alexander, 2010). This persistence of structural inequity continues at a stable pace, despite individuals reporting a more favorable outlook on Black communities and individuals, which may suggest that exposure itself, is unlikely to create systemic change (Alexander, 2010).

While institutionalized racism against the Black community illuminates the pervasive nature of oppression and offers this as a challenge to the weak assumption that mere exposure to another can combat Islamophobia, a one-to-one comparison cannot be made because of the differences in community histories. However, a recent study conducted by Bruneau et al. (2018) revealed that collective blame (against Muslims for individual acts of violence in the name of Islam), was reduced more effectively by "revealing the hypocrisy of collectively blaming Muslims for acts of terrorism, but not collectively blaming White people or Christians for individual acts of violence by members of those groups" (Bruneau et al. ,2018, p. 445). This study, which compared various approaches of reducing collective blame which has been "associated with anti-Muslim attitudes and behavior" (p. 445), showed that a gentle revelation of hypocrisy in logic was more effective than exposure to videos of positive Muslim individuals who countered narratives of Muslims as violent, Muslim men as abusive, and Muslim women as submissive. While this research cannot conclusively rule out the efficacy of exposure to Muslims as an antidote to anti-

Muslim sentiment, this work does give pause to the assertion that exposure alone can combat prejudice. While the first assumption argues that exposure to Muslims will not necessarily challenge anti-Muslim sentiments, the second assumption, discussed in what follows, speaks to the conflation between Muslim adherents' practice of Islam, and Islam itself.

Claiming that exposure to Muslims will reduce anti-Muslim prejudice and lead to religious literacy, is an illogical overreach, which only highlights the nature of religious illiteracy as, at its core, it presumes that Islam is conceptually cogent and can therefore be ascertained through exposure to its adherents. This assumption reveals the trouble with equating a religion with its adherents (Rashid, 2015). At the same time, it is also true that religion is not animate on its own and requires a host in order to live and be understood (Asani, 2011). The impossibility of conceptualizing religion as something coherent, brings us to the most essential question underlying all of the assumptions in the discourse of religious literacy and Islam, that is, as Shahab Ahmed asks: "What is Islam?" Ahmed, in his masterwork titled *What is Islam?*, points out that Islam is not simply an object to be "identified and classified" (Ahmed, 2015). He explains,

> Any act of conceptualizing any object is necessarily an attempt to identify a general theory or rule to which all phenomena affiliated with that object somehow cohere as a category for meaningful analysis-whether we locate that general rule in idea, practice, substance, relation, or process. (p.6)

If our understanding of Islam is as an object, coalescing around a set of general rules, then, as McCollum suggests in his article, it would follow that exposure to adherents would be exposure to Islam itself. However, academic disciplines, through human research and philosophy, have clearly challenged the oft-reified fallacy that, "civilizations possess distinctive, indeed inherent traditions that emerged largely out of the operation of mechanism internal to the particular unit" (Dunn, 2010, p. 187).

Islam as Object

Learning about Islam, the fasted growing religion in the world, is a necessary topical area of study in the K-12 system. The question remains, what about Islam must be taught? As discussed earlier, the question Shahab Ahmed (2015) asks, "What is Islam?" is essential in unearthing the conceptualization of Islam itself. Before discussing the substantive curriculum question of what is taught in the classroom, it is important to recognize that curriculum is not a result of an accidental process of choosing from sparsely available resources. Instead, curriculum represents a valuing of a certain set of knowledge and curriculum fulfills a particular purpose in society. The question of curricular intent is taken up directly by scholars of critical curriculum studies, who ask: "*Whose* knowledge is of most worth?" (Apple, 2000, p. 44).

Preoccupied by questions of power and dominance, critical curriculum studies provides an analysis of the politics of curriculum at various levels (Apple, 2000, p. 10). Post-colonial theorists view the politics of curriculum as one piece of a larger colonial project where classrooms are "fundamentally political and cultural sites that represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies" (Mohanty, 1988, p.16). While it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss, in detail, the various impetus and forces disciplining curriculum selection and coverage, critical curriculum theorists assert that in a neoliberal political and social environment, where serving the free-market is of paramount value, the building of a

compliant body politic is essential (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 1979). It is important to acknowledge the underlying politics of curriculum because the investigation of this politics allows us to interrogate what is often assumed as common sense, or in the case of curriculum on Islam, "the basics" of Islam.

Particularly challenging in the thoughtful design of curriculum on Islam is the shallow knowledge reservoir within a Christian-centric society with investments in nationalism and white supremacy (Giroux, 2002). The practical problem of the dearth of knowledge often relies on expertise of Islam through the eyes of the adherent. The major problem with focusing on religion through the adherent's beliefs and practices is of course the diversity in practice and belief, from adherent to adherent (Moore, 2007). Yet, as discussed earlier, one cannot claim that religion, as an academic subject, can stand on its own without the enactment of the adherent. This curricular problem might lead down a road of relativism that ends in intellectual paralysis. That is to say, since Islam exists through its adherents, and no adherent can claim authority of Islam, it is not possible to study it as an object at all.

This curricular problem, not unique to Islam, while incredibly arduous to undertake, is not immutable. The question for investigation must center on the most useful knowledge to prioritize. In the K-12 system, particularly in the social studies, where time and depth are both threatened by a devaluing of the discipline itself, decisions on what to teach become ever more crucial.

What can We Know? What should We Know?

As tempting as it is to suggest a curriculum on Islam with lofty goals of expressing the diversity within Islam and delving in deeply to the intricacies of varied historical narratives, community practices, etc., it is equally important to consider the limitations of the social studies classroom where these topics are taught. The limitations include: teachers' limited knowledge matched with inadequate resources with overwhelming reliance on textbooks (Jackson, 2014), limited time for content coverage, and a lack of emphasis/support given to social studies within schools. These practical considerations are well known to those familiar with the K-12 context. As Layla, a high school student belonging to a minority community of interpretation within Islam, explained,

> Islam it is pretty complicated like all the differences in sects they usually just teach the basics like Shia and Sunni, but think about it if this was with Islam don't you think they would have to like…they don't teach like everything about Christianity, they don't teach like all the different kinds of Christianity, they don't teach the different kind of Judaism, they can't only be like only teaching us all this about Islam but not much about anything else. (Merchant, 2016, p.105)

Layla points out the practical limitations of teaching diversity and depth with curricula on Islam. In an effort to balance limitations with needs, I assert that critical frameworks, rather than "the basics" should be taught. In what follows I will describe why critical frameworks are necessary in reducing and limiting oppressive ideologies like Islamophobia and the implementation of critical frameworks within social studies curricula.

Islamophobia is an oppressive ideology with a set of precepts that constitute its foundation, including:

> Islam is monolith and cannot adapt to new realities; Islam does not share common values with other major faiths; Islam as a religion is inferior to the West. It is archaic, barbaric, and irrational; Islam is a religion of violence and supports terrorism; and Islam is a violent political ideology. (1991, The Runnymede Trust Report)

These precepts are tied directly to the project of European colonization that relied on the degradation of Muslims, and other colonial-subjects. In other words, Islamophobia is an ideology rooted from and perpetuated by, a schema of injustice. In order to reduce Islamophobia, therefore, critical frameworks, "concerned in particular with issues of power and justice," must be utilized (Kincheloe, 2001, p.123).

With limited time and resources, teachers are forced to make curricular selection decisions, and crucial curriculum theorists urge educators to prioritize critical frameworks and approaches over a set of neutral facts, which, in their very presentation, are oversimplified and incomplete (Au, 2012; Kinchloe, 2001; Segall, 2004). Critical curriculum theorists argue that what we think of as content embeds within it pedagogy (Segall, 2004). In other words, the content we are presented with also disciplines the ways in which we position ourselves to understand the material. With this in mind, there are several strategies social studies educators might use to prioritize critical frameworks when teaching about any "other," in this case, about Islam and Muslims.

One approach to prioritizing critical frameworks is in educators adopting an epistemology of complexity, one that "understands the complications of producing knowledge" including the understanding "that the politics, values, research methods, and goals of social scientists profoundly shape what has been passed on to students as 'truth' in social studies classes" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 202). Such understandings prompt educators to engage students in pedagogies which unearth the nature of the social construction of knowledge. The questions students and teachers explore in an epistemology of complexity ask:

> Whose knowledge are we teaching? Where did it come from? How was it produced? Whose interests does it serve? How did it get in the curriculum? Why are we teaching it? How does it serve the needs of students? How comfortable are we with it? Are we getting beyond the facts yet? (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 204)

While these critical questions, seeking to unearth the social construction of what is packaged as immutable facts, are worthy educational goals, it is difficult for educators to build lessons around them. The challenge is even more significant with subject matter that teachers themselves are unfamiliar, or uncomfortable with, as may be the case with Islam. Critical excavation of truth-claims (in American history, for example) is somewhat easier for teachers to approach as alternate accounts and critiques of dominant narratives, while rare, do exist in the collective consciousness. However, alternate narratives of the history of Islam are more difficult to excavate because alternatives are less known. Moreover, if the subject matter isn't overtly Islamophobic, the need for an alternative isn't immediately apparent. I highlight this point through an email conversation I had with a senior scholar at the beginning of my doctoral studies. In hopes for advice and mentorship, I wrote,

> Particularly, I am interested in curriculum on Islam as it relates to coverage of the diversity within Muslim experiences. I also study the impact curriculum on Islam has on those students who are from minority communities within Islam. I am wondering if you know of

> similar work being done around the country. I would be so happy to connect with you when you have a chance. Thank you. (Merchant, personal communication)

The response I got from this senior colleague was discouraging to say the least. She responded,

> I am not sure I would focus on the aspect of its impact on minorities, but would look at how the content in, say, widely used textbooks (plus actual teaching) impacts students' attitudes. The reason is that there is a ton of polemical and outright false info out there on this subject, especially since 9/11, acting like students are being proselytized to convert to Islam if the info isn't negative enough (by this they mean "accurate"). Topics such as *jihad*, women and *shariah*, to say nothing of terrorism, are among the hot-button items of course. I am far less concerned about how the coverage affects minority—Muslim students than I am over how it impacts attitudes in the US generation after generation. (Merchant, personal communication)

As I previously asserted, while focusing on "outright false info" is absolutely necessary, the root of the problem (Islamophobia) is not simply a gap in knowledge, it is oppression. To respond to the problem of religious illiteracy, a fertile ground for Islamophobia, there are two curricular approaches which can help in resisting essentialized notions of the Muslim-other.

The first of these strategies is that of internal variation. Internal variation involves describing multiple examples of a given topic, which present contrasting realities. Although variation in experience of a group of over 1.6 billion people should be commonsense, it often isn't. For example, when discussing international women's rights, it is as important to present the human rights violations against Afghan women under the Taliban as it is to present the number of women in Muslim-majority countries who have served as heads of state.

Many teachers who resist textbook narratives of "the-other" will bring in guest speakers to give more authentic accounts of Islam (Moore, 2007). However, if internal variation isn't part of this, single accounts fill the vacuum of knowledge, particular those narratives, which are consistent with existing perceptions of Muslims and Islam. This is highlighted in the following anecdote from Farheena, a high school student who describes her discomfort as fellow students applied what they learned about Muslims to her experience as a Muslim. The incident she described was in response to a Muslim guest speaker, invited by her teacher during a unit on Islam.

> And I remember we had a huge section on Islam and our teacher was like I am going to bring in a Muslim speaker to talk to you guys about the different sects in Islam, and it was so odd because everyone is like, "I finally understand your religion," but the only probably was, she brought in a Sunni person so everyone still thought that we prayed 5 times a day and we were supposed to wear hijab, but I just wasn't…like that person was saying that all Muslims wear hijabs, so I don't know if it was the best speaker…I know that speaker talked to us a lot about the 5 pillars and how women in Islam dress…that when you are crossing men in the street you don't raise your eyes to them. Yeah. So when they said, "Oh now I understand what it is like to be Muslim," I was thinking (laughter) "no you really, *really* don't." (Merchant, 2016, p. 106)

The fact that the teacher invited a guest speaker, a very common practice in teaching about Islam, presents the problem of personifying a religion by association with a single adherent (Moore,

2007). The "authentic" account of this guest speaker trapped Farheena in a corner, where if she contradicted the guest speaker, she would risk either invalidating the speaker's interpretation of Islam, or worse, might expose herself to being accused of being inauthentic. Although the source of the pressure Farheena faced in giving a correct response was unclear, the environment of Islamophobia fueled by ignorance about Islam and Muslims, heightened the stakes for Farheena. Intentional multiplicity forces students to question existing assumptions and disrupts overly simplistic notions of Muslims and Islam, which unearths the facile assumptions that Islamophobia thrives upon.

The second approach, already alluded to earlier, employs an epistemology of complexity, encouraging students to critically excavate what is present in the existing curricular resources in order to better understand how knowledge within any given topical area is produced. When considering teaching about Islam, some of the critical questions teachers may engage students in might include: *How is Islam portrayed similarly or differently from other religions and why? How is Islam defined and constituted (What is Islam?)? Is there diversity in belief and practice? If not, what might be missing and why?* In addition to these questions, teachers might engage students in a cross-textual analysis of texts covering Islam in order to understand which narratives are similar/different.Teachers can leverage disconfirming accounts as a means of deconstructing knowledge production therefore better preparing students to be more thoughtful consumers and producers of knowledge.

While Islamophobia continues to persist in an environment of widespread religious illiteracy, the assumption that "facts" about Muslims and Islam, presumed to be static and universal in their belief and practice among Muslims, aren't simply failing to address the problem of Islamophobia, rather, this educational approach is reinforcing one of Islamophobia's precepts. That is, Islamophobia, just as any system of prejudice, is based on a dehumanizing narrowing of experience and truth. Through this article, I have argued that rather than educating students on "the basics" of Islam, critical frameworks stemming from an epistemology of complexity would go much further in resisting anti-Muslim ideologies.

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Teaching Islam without the Phobia: What We can Learn from World History Textbooks

Abdellatif W. Al Sager & Lisa Zagumny

Abstract

This study is an investigation of the representations of Muslims and Islam in high school world history textbooks available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year adoption cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. Informed by critical theory and Said's Orientalism, we used critical discourse analysis to identify six major themes: people and their roles, fabricated religion, mysticism, timelessness, violence, and internal conflict. By sharing that school curriculum is socially constructed with students, teachers can help to foster critical social justice literacy so that students may in turn challenge social injustice.

Keywords*: critical discourse analysis; high school history textbooks; orientalism; social justice literacy; Tennessee*

Introduction

In the fall of 2015, a group of parents attended a town hall meeting in Sparta, Tennessee, to protest the religious studies curriculum in their children's school textbooks, decrying Islamic indoctrination of students in public schools. While the school and district leaders pointed to the social studies standards, it was a media frenzy that fueled Islamophobia. Incidents like these are not uncommon in school districts across the United States. Misinformation and misunderstanding about Muslims and Islam is ubiquitous, and the research on K-12 curriculum reveals limited or skewed coverage that reinforces Orientalist discourse. Our research challenges curricula on Islam, specifically high school world history textbooks available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year adoption cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. This paper begins with a contextualization of the study, describes the theoretical grounding, details methods and analysis, presents findings, and concludes with recommendations for informing an engaged citizenship.

We do need to point out that while we examined world history textbooks for which content and methodology are primarily driven by history content standards, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) has provided curriculum standards that serve as guiding principles to crafting a quality social studies curriculum. The purpose of social studies is the promotion of civic competence or, as defined by the NCSS (1994, p. 6), "to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." With this in mind, we present our work in efforts to realize a rich and respectful education on Islam.

Background

In the current context of increasing standardization and assessment in schools, we caution against the collapsing of standards and testing (Ravitch, 2010). Curriculum standards are intended to serve as guiding principles for the selection and organization of content specific to a discipline. In 1994, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) published their first edition of curriculum standards, which represent educators' best thinking about providing a framework to prepare young people for the challenges of citizenship. The NCSS (1994) emphasizes the importance of civic competence to foster a commitment to the ideas and values of democracy:

- Consideration of civic competence does not refer exclusively to those who are legally recognized members of a nation, but more broadly to the responsibilities and relationships everyone has as a member of a complex network of groups and communities;
- Civic competence requires the ability to use knowledge about one's community, nation, and world, apply inquiry processes, and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving;
- Young people who are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life, and participating as members of a global community. (pp. 5-6)

The NCSS framework provides ten themes that represent a way of organizing knowledge through which to situate content, state standards, and other curricular materials.

School curriculum in the United States is the result of intense negotiation and sometimes conflict. School textbooks are objects of social and economic regulation and are situated in larger social contexts. Highly competitive, textbooks are cultural artifacts and economic commodities that are market and state driven. The textbook is an economic commodity because "it is subject to intense competition and to the pressures of profit" (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 7). It is a regulated commodity because it has political and cultural roles, including a "legally assured captive audience" with its enforcement and sanctioning in public schools (Luke, de Castell, and Luke, 1989, p. 254). Textbooks are typically considered to be factual, authoritative, and value-neutral, or as Apple (1993, p. 9) aptly coined, arbiters of "official knowledge." Textbooks signify through content and form particular ways of selecting and organizing a vast body of possible information, hence "arguments about textbooks are really cultural politics" (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 7).

There is a plethora of research (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, and Weis, 1991; Anyon, 1979; Apple, 1986, 1993; Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991; Calderon, 2014; De Castell, Luke, and Luke, 1989; Douglas and Dunn, 2003; Elson, 1964; FitzGerald, 1979; Leahy, 2010; Willinsky, 1998; Woodward, Elliot, and Nagle, 1988; Zagumny and Richey, 2012, 2013) on textbooks that corroborates the legitimization of knowledge via textbook content. In education systems, and particularly in textbooks, knowledge is all too often presented as standard, static, and neutral (Spring, 1991). Seen by the general public as objective and above criticism, textbooks, nonetheless, contain particular constructions of reality organized for specific purposes. Textbook content embodies information that society perceives as valid—encoded and transmitted through textbooks. Or, in Calderon's (2014) terms, "US social studies textbooks widely adopted at the

secondary level…are a central delivery mechanism of normative historical narratives that promote a particular type of American national identity" (p. 315). In her examination of representations of American Indians in social studies textbooks, Calderon (2014) affirmed that such narratives maintain settler colonialism and perpetuate settler futurity.

The manner in which textbooks function in these legitimizing ways is particularly problematic given that research (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, and Weis, 1991; Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991; De Castell, Luke, and Luke, 1989) confirms teacher and especially novice teacher reliance on textbooks. Teachers may rely more heavily on textbooks for unfamiliar material. Of greater concern are pre-service teachers who have little knowledge about Muslims and Islam who may or may not be willing to reflect on their own positionality (Lévesque, 2014; Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown, 2002; Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2006; Subedi, 2006). The potential exists for them to become in-service teachers who perpetuate misunderstandings of Muslims and Islam. A recent article by Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) further situates the problem with insufficient reflective practices on behalf of teachers and teacher educators. Despite the best intentions to teach about Muslims and Islam, "incomplete knowledge, misinformation, and weak arguments…cement stereotypes, promote intolerance, shut down learning, and thwart education for social justice" (Sensoy and Ali-Khan, 2016, p. 506).

Mass media and popular culture serve as curricular and instructional sources. The study of the organization and regulation of culture by corporate producers and their connections to formal education has a strong scholarly history and certainly informs our work here (e.g. Giroux, 1999; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997). Popular culture as informal educational space influences students' and teachers' thinking about Muslims and Islam. Media depictions of Muslims and Islam include monthly serials (Steet, 2000), news media (Falah, 2005; Jackson, 2010; McAlister, 2001; Kamalipour, 1995), movies (Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2003), television and comic books (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2004; Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Stonebanks, 2010), and comics, music, and dolls (Sensoy, 2009, 2010, 2014; Sensoy and Ali-Khan, 2016; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010). Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) explained how media sources fuel common misunderstandings: "Shaped by media stories, representations in pop culture continue to matter because the iconic fictional texts from the past have influenced the most popular character-types, story elements, and plots of today related to the Middle East" (p. 517). The intersection between education and mass media makes clear the pervasive cultural forces influencing schools, helping us to see education relationally (Apple, 1986).

Methodology

The data for this research include six high school world history textbooks (Adas et al., 2007, 2011; Bentley and Ziegler, 2006, 2011; Bulliet et al., 2008, 2011) available for adoption in Tennessee from two consecutive six-year cycles—2008-2014 and 2014-2020. In Tennessee, only a select group of textbooks is available for adoption in each six-year cycle. A state textbook adoption committee reviews all available textbooks and reduces the selection for districts and schools who are then able to adopt a specific book from the already narrowed selection. The textbooks examined here are the books that were determined to be available for adoption in the two cycles via the adoption committee. Our approach to examining these school textbooks is criticalist in that asymmetrical power relations structure official knowledge disseminated via school systems. Much of what we are taught about Muslims and Islam is filtered through authorial sources that are extensions of colonial legacies.

In our study, we considered how the narrative constituted Orientalism and how those constructions were infused socially and culturally. Sections of the written text were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to initiate a process for coding. Potential codes were then identified and sorted into categories and eventually themes. This procedure was followed for each textbook, after which categories and themes were further combined resulting in the final themes. We do not intend for these themes to stand alone in isolation or be neatly distinct from one another. They tend to overlap and blend into one another. We also stress that these codes and subsequent categories and themes are not the only possible configurations for these data. Considering the social and cultural sources through which information is filtered, these themes are always already limited, partial, and spatially and temporally bound. The themes that we identified fall into two general categories: attributes assigned to Muslims and attributes assigned to Islam. Attributes assigned to Muslims include inability, opulence, corruption, unruly, inequity. Attributes assigned to Islam include fabricated religion, mysticism, timelessness, violence, and internal conflict.

Findings

Attributes Assigned to Muslims

Attributes assigned to Muslims address various characteristics ascribed to Muslim identity.

Inability

Each time a Muslim political entity's failure is exposed, the failure is attributed to the incapability of its rulers and administrators to solve problems and maintain stability. Adas et al. (2007) reinforced the idea of incompetence in their description of the first Caliph: "He received no financial support from the Muslim community. Thus, he had to continue his previous occupation as a merchant on a part-time basis, and he only loosely controlled the military commanders" (p. 136). This passage presents the first caliph as incapable of financial and military leadership. This passage indicates Muslims are incapable of establishing an appropriate system of government and are therefore unable to lead successfully.

Opulence

Muslims and their rulers were depicted as living in opulence with no understanding of the value of money, and as eager spenders who enjoy displaying their many possessions. Adas et al. (2007) superimposed opulence on Muslim rulers in his comparison of Ottoman and Safavid rulers: "As was true of the Ottomans, the practice of confining the princes to the atmosphere of luxury and intrigue that permeated the court led to a sharp fall in the quality of Safavid rulers" (p. 437).

Corruption

The textbooks often strip Muslim individuals of morality and ethics, and depict them as corrupt, opportunistic, and self-centered. Depictions of the Muslim character as corrupt extend to visual re-presentations as well. Bentley and Ziegler (2006) provide a visual re-presentation of corruption in a section addressing commerce in the early days of Islam. The discussion centered on camel caravans and an illustration from a 13th century manuscript was used as a visual aid

depicting how Muslims engaged in commerce. In a sturdy structure, a group of men appear to be unconscious while robbers empty their pockets of personal belongings. The caption reads: "Caravanserais offered splendid facilities for caravan merchants, but they sometimes harbored dangers. In this illustration from the thirteenth-century manuscript, drugged merchants sleep soundly while burglars relieve them of their valuables" (p. 361). The image actually illustrates a scene from an Arab fairytale. In the context of Bentley and Ziegler's (2006) commerce section, however, this illustration portrays Muslims as thieves who would not think twice to steal if they had the chance.

Unruly

Muslim men, especially those who have power, are represented as unable to control their desires, anger, and behavior. In addition to being driven by desire, Muslim men were shown as incapable of controlling their behavior, especially those who have power. Bentley and Ziegler (2006) portrayed Muslim rulers as historically unaffected by religious or social constraints: "The autocratic authority wielded by the rulers of the Islamic empires also reflected steppe traditions. The early emperors largely did as they pleased, irrespective of religious and social norms" (p. 762). This representation suggests that Muslim rulers were guided by their desires rather than the needs of their people. Furthermore, they had no respect for religious and social constrains that regulate social life.

Inequity

Muslim women in world history textbooks are presented as deliberately discriminated against by the Islamic faith and Muslim men. An example demonstrating womens' inequity in Islam can be found in Bulliet et al. (2008) in a discussion of marital laws, "although a man could divorce his wife without stating a cause, a woman could initiate divorce under specified conditions" (p. 230). This gives Muslim men an advantage over women in marriage. Misrepresentation occurs through general information presented in a way that reinforces the theme of inequity, rather than discussing the issue in detail. Women are depicted as secluded, isolated, and deprived from participating in social life and being productive members of society.

Attributes Assigned to Islam

Attributes assigned to Islam address various characteristics assigned to Islam.

Fabricated Religion

Islam is treated as a modified version of other monotheistic religions, copied by Mohamed, and imposed on Muslims to foster a sense of unity against non-Muslims. Textbook authors often indirectly indicated that Mohamed was familiar with other monotheistic religions and relied on this knowledge to invent a new religion. Islam is isolated from other Abrahamic faiths and framed as a Mohamedist cult to distance spectators and reinforce an Orientalist divide. For example, Bentley and Ziegler (2006) clearly explained that Mohamed went to Syria and met with Christians and Jews: "Although he was not deeply knowledgeable about Judaism or Christianity, Muhammad had a basic understanding of both traditions. He may even have traveled by caravan to Syria, where

he would certainly have dealt with Jewish and Christian merchants" (p. 348). Later, on the same page, the authors stated: "He did not set out to construct a new religion by combining elements of Arab, Jewish, and Christian beliefs" (p. 348). This is an indirect indication that Mohamed knew about monotheistic religions and relied on his knowledge to invent a new religion.

Mysticism

The textbooks often associate Islam with the supernatural—witchcraft, desert spirits, magic, and fortune telling—insinuating an irrational, infantile populace in need of rational, mature control. A visual from Bentley and Ziegler (2006) shows a bustling bazaar where a man attracts a crowd as he tells fortunes (p. 764). A full sack of coins at his side suggests he has good business. Harkening back to an antiquated time when superstition reigned supreme, Islam is placed in a perpetual state of stagnation. Such representations strip Muslims and Islam of rationality by depicting them as a group that relies on elements of mysticism in their daily life, rather than an intelligent society that seeks logical and scientific solutions for problems.

Timelessness

Muslim societies are often depicted frozen in time and incapable of living and adapting to a contemporary lifestyle. Resistant to modern, global knowledge and products, Muslims are portrayed living in the past. Little information was provided about contemporary Muslim societies. Rather, people were repeatedly shown timeless, backward, and resistant. For example, one textbook photograph shows a man carrying a cabinet-style television on his back (Bentley and Ziegler, 2006, p. 1142). The man wears a traditional *deshdasha* and white tennis shoes. In the background, automobiles manufactured in the 1950s United States are parked in front of a store with a sign in Arabic and English script. Despite the western influence via the automobiles, television, tennis shoes, and English language, this man is stuck in the past as evidenced by the antiquated products from the US. Instead of showing a diverse population of Muslims strongly influenced by western cultures and living in dense, urban areas, authors of textbooks constructed Muslim societies stuck in the past even when discussing recent history.

Violence

Representations of Muslims and Islam are associated directly or indirectly with violence. This depiction of violence goes beyond individuals to become a generalization associated with Islam. While wars are often associated with political entities rather than religions, the textbooks over-emphasize the role of wars in the spread of Islam. Islam is often seen as a force of destruction and, sometimes, depicted through extreme acts of violence. For example, in an explanation about the defeat of a 16th century empire, the authors describe how an army commander was thrown out a window, dragged across the palace courtyard, and then thrown out the window again to assure he was indeed dead (Adas et al., 2007, p. 130). Especially destructive of churches and temples, Islam is characterized by gory metaphors such as bloodbath, bloodshed, and torture.

Internal Conflict

Internal conflict refers to the historical struggles, disagreement, and war that took place within Muslim societies. This conflict depicts Muslims as unable to reach agreement and coexist peacefully, and implies Muslims do not possess the necessary civility and common sense to effectively communicate with one another to reach an agreement. Rather, Muslims invoke violence to settle disputes and are mentally and socially underdeveloped in comparison to people from other cultures and countries. One example from Bentley and Ziegler (2006), describes how a sultan issued a decree allowing rulers to legally kill siblings to maintain the throne. Strangulation with a silk bow prevented royal bloodshed. One sultan murdered 19 brothers, many of whom were infants, and 15 expectant mothers (p. 763). Such a dramatic snapshot of a long and complex history circumscribes a particular representation of Muslim rulers. Muslim states are repeatedly shown in decline, which is attributed to the presence of internal conflict. Such depictions promote the idea that western intervention is required to keep these regions peaceful at the same time they justify acts of war against predominantly Muslim countries.

None of these representations are new or exclusive to textbooks. Rather, such depictions are quite common in a variety of media including news coverage and films. More troubling is that these curricular materials do nothing to challenge Orientalist meaning making to teach against Islamophobia (Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Stonebanks, 2010). This research helps us to see the power/knowledge relationships in education that can lead to developing rich curriculum to engage students with civic competence in a diverse, democratic society similar to Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009) challenge simplistic and reductionist characterizations of Muslims in schools. They urge teachers to delve into the complexities and often uncomfortable classroom discussions dealing with diversity. Merchant (2016), in her examination of Muslim girls' experience with and understanding of curriculum on Islam, breaks new ground by working with Muslim girls from minority communities—minorities within a minority. She is careful to avoid reifying fixed, essentialist identities as she "advocates a curriculum on Islam honoring complexity" (p. 183).

Recommendations

Curriculum Standards

Standardized curriculum and increased pressure on teachers and schools often de-emphasize the sociopolitical context of curriculum. Again, we caution against the collapsing of standards and assessment. Curriculum standards are intended to guide the selection and organization of content specific to a discipline rather than serve as measures for accountability. Moreover, teachers, administrators, policy makers, families, and teacher educators must be aware that school curriculum including textbooks is socially constructed and often disguised as common sense (Kumashiro, 2009). Once we begin to realize that curricular content is material deemed worthy of study, policymakers and numerous panels of stakeholders like teachers, families, teacher educators, discipline experts, and more, can hold discussions about the variety of ways in which the materials can be mediated, interpreted, and presented.

And, textbooks are unlikely to change and adequately capture the rich diversity of global populations, especially world history or world geography. By design, these textbooks are intended to generalize about large, diverse areas of culture to give a totalizing sense for comparison. Certain constructs continue to live on in textbooks because, as Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) explained, even though publishers are pressured to include more in-depth and nuanced representations of people and cultures, "Very little tends to be dropped from textbooks…and major

ideological frameworks do not get markedly changed" (p. 10). A sentence or two in a textbook gives authors little opportunity for discussion and can lead to gross overgeneralizations, shortchanging students of an opportunity to understand or develop an appreciation. The chronological ordering in history or the nationalist divisions in geography could be organized differently in order to alleviate the need to generalize. The attempt to capture world history or geography in a single class is perhaps too ambitious if our end goal is civic competence.

Multiple Interpretations

We cannot assume that all knowledge in textbooks represents cultural domination. One of the pitfalls of research on textbooks and curriculum has been the acceptance of these media as delivery systems of a particular ideology (Luke, 1988, p. 29). While school textbooks are the primary carriers of an authorized version of knowledge, the messages in the books are not necessarily read by the teachers or students as the publishers or authors have intended. The same text may yield different meanings for different audiences according to variations in social context. Because teachers instruct with and through textbooks, school books are objects of teacher mediation and, therefore, already undergo re-interpretation by the time they are presented to the student.

Students do not necessarily learn what is taught in schools, and more specifically in textbooks. Social context plays an important role here (Anyon, 1981). Depending on student experience, representations in school textbooks can present dominated, negotiated, or oppositional views to students. Students are far from the realist Lockean passive vessels into which information is poured. Rather, they are active learners, constructing their own responses and meanings (Freire, 1997, p. 52; Belenky et al., 1986, p. 214). As the multiple and contradictory interpretations by students attest to, textbooks are complex material artifacts, despite the overwhelming urge to view textbooks as disseminating a particular ideology.

Not all textbooks or every section of a single book represents cultural domination (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 9). Authors may completely subvert hegemonic systems or they may treat potentially hegemonic information more subtly. By including vignettes about real people and their experiences and by presenting two or more conflicting interpretations of a situation, an author helps in the process of understanding nuanced information. More critically, engaging relations with textbooks allows for those being represented to participate in the representation. Loewen (1995) encourages the use of vignettes because they "instruct by example," "show diverse ways that people can make a difference," and give space to characters otherwise relegated to the margins (p. 19). Teaching history in context helps students connect historical events to trends and developments (Ravitch and Finn, 1987, p. 205).

Supplemental Materials

Rather than perpetuate the myth of official knowledge (Apple, 1993), teachers can bolster textbook materials with rich classroom instruction and supplementary resources. There is an ever-increasing, substantial body of materials that can be used to supplement textbooks. Trade books for students can bolster instruction and help teachers to move beyond superficial or tokenistic approaches to less familiar cultures. Trade books can enrich the curriculum and engage students in ways that textbooks do not. Further, there are a number of centers devoted to increasing awareness and outreach programming about the Middle East and Islam. Many of these centers are

connected to universities and offer high quality programming available at little or no cost for teacher education programs and K-12 teachers. Many of these centers offer lists of trade books that contribute meaningfully to understanding Muslims and Islam. Some even offer websites rich with valuable information to bolster curriculum and instruction.

Critical Pedagogy

Multicultural and culturally relevant education provides outlets to address diversity and promote social justice. Multi- and new-literacies give teachers and students the opportunity to craft their own curriculum to foster caring communities where all students experience a quality education (Gee, 2004; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012). Socially just educational approaches can make us uncomfortable because we are forced to question our thinking and beliefs. We need to problematize the things we take for granted and perceive as ordinary or common that may be oppressive or exclusionary to others. For example, the privileging of Christianity can be recognized so that teachers and teacher educators can develop their own awareness and critical reflection to disrupt marginalizing practices (Aronson, Amatullah, and Laughter, 2016). Sensoy and Ali-Khan (2016) offer eight instructional strategies to teach against Islamophobia:

- Foster transparency by letting students in on our own struggles with challenging experiences.
- Center historical/memory work so that students are given the chance to reflect on their lives and reinterpret their experiences.
- Give up comfort and engage students in challenging and uncomfortable conversations.
- Understand the difference between Middle East versus Islam to combat the common monolithic representation of a Muslim world.
- Recognize the cultural diversity of students to foreground heterogeneity.
- Give attention to stereotypes in media as these stories influence and shape our thinking.
- Address common fears by acknowledging the practices of privilege that perpetuate Islamophobia.
- Ask challenging questions to promote reflective practices and help students to think about their thinking. (pp. 514-518)

With critical pedagogy, teachers can work closely with their students to question and contextualize. Abdou and Chan (2017), who examined polytheistic and monotheistic religious portrayals in textbooks, recommend,

> Helping students analyze the constructions of the different traditions in the textbooks and what interests these constructions might serve is also important as it equips them with the skills they would need to deconstruct other equally problematic social constructs and divides they would encounter elsewhere. (p. 24)

Students can then recognize and challenge social injustice when they see it via "critical social justice literacy" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. 19). Letting students in on the social construction of knowledge moves us one step closer to engaging students with civic competence and realizing a rich and respectful education on Islam.

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Plural Voices in the Teaching of Islam

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Abstract

The site where knowledge of Islam is authorized is in institutions of higher learning. This authorized knowledge then determines what is taught in secondary education curriculum, creating limited frames for thinking about Islam, which then limits what is possible in higher education. This feedback loop continues to narrow the ways in which we perceive Islam and Muslims. Edward Said is interested in the political dimensions of this discourse, and he does not eschew the educational impact. In particular, he notes that American media relies on educational systems for the knowledge it reproduces. As Muslims outside the United States consume American media, the Muslim definition of what "Islam" means is conditioned by American understandings of what "Islam" means. My particular interest is in the ways in which US education curtails the breadth of Muslim experience, and why it does so. Using a case study of Shi'ism, I argue that there is a strongly normative bent to the teaching of Islam in higher education that is more befitting of Theology than Study of Religion. That methodological shift is necessary for the control of what "Islam" means and is a logical outgrowth of the origins of the Study of Religion from Comparative Theology.

Keywords*: Islam; Shi'ism; Orientalism; Study of Religion; textbooks; Shi'ah; Ithna'ashari; Isma'ili; cultural studies*

Introduction

Edward Said, in his works *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, argues for ways in which the production of knowledge is used to craft political and social realities.[1] In particular, he is invested in the Middle East and Islam. His premise, as it relates to the teaching of Islam, is that the way one "authors" knowledge is a tool of domination. What we witness is a narrative of Islam that is used to curate, curtail, and control the messiness of religion.

The site where this knowledge is authorized is in institutions of higher learning. This authorized knowledge then determines what is taught in secondary education curriculum. As tertiary education has limited ways to discuss Islam, it creates limited frames for thinking about Islam in secondary education, which then limits what is possible in higher educational teaching. This feedback loop continues to narrow the ways in which we perceive Islam and Muslims. While Said is interested in the political dimensions of this discourse, he does not eschew the educational impact. In particular, he notes that American media relies on educational systems for the

1. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979; Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

knowledge it reproduces.[2] As Muslims outside the United States consume American media, the Muslim definition of what "Islam" means is conditioned by American understandings of what "Islam" means.[3]

My particular interest is in the ways in which US education curtails the breadth of Muslim experience, and why it does so. Using a case study of Shi'ism, I argue that there is a strongly normative bent to the teaching of Islam in higher education that is more befitting of Theology than Study of Religion. That methodological shift is necessary for the control of what "Islam" means and is a logical outgrowth of the origins of the Study of Religion from Comparative Theology.

The approach to Islam in secondary curricula suffers from different methodological issues, although inheriting the biases of higher education. Generally, Islam is introduced through History or Social Studies, which have their own limitations in discussing religion.[4] However, the difference in approach offers a way to constructively think about how to effectively approach teaching Islam. Using a cultural studies approach of multi-disciplinary, contextual inquiry of human activity, we introduce a more diverse and nuanced religious life of Muslims.

Islam as Person, Islam as Object

The study of Islam, as an academic subject, is tied to the emergence of the field of Study of Religion. Yet the category of religion is inherently one that is imposed from the outside.[5] As a result, it must come with the biases of the authorizing agent as to what religion is and how it should function; to paraphrase Descartes, we can only imagine what we know. To understand, then, how the the study of Islam is structured, we must look at how the Study of Religion is structured.

Richard King, in his work on Orientalism and religion, argues that there are two different etymologies for the world "religion," which are are germane to our argument. In the pre-Christian era, "religion" is traced back to the Latin *relegere*, meaning "to re-read" or "to re-trace." This sense of religion is nearly synonymous with tradition, and following what already exists in the culture.[6] King says by the third century of the common era, we find Christian authors providing a new etymology. He points to Lactantius, who says "religion" is related to *religare*, meaning to "to tie together," or "to bind." This shift is important because the argument is that there is one religion, bound to the worship of the "true God," and all other worship is superstition. This shift in the definition, according to King, "served to establish the monotheistic exclusivism of Christianity as the normative paradigm for understanding what a religion is."[7] The category of religion is thus indexed to Christianity as to what religion could be.

While the category of "religion" may be an external category, it does not preclude emic understandings of what a life of worship means.[8] However, the Study of Religion, in a push to

2. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam*, 161.

3. Ibid., 52.

4. Susan L. Douglass, "Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula," in *Educating the Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Farid Senzai, and Jane I Smith (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86. Morgan, Hani and David Walker. "The Portrayal of the Middle East in Four Current School Textbooks." *MESA Bulletin* 42, no. 1&2 (2008): 86–96.

5. Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst, "Locating Religion in South Asia: Islamicate Definitions and Categories," *Comparative islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014), 226.

6. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 35.

7. Ibid., 36.

8. Morgenstein Fuerst, "Locating Religion in South Asia: Islamicate Definitions and Categories," 229.

prove an objective discipline distinct from Theology, may actually use the language of secularism to erase these emic notions of religion.[9] In part, this erasure hearkens back to the struggle to define what religion is, as the Study of Religion relies on scientism to establish its objectivity, and in the process losing an investment in tradition. The Study of Religion, in using the language of objective inquiry, relies on an understanding of religion that is based on a static truth, that does not consider tradition in structuring what believers may express. It is, in fact, the diversity of tradition that may allow us to engage with the underlying logic of what adherents understand of their faith, as it is conditioned by their material conditions.[10]

Tomoko Masuzawa, in her work on the creation of the category of world religions, argues that the emergence of the Study of Religion, tied to a sense of rationalist discourse, formalizes a discourse of othering.[11] Just as theology assumed Christianity was the dominant religion, the Study of Religion emerged with the nation-state, and worked to assure the centrality of the West. Ultimately, religions near to Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, are true religions, because of their proximity to Christian belief, but rejected the "Truth," therefore remaining problematic.[12] The solution was the introduction of the term "World Religions," which allows for Christianity to remain the central religion against which other religions are judged, without denying they are religions. The logic of "world music" functions in a similar way. The United States is part of the world, but it is the standard against which other musics are judged and consumed.

By making a religion static, in part by having a textual corpus to interrogate, it becomes easier to exercise control over that religion. In the case of Islam, the structure of the discipline favored legalistic work and works in Arabic as representing the essence of what the religion is, and looking at later developments, particularly mystical movements like Sufism, as deviations from the religion. Regional developments and histories are not part of the study of Islam, but of area studies, because they too are not seen as essential to the core of what Islam is.[13]

Returning to the idea that religion is a category imposed from the outside, it is evident that phrases like "the world of Islam," or "the Muslim world," are not inherent to the tradition. While the Arabic phrase *ummah*, or community, may refer to an aspirational sense of a connected Muslim population, it does not carry the same weight of homogeneity that the English phrases do. This idea of a "world" relating to Islam is an external organizing principle.[14] We must question what purpose this organization serves, and the role that Islam and Muslims play in it.

Edward Said argues that the construction of "Islam," which we can treat as synonymous with "the Muslim world," serves particular geopolitical ends in the context of the United States.[15] This construction of "Islam" is constituted through and by media, government, and academia.[16] This "Islam" is effectively anthropomorphized and is normalized as *the* Islam against which all others are measured. It is formed through a theologizing process of politicians, who leverage the deficiencies of Study of Religion to their logical conclusion: the elevation of the state against any

9. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, 42-43. cf. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, "Pedagogical (Re)encounters: Enacting a Decolonial Praxis in Teacher Professional Development in Pakistan," *Comparative Education Review* Online First(2017), (3-4).

10. cf. Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009), 23.

11. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.

12. Ibid., 49.

13. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 40.

14. Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 15.

15. Said, *Covering Islam*, xi.

16. Ibid., 136.

constructed Other. As this idea of Islam, or Buddhism, or Communism, is constructed to serve state interests, it becomes a foil for the nation-state to define itself. This reflection of the state becomes an object of state violence.[17] The lack of a viable, alternative narrative of how religion functions, from the very discipline designed to do this work, enables the violence against the political Other.

If Islam is anthropomorphized, then it can be discussed as a unitary object, removing any sense of agency from adherents of Islam.[18] Muslims are effaced from the narrative of this Islam. There are two mechanisms through which this effacement happens. The first mechanism is scripturalism, which emerges out of a Protestant notion of the primacy of scripture.[19] As it applies to Muslims, it is the belief that verses of scripture control the actions of Muslims, although there is no concordant belief that scripture is predictive of the behavior of Protestants themselves. The second mechanism is culture talk.[20] This idea extends beyond Muslims to other minority groups in America,[21] and seems to be tied to the ways religions were described as part of colonial projects.[22] Cultural talk reduces complex traditions to an essence that explains the politics of a cultural matrix. Both mechanisms seek to exert control over Muslim communities by claiming to have a predictive element to their understanding of Islam. That predictive element is about controlling Muslim populations and disciplining them.

Since the study of Islam emerges from the Study of Religion, and inherits the biases of the discipline, including a reference to Protestant Christianity as the reference point for "true religion," and the legacy of colonial control, we have to understand the academic study of Islam as being linked to power that seeks to maintain its privilege.[23] The Islam constructed through this Orientalist frame is irrational[24] and incompatible with modernity.[25]

Islam at the Secondary Level

This vision of Islam, as anti-modern, and thus a threat to national interests, is constructed as early has high school texts, when we see a construction of an essentialized Islam that is not part of the world. On the production side, publishers may consciously omit commonalities between Muslim and non-Muslim societies to maintain boundaries; Muslim cultures are often introduced through political lens, eschewing what academics would consider elements of the humanities; and Muslim societies are taught outside the flow of world history.[26] Many of these textbooks use

17. cf. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 4-8.
18. Said, *Covering Islam*, 39.
19. Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 55.
20. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 17-62. cf. A. Kevin Reinhart, "On the "introduction to Islam"," in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 24. on "phenomenal essentialism."
21. cf. Richard C. Martin, and Abbas Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy: Authority, Power, and Networks in Muslim Societies," in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carl W. Ernst, and Richard C. Martin (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 193.
22. Hastings Donnan, and Martin Stokes, "Interpreting Interpretations of Islam," in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002), 2.
23. Said, *Covering Islam*, xvii.
24. Ibid., 51.
25. Donnan, and Stokes, "Interpreting Interpretations of Islam," 4.
26. Hani Morgan, and David Walker, "The Portrayal of the Middle East in Four Current School Textbooks," *MESA Bulletin* 42, no. 1&2 (2008).

"Islamic," as an adjective on almost every description, implying that everything is because of religion, and that religion is the determining factor in all things for Muslims.[27] This use of the adjective "Islamic" is a manifestation of culture talk, and seeks to provide an easy explanation for the actions of Muslims, devoid of any historical or political concerns.

The introduction of "world religions" into educational curricula seems to have happened in the 1920s and 30s, as popular books on the topic were on the rise.[28] Then, as now, the appellation of "world" is meant to signify difference and otherness. Islam, as a "world religion," is taught in "world history," and "world geography."[29] While concerns around the First Amendment and the teaching of religion may make US public schools reluctant to offer courses in religion, the use of the adjective "world," reinforces an American exceptionalism that removes the United States from the flow of history. Regardless of which subject we discuss, treating the US as an autonomous actor from the rest of the world enforces a sense that the Other exists and is measured against the US.

Textbooks also use the structure of the "great leader" model, of a linear, dynastic history. As Susan Douglass and Ross Dunn point out, "typically, the books characterize each world religion in terms of a founder figure, an origins story, a holy scripture, a set of basic tenets and practices, and identification with a particular historical period or cultural tradition." This type of narrative does not make room for competing interpretations of the religion. Rather, it focuses attention on the religion as a cultural practice fixed in time. This approach results in an essentialized, ahistorical, non-dynamic presentation of a religion, masking the dynamic elements present in any living tradition.[30]

We must see these texts as part of a dialogic. They reflect academic thinking that is dated because of the cycle of publication. In addition, the authors of secondary education textbooks, who often do not work in higher education, rely on published material that may lag behind current thinking in the field, or who may not even have access to academic research. There are politics around textbook adoption that limit how quickly new textbooks are adopted, and what types of new scholarship are included.[31] These textbooks then inform students, who need to be redirected in their learning about Islam, affecting research interests of academics. As Susan Douglass observes, as recently as 2009, "Orientalist canards discredited for decades could be found in the textbooks presented at face value, without any attribution of source or indication of differing views among scholars or advances in scholarship over the past century."[32] The points of critique of the Study of Religion are present in these textbooks, and they are slower to change than academic works. The result is that students at this level are presented a simplified version of Islam that removes Islam from the flows of world history. They have an impression that the most important factor in the construction of identities for Muslims is their religion, absent any other cultural factors; that Muslims act irrationally because they are not tied to the realities of the world.

As a result, these textbooks represent the reality of Islamic Studies, albeit on a different trajectory. If we accept that Islamic Studies is the child of Orientalism and the Study of Religion,

27. Susan L. Douglass, and Ross E. Dunn, "Interpreting Islam in American Schools," in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002). cf. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Islamic History as Global History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1990).

28. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 37.

29. Douglass, "Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula," 86.

30. Susan L. Douglass, and Ross E. Dunn, "Interpreting Islam in American Schools," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, no. 1 (2003), 60.

31. Douglass, "Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula," 100.

32. Ibid., 87.

we know that it is a field whose antecedents were based on power, control, and denying Muslims their own voice.[33] The Study of Religion uses Christianity as a baseline and seeks to put other religions into the mold of Christianity, using languages of orthodoxy, heresy, and privileging literacy and scripture. The premise behind the rise of world religions, in part, was that Christianity was the "true" religion, and all others were lacking.[34]

A Question of Method

If the core issue is the ways in which the Study of Religion is constituted, and its subsequent impact on the Study of Islam, then there should be methods that allows us to look for other narratives of being Muslim. The anthropologist Talal Asad offers us a potential way forward as he speaks about traditions. He says, "the variety of traditional Muslim practices in different times, places, and populations indicate the different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain."[35] According to this argument, it is possible to recognize a multitude of Muslim practices, organized under a logic of "Islam," but conditioned by lived realities of practitioners. He continues to state that it is a problem of the modern to see and expect homogeneity in traditions. It seems to be an anachronistic reading tied to notions of control.

Asad appears to be echoing some of the theoretical approaches of The Birmingham School of cultural studies. Broadly speaking, the interventions of the Birmingham School were to look at contemporary culture through a Marxist lens, to understand the ways in which culture is embedded in lived realities. Simon During, in his introduction to cultural studies argues that it is about "the engaged analysis of contemporary cultures," and "engaged" has three distinct senses for him. The first sense is that scholars are politically and critically engaged for those who suffer under social structures. The second sense is that it is engaged "to enhance and celebrate" social experiences by examining their underpinnings. The third sense is to engage with culture as part of everyday life, rather than as separate from it.[36]

This background is important for Richard King, who argues for a "specific form of 'cultural studies'" to replace the current methods in the Study of Religion. He believes that it would offer "reconceptualization of the notion of 'religion' in such a way that it no longer remains bound to the peculiar orientations of Christian theological speculation." As a result, it would offer a us a reading of "religion" tied more closely to the pre-Christian notion of "tradition."[37] King offers us a way to bridge Asad's intervention with the work of cultural studies.

It is Diane Moore's work on religious illiteracy, cultural studies, and religion in secondary education that seems to offer a specific way of using cultural studies to pedagogically engage with the Study of Religion. While not as explicitly Marxist as The Birmingham School, she states that "all knowledge claims are 'situated' claims in that they arise out of certain

33. Carl W Ernst, and Richard C. Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carl W. Ernst, and Richard C. Martin (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 2.

34. Richard C. Martin, "Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (London: Oneworld, 2001), 1-2.; Ernst, and Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," 3, 9.; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*. For a broad survey of the history of "Islamic Studies," see Charles Kurzman, and Carl W Ernst, "Islamic Studies in Us Universities," *Review of Middle East Studies* (2012).

35. Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 23.

36. Simon During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

37. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, 53.

social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives." By situating the knowledge, we disrupt the claims to an "objective" study, as the observer is as conditioned by her reality as the observed is. Nor can we claim to have a totality of knowledge about the observed or make universalizing claims through partial observation. Moore also avoids the trap of relativism in this position, by arguing that it is the mirror image of totalizing knowledge and objectivity. Both approaches are a "denial of responsibility and critical enquiry." It is only through recognizing partial perspectives that one can develop a rational and critical discourse.[38]

Moore allows us to understand how a totalizing sense of knowledge about Islam curtails our actual knowledge of Muslims, by recognizing situated knowledge; that religion exists in a cultural matrix and is manifest in a way conditioned by that matrix; as well as acknowledging the questions of power inherent in cultural studies. Looking at the ways in which Arabic and Sunni notions of Islam are valorized, voices of other communities, such as Persian, Turkish, Indonesian, Sufi, and Shi'i are marginalized. Taking a case study on Shi'ism, we see how the teaching of Islam is limited in tertiary education.

Tertiary Education—Case Study on Shi'ism

In an average 14-week college/university semester, it is impossible to speak to the breadth of diversity of Muslims in the world. They currently constitute about 1/4 of the world's population and exist in almost every country. There have to be pedagogical choices as to what to include in an introductory class. The critique is not that such curation has to happen, but that it may happen in such a way as to serve as a weak theology, creating a normative Islam against which other Muslims are measured. Equally as important, by engaging with the broad historical parameters of the Study of Religion, the teaching of Islam serves the purposes of power, rather than a critical engagement with Muslim traditions.

For example, when thinking about the history of Muslims in America, the presence of Muslims is often linked to periods of Arab and South Asian migration. By ignoring the large numbers of Muslims who were enslaved, the state does not have to confront its crime of slavery. Ignoring African-American Muslim movements like the Nation of Islam also allows Muslims to be seen as foreign to the United States, and thus a suspect population tied to foreign interventions. Muslims no longer have individual agency but are controlled by an anthropomorphized "Islam."

This "Islam" must present itself as ahistorical and homogeneous. To investigate situated knowledge and manifestations of the religion in context would upset narratives of control and domination. Muslim communities of interpretation must be effaced.[39] To be effective in this erasure, an historically grounded narrative, one that is recognizable as broadly being Muslim, is chosen to be the true manifestation of the religion. This being of "Islam" becomes synonymous with Sunni Islam.

There are numerous ways in which we might look at communities of interpretation. For our purposes, the most salient division is the question of authority after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The two stable communities that ultimately emerge over the succession of Muhammad are the Sunni and Shi'i communities. The Shi'ah make an argument referencing the

38. Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 79-80.

39. Farhad Daftary, "Diversity in Islam: Communities of Interpretation," in *The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the History, Faith, Culture, and Peoples of Islam*, ed. Azim Nanji (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1996).

Qur'an, the sacred text for Muslims, and the *hadith*, the teachings of Muhammad, that Ali ibn Ali Talib was the successor to Muhammad's political, spiritual, and religious authority. While they do not make a claim to prophethood after Muhammad, they do believe that Muhammad instituted the office of the Imam, and this position is inheritable through the line of Ali and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. The Sunni position rejects such claims and refers back to a pre-Prophetic model of leadership, which offers a type of elective process for selecting political leaders. Very quickly after Muhammad's death, this type of elective process gives way to dynastic succession.

Within these broad communities, there are subdivisions based on questions of succession and interpretation. Of course, the ways in which we understand these communities now is different than what these communities may have understood of themselves. For example, I would argue that we see a theological formation of Shi'ism during the lifetime of Muhammad;[40] a political formation of Shi'i identity after the death of Imam Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, at Kerbala; and a legal formation with Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar as-Sadiq.[41] Sunni identity seems to emerge later, partially in response to the crystallization of Shi'i identity.[42] For numerous historical reasons, the Sunni community becomes the majoritarian tradition. While there are deep theological differences and conflicts over claims of the true meaning of religion, there is also a history of mutual acceptance, known as *taqrīb*,[43] most recently manifest through the Amman Message.[44]

The reliance on Arabic and legalistic texts in the study of Islam favors reading the Sunni tradition as normative. Farhad Daftary, a scholar of Shi'ism, argues that Orientalists "studied Islam according to Sunni perspectives and, borrowing classifications from Christian contexts, treated Shi'ism as the 'heterodox' interpretation of Islam, or even as a 'heresy,' in contrast to Sunnism which was taken to represent Islamic 'orthodoxy.'"[45] Christian categories of religion, married with Christian biases, structured Shi'ism as the internal Other of Islam. The Shi'ah parallel the Catholics, who were despised in the Europe of the time because of the presence of a strong central leader and clerical hierarchy. European scholars favorably compared Sunni communities to Protestant communities and established Sunnism as the Muslim "orthodoxy" as a tool of control.[46] In addition, orthopraxy is often indexed to orthodoxy,[47] the vision of Islam that emerges is a simplified, lowest-common denominator form of Sunni Islam.

Carl Ernst and Richard Martin, scholars of Islam, ask the most relevant corrective question to this state of affairs, "why should the study of other historically important (if not outright dominant) Islamic discourses such as Sufism, Shiism, philosophy, poetry, ethics, and history be ignored or dismissed in an effort to maintain an old, some might say 'Orientalist,' criterion of what

40. Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

41. Arzina R. Lalani, *Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad Al-Baqir* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000).

42. Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni "ulama" of Eleventh Century Baghdad* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

43. Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, "Sunni-Shi'i Rapprochement (*Taqrīb*)," in *Shi'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. Lynda Clarke (Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001).

44. "The Amman Message." (2007): accessed Jan. 20, 2016, http://ammanmessage.com.

45. Farhad Daftary, "The Study of the Ismailis: Phases and Issues," in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, ed. Farhad Daftary, and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda 2014), 55.

46. Martin, and Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy," 180. cf. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (1955), 5.

47. Martin, and Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy," 184.

is authentic or normative?"[48] The challenge that this question poses is to integrate a variety of perspectives on what it means to be Muslim, engage with a multitude of Islams, without slipping into relativism. The specifics of language are important, as they contextualize the objects of our study.

The particularity of what we mean by Shi'ism is our first clarifying point. In discussing Shi'ism, I mean Imami Shi'ism, which covers groups like the Ithna'ashari and Isma'ili communities, and as distinct from Zaydi Shi'ism, which operates under a different model of leadership.[49] Even this simple clarification allows us to understand that under the label of "Shi'ah," there exists a multitude of interpretations. From there, we make a choice which voices to include. If the goal of situating knowledge is to engage with a transparent process of knowledge making, then our goal here is not to marginalize Zaydi voices, but to acknowledge we cannot do Zaydism justice in this space. At the same time, the term "Imami Shi'ism" is used as a synonym for "Ithna'ashari Shi'ism," because it is a self-designation from the community. However, without careful usage, the theological meaning is lost, and one group, the Ithna'ashari, emerge as a privileged group.[50]

The language that lends itself most to this sort of exclusion is the word "sect." This concept clearly emerges out of the Protestant Christian basis of the Study of Religion, with a dominant understanding, or orthodoxy, against which other groups are heterodoxies, or even heresies. "Sect" lends itself to exclusionary truth claims that are not emic to Muslim traditions. The closest term in Arabic comes from the root *faraqa*, meaning a division or separation, and is present as *furqah* when denoting religious difference. Marshall Hodgson, an historian of Islam, argues that the term *furqah*

> has been translated "sect," but it rather rarely answers to the modern English notion of "sect." Usually it should be rendered by nothing stronger than "school of thought." Often it is used to refer to a single teacher and his disciples, with reference to one minor point of doctrine. In such a case there is no question of a body of persons sharing a common religious allegiance such that their overall religious life is led among themselves and apart from others, as is implied in a "sect."[51]

Within Muslim traditions, there is a saying of Prophet Muhammad that the community will split into 73 groups, and one will be saved. A variation of the *hadith* says to be saved, follow the majority group. Here, the word "group" comes from the root "*faraqa*," so there is a call to a right path, but there is no indication which path that is, or the distinction between difference and division. Left open is when an interpretative community can be considered a "sect."

As a result of *hadith* like this one, a genre of literature emerges known as *firāq* literature. These works attempt to explain why the author's community is the right one and the others are doomed. Works in this genre are often translated with titles like "The Book of Sects." However, if the term is translated as "heresy," it is easier to see these treatises as polemic literature, ascribing difference to other groups to elevate one's self. To translate the works as sectarian implies a

48. Ernst, and Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," 14.

49. Wilferd. Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, N.Y.: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 77-92.

50. Etan Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-'Ashariyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39, no. 3 (1976).

51. Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam*, 66.

cohesive discourse that is generally absent in these works. They are very much engaged in the construction of what Islam is, but through generating a normative theology, positively and negatively, rather than describing the differences that exist.

The question of how to translate the root *farqa*, and its permutations in this context, provide a way to think about how to approach the teaching of Islam. Our premise is that we are teaching about an organizing principle known as Islam, but that is manifest in particular cultural matrices that results in "Islams" in practice.[52] As we take Islam in practice as a serious way of understanding the religion, because we consider it a form of interpretation, we enrich textual study.[53] Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar, two Islamic Studies scholars, further develop this point when they state:

> This suggests adopting the more accurate, if inelegant, plural reference to "Islams" while continuing to stress that within Hanbali Sunni, Shafi Sunni, Ithna'Ashari Shia, Ismaili Shia, and tariqa Sufi movements are normative institutions of authority as well variations and contestations of belief and practice among constituents.[54]

Their language of "contestations" is an important way to engage with the language of heresies to engage with understanding the limits of a normative tradition. They argue that orthodoxy is a dominant position, which won in a battle of heresies.[55] They take seriously the internal claims that everyone sees each other as heretics, and the group that wins is orthodox. The elegance of this approach is that it takes internal truth claims seriously, without granting them external validation, and situates the question of power at the center of what defines the traditions. Orthodoxy changes over time and place, allowing us to situate dominant narratives.

One could also speak to competing interpretations,[56] or competing orthodoxies,[57] which is my favored approach. My Introduction to Islam course is a hybrid historical-thematic approach. The guiding question revolves around who is claiming authority and on what bases after the death of Muhammad. Such an approach allows me to look at Shi'ah-Sufi-Sunni notions of leadership developing relationally, rather than sequentially. It keeps students from falling into the trap of hearing "this is Islam," with the first tradition I introduce, and viewing later traditions as deviations from that first community.

With a shift away from an orthodoxy, we can also move away from an orthopraxy. Since we are treating ritual as an interpretative action, praxis and doxis remain linked, but are also tied to questions of location in cultural matrices. A subtle shift in language creates new vistas for exploration. Instead of talking about the Hajj as the act of pilgrimage, we talk about pilgrimage, where the Hajj is the model, but Karbala, Touba, and Konya are also part of the spaces of a Muslim

52. Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional papers series: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington* (1986); A.H. El-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6(1977).

53. cf. Charles Lindholm, "Kissing Cousins: Anthropologists on Islam," in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002).

54. Martin, and Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy," 183.

55. Ibid., 182, 186.

56. Keith Lewinstein, "Recent Critical Scholarship and the Teaching of Islam," in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 52-53.

57. Brannon M. Wheeler, "What Can't be Left Out: The Essentials of Teaching Islam as a Religion," in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 11.

pilgrim's options.[58] Students see differences as part of the tradition, not deviations from a true Islam. We can read about the lives of Muslims in villages in Iran, and connect their actions to their Shi'ism, instead of offering a definitive view of Shi'ah life.[59]

At the same time we want to engage with diversity of thought, we have to be careful of the issue of relativism. The particularities of each tradition are important as well. If we return to the idea that we can trace the formation of Shi'ism to at least three stages—theological, political, and legal—then we can also trace a development of justice in Shi'i thought. There is an early spiritual tradition around Imam Ali, and involves Fatima, and his sons Hasan and Husayn. His descendants inherit that charisma, and create forms of practice that demonstrate the adherents understanding of the teachings of Muhammad his family. By looking at devotion, we center the believer in the conversation, so we look at ritual and literature alongside holy texts and scholastic tradition. What emerges is a sense of social justice grounded in the teachings of Imam Ali,[60] which is then formalized and refined through through various Imami traditions.

Teaching spaces can be more flexible and adaptive to new ways of thinking about Islamic Studies than textbook spaces can be. Focusing on Shi'ism again, there are few textbooks that are appropriate for teaching Shi'ism at an undergraduate level.[61] Looking at contested authorities allows me to use what is available for maximum impact. It is in the textbook space that we see some of the difficulties presented earlier in the discussion of secondary education appearing in tertiary education. Part of deciding what is taught, especially for non-specialists, is what is available.[62] To go on a syllabus, one has to consider cost, quality, and accessibility to the audience. While there are a fair number of books on Shi'ism available to scholars of Islam, it is not clear how well many of them fare on the decision matrix. Texts can be too expensive or targeted to a specialist audience. Peer-review also plays a role in which texts are accepted for publication, and the form of their publication. As a result, there are multiple points of resistance in crafting new approaches to introductory texts in Islamic Studies. The advantage that tertiary education has is that instructors are not limited to a single book and can create reading resources from multiple texts to offer approaches to the Study of Islam that destabilizes the limits and presuppositions of the Study of Religion. However, non-specialists are potentially more limited to a textbook approach, mirroring the issues facing secondary school teachers.

Conclusion

Knowledge of Islam is constructed to serve particular political ends. While those aims may not be explicit in educational material, nor obvious to educators, it is present in representations of Islam. Emerging from the Study of Religion, Islamic Studies in the United States inherits the biases and structures of the discipline. Protestant Christianity is held up as the norm, and Islam is

58. Ibid., 9. For an approach that centers common ritual practice and respects differences, see Edward E. Curtis, ed. *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

59. cf. Reinhold Loeffler, *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988).

60. M. Ali Lakhani, ed. *The Sacred Foundations of Justice in Islam: The Teachings of ʿalī Ibn Abī Ṭālib* (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, 2006); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: IB Tauris, 2006); Reza. Shah-Kazemi, *Spiritual Quest: Reflections on Qur'Ānic Prayer According to the Teachings of Imam 'Alī* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

61. One text that has proven helpful in my own teaching is Najam Iftikhar Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

62. Wheeler, "What Can't be Left Out: The Essentials of Teaching Islam as a Religion," 4.

constituted against it. As a result, because of phenomenological similarities, Sunni Islam is elevated to the status of normative Islam.

Within this system of knowledge, Shi'i Islam is presented as a heterodoxy that can be discounted or effaced from the presentation of Islam. The unitary form of Islam is then anthropomorphized as a means of control through description. Scripturalism and culture talk become ways of exerting predictive control over Muslim populations. These reductionist approaches appear in secondary school textbooks and are also manifest in higher education.

One of the ways to break this monopoly of meaning making is through a cultural studies approach to the Study of Religion. Cultural Studies, as used in this context, seeks to consider questions of power and cultural context in engaging with constructing knowledge. Within this system, we can consider the actions of Muslims in constructing the religion of Islam, thereby destabilizing a narrative of a fixed, unchanging religion. Offering competing notions of authority, and this paper uses Shi'ism as a case study to illustrate this process, allows one to bring complexity to the narrative of what "Islam" means. People are active agents in constructing their own narratives. As a result, we see claims to a normative Islam as being claims of competing orthodoxies, and not a simple linear history with an obvious teleology.

Unfortunately, this multidisciplinary approach to the study of Islam is not yet a normative part of the making of texts appropriate for undergraduate usage. As a result, non-specialists in the field of Islam may end up reproducing the knowledge systems that give us an anthropomorphized Islam, equivalent to the Sunni understanding of the faith. Perhaps a useful intervention in this scenario is the self-reflexive analysis of what observations about Islam say about the observer. If the Orient is the Other against which Europe defines itself, then Islam must be the Other against which European Christianity defines itself. The United States is not immune to constructing its sense of self against the Muslim Other. This relationship between Self and Other is not unidirectional, but dialogic, so that they are constantly defining one another.[63] Perhaps when we ask that question, of how we are to define ourselves against that which we are defining, we can open a richer conversation into what we know and how we know, without accepting textbooks as the sole authority on the topic.

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63. Tim Jon Semmerling, *"Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 81.; Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America* 23, no. 4 (1991), 15-17.

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"Contingent Beings": On White Supremacy and An Islamic Framework

Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson

Abstract

Though U.S. American academic discussions of White supremacy abound, they often consider White supremacy and its effects as phenomena that, while interesting and important subjects of study, represent some aberrant departure from Western rationality, or an offense minor enough to be corrected while generally keeping our current sociopolitical systems intact. Such perspectives reinscribe the very White supremacy they purport to challenge: when we discuss White supremacy as the ideological exception rather than rule, or as one building block of our society rather than its foundation, we prevent ourselves from considering the truth of White supremacy and what it may take to change it. In this article, I argue that those of us interested in a world beyond White supremacy can learn from Islamic frameworks, which are often ignored by the White, settler colonial context, but can offer ways of understanding our world. To that end, this article discusses the Islamic concepts of shirk and ummah to examine the effects of and resistance to White supremacy.

Keywords: *Islam; White supremacy; Sylvia Wynter; Black-Indegenism; Sherman Jackson; contingence*

Introduction

Though U.S. American academic discussions of White supremacy abound, many of us in education consider White supremacy and its effects as phenomena that represent some aberrant departure from Western rationality, or an offense minor enough to be corrected, while generally keeping our current sociopolitical systems intact. As an institution that supports and is supported by a White supremacist state, U.S. schooling perpetuates these patterns of discourse, both in K-12 schools and at the university level. These types of discussions reinscribe the very White supremacy they purport to challenge: when we discuss White supremacy as the ideological exception rather than rule, or as one building block of our society rather than its foundation, we prevent ourselves from considering the truth of White supremacy and what it may take to change it. Though not often seen as related, the truth about White supremacy and a key to changing it may be found in Islamic teachings.

Our challenge in discussing White supremacy makes sense. Most of us are products of Western elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling practices that divide select aspects of the human experience into "study-able" subjects, while ignoring or objectifying the less-observable or -explainable aspects human experience, including spirituality and religion. While narratives of Western academic practice either celebrate or lament the European academy's break

from Church control, I posit that such a break—even if only rhetorical,[1] and even as it coincided with European imperial, colonial, and enslavement enterprises around the world—paved the way for current understandings of White supremacy as a relatively recent, observable, and self-remedying phenomenon, rather than a practice long recognized and documented in religious and spiritual practice. Further, as White supremacy has allowed for the co-opting of a particular religious and spiritual practices in the name of domination (namely, Christianity), I further argue that attention to knowledges offered by other spiritual and religious practices can offer ways of considering and resisting White supremacy outside of a framework that simultaneously reinscribes it.

I acknowledge that, even as I discuss "religious and spiritual practice" as a discreet and separate category, I am bending to the aforementioned Western practice that separates our lives into categories of *observable/knowable* and *unknowable/non-existent/invalid*, particularly as many adherents' religious and spiritual knowledges structure their entire worldview—both what they see, and what they cannot. Because of this, I prefer to discuss such knowledges and attendant practices as *frameworks*, in that they often inform people's understanding of their universes. I also acknowledge that it is outside the scope of this article to offer specific instructions incorporating spiritual/religious framework knowledge into academic research practice and schooling curricula. However, this article invites those of us interested in education and schooling to spend less time considering how we "teach" spiritual/religious frameworks, and instead consider what these frameworks can teach *us*, particularly when it comes to long-standing social issues that we seldom connect to the areas of spirituality or religion, such as the existence and effects of White supremacy in society, and specifically in education.

Elsewhere, I discuss the Black-Indigenist paradigm, a paradigm which—in response to five centuries of White supremacist, settler-colonial dominance in the lands called North America—looks to Black and Indigenous responses to the settler colonial project as models of resistance.[2] Those models prioritize (1) the *Word* (language, storytelling, narrative construction); (2) kinship/community networks; and, (3) land/space connections as sites where Indigenous and Black peoples have historically confirmed and reaffirmed their humanity in a wider settler colonial context predicated upon their dehumanization and enslavement/elimination. While I have focused quite heavily on Sylvia Wynter's and others' conceptions of the *Word* as a vehicle for creating (or re-creating) a world beyond White supremacy and colonialism, [3] this article more closely focuses on the second site of Black-Indigenist resistance—kinship/community networks—and their connection to spiritual/religious frameworks. While this connection could work with a variety of spiritual/religious frameworks, a statement by Wynter encouraged the specific religious focus of this article.

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1. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3 (2003).

2. Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "'I had never been at home in the world': A Case for Black Indigenism," forthcoming; Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "On Academic Repression, Blackness, and Storytelling as Resistance," *Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education: Resistance, Reclaiming, Organizing, and Black Lives Matter in Education*, ed. Anthony J. Nocella II and Erik Juergensmeyer (New York: Peter Lang, 2017); Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "The Story of One Hundred and Sixteenth" (doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University, 2016).

3. Karen Gagne, "On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines: Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter Propose a New Mode of Being Human," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4 (2007); Joyce King and Sylvia Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century*, ed. Joyce King, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).

In her piece with G. Thomas, Wynter mentions the Islamic concept of *ummah* when discussing the ways that de- and anti-colonial thinkers (including educators and researchers) can push ourselves beyond our current oppressive societies—notably, how we can understand ourselves beyond the Western construction of White, heterosexual, cisgendered normative construction of humanity, or Man.[4] Instead, this group can "recognize itself not just as physiologically a species but phenomenologically as a unit; as a 'we' or to borrow from Islam, as an 'umma[h],' but this time one of the human, after 'Man.'"[5] If we, as Wynter suggests, extend our definition of *ummah*, or community, from those with whom we share religious connection (in the typical Islamic sense) to all oppressed and marginalized under White supremacy, we can better recognize potential partners in our resistance. [6] In this article, then, I argue that those of us interested in understanding and extending these partnerships can learn from Islamic frameworks, which are often ignored as valid sources of knowledge in the larger White, Western context, though these frameworks offer ways to understand our world. To that end, this article discusses the Islamic concepts of *shirk* and *ummah* in order to examine the effects of and resistance to White supremacy.

This article is separated into four parts. The first section, called "White Supremacy" briefly addresses the history and effects of Whiteness in the United States. The next section, "Shirk," discusses the Islamic concept, as well as its connection to White supremacy in the United States. "The New Ummah" addresses the implications of spiritual and interpersonal connection as a site of resistance to White supremacy. Finally, "Education" attends to the ways that these concepts affect our schooling practices, and what we can do about it.

Before addressing these topics, however, it is important to note what I hope to accomplish through this article, and what I do not. First, while assertions in this article may apply to White supremacy outside of the United States, this article addresses issues of supremacy and religious frameworks within the U.S. American context. As a Black U.S. American, my priority is to address White supremacy in my own backyard; though I am interested in and hopeful for the eradication of White supremacy in other places, there are others much better qualified to discuss it than I. I will not impose upon their space/place.

Second, though I am a Muslim (and Black and queer) academic, I am not an Islamic scholar. In other words, the argument presented here is not based on theological background, but on one religious adherent's perspective on the sociocultural context in which she finds herself. References made to the Qur'anic text come from Abdel Haleem's and Yuksel's, al-Shaiban's and Schulte-Nafeh's English translations, which I have found helpful in my personal spiritual practice.[7] For easy reference, I include parenthetical citations of the Qur'an in the body of this article, while I include specific translations' publication information in the footnotes. I invite interested readers to consider my assertions using the Qur'anic text that is most helpful for them, and that those better-versed in the centuries-old history of Islamic scholarship extend upon the ideas presented here. It is important to note that Islamic scholars have addressed the topic of White supremacy and *shirk* in various forms, and some of them will be referenced here.

4. Greg Thomas and Sylvia Wynter, "Fanon, 'the Man,' Humanism and 'Consciousness,'" *Proud Flesh: A New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness* 4 (2009).

5. Ibid., 22.

6. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System."

7. *The Qur'an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Quran: A Reformist Translation*, trans. Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafeh (Brainbow Press, 2007).

Third, following the leads of Hasan and Stonebanks, I encourage interested adherents to say the requisite blessing after reading any direct reference to God or Prophet Muhammad.[8] I use various names to signify God, including The Creator and The Divine. Those Names will be represented by the capitalization of both the name and its accompanying article (e.g., The Divine). I try to avoid gendering God, as The Creator of the universe defies our limited confines of sex and gender. Where gendering seems unavoidable, I use *he/she/they* as a way to both trouble and broaden our assumptions about gender and God. I also note that, as a convert, I was neither raised within or ascribe to a particular Muslim order; rather, I work to align my religious practice most closely with my personal readings of the Qur'an, various teachings on the Qur'anic text, and inspirations that emerge from prayer and meditation practice. Because of this, my approach to the Qur'an, as well as the exclusion of other important aspects of the mainstream Islamic knowledge base (such as discussions of the Sunnah and quotations of well-known hadith), may differ from the approach of my brothers and sisters in the faith. Rather than excuse these differences, I hope that they remind us of the depth and breadth of Islamic thought and practices. We are in the same *ummah*, but we understand and approach aspects of our religion in different ways. That is okay.

Finally, I hope that this article offers one of many ways to consider, understand, and resist White supremacy; I neither posit nor imply that it is the only way. In the spirit of Islamic traditions that honor the variety of paths humanity takes to get to Truth, may this article serve as one helpful step along a world full of paths.

White Supremacy

Within the past five hundred years, *Black* has come to define those in the global socio-economic hierarchy whose bodies and resources are permanently and perpetually at the disposal of Whites (whose bodies and resources are, paradoxically, at no one's disposal but their own). While Blackness as the antithesis of the norm makes it what Wynter calls a "liminal category," and while it is often included in discussions of Whiteness as the opposing identity (as will be done here, intermittently), the concept of Whiteness itself is the primary focus here.[9]

In the current imperialist/colonial era, Whites' representing their experiences as "normal" is not only the foundation for White supremacy, but makes all non-Whites the perpetual "other." This delineation between White and non-White has not always existed, however, and has been a developing concept throughout the Western colonial era. In the case of the area that came to be called the United States, Africans and people of African descent did not initially represent only an enslaved and enslaveable caste. While 100 enslaved people from Africa were brought by Spanish colonials to present-day Virginia in 1526, Africans and African-descended people were also a substantial portion of the then-British colony's indentured servant population in the region in the early seventeenth century—a time when, as Steven Martinot contends, the English had not "racialized the Africans, as evidenced by the fact that they had not racialized themselves."[10] As late as 1651, these Africans shared social standing with British indentured servants and laborers, and were awarded stolen Indigenous land and freedom from indenture after a specific term of

8. Christopher Darius Stonebanks, "An Islamic Perspective on Knowledge, Knowing, and Methodolgy," *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005), 294. Here, Stonebanks quotes Hasan (2005).

9. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System," 363.

10. John Rickford and Russell Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 130-131; Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 45.

service.[11] As the growth of labor-intensive cash crops such as rice, cotton, and tobacco began to increase, so did the growth of the enslavement industry, especially in the southern British colonies, where small African and African-descended populations doubled and continued to grow. By 1750, African-descended people made up 27%, 31%, and 44% of the populations of North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia, respectively; by the late eighteenth century, African-descended peoples outnumbered British-descended in South Carolina and Georgia.[12] While European indentured servants were still present, the influx of African-descended enslaved people shifted the legal and social practices in the colonies, where older laws regulating the enslaved were more regularly enforced. Thus, while there were laws distinguishing the rights of the African-descended Blacks and British-descended Whites as early as 1639 (including the law of "lifetime service" in Virginia), the letter and adherence to these laws hit a violent uptick in the early 1700s.[13]

As they were legally and socially establishing who Blacks could and could not be, the British-descended colonists were also developing what Whiteness was and was not. While Martinot notes that the 1662 act "Negro Women's Children to Serve According to the Condition of the Mother" was what "marked the beginning of a process of social differentiation between the English and the Africans," he also notes that this act did not make an immediate difference in the lives of the European and African indentured servants, who together worked under and resisted the oppressions of their masters.[14] Martinot echoes others that marked Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 as the beginning of a more widely economically- and socially-influencing racialization within the colonies. It was then that narratives describing African-descended peoples as dangerous, rebellious, and in need of White control encouraged impoverished, European-descended people to join the richer colonists in their domination over the Black population for financial gain.[15] Martinot notes that this "emergence of whiteness" created a new identity and consciousness for the colonials: "[w]ith the birth of slavery, the English felt secure; with the birth of racialization, they could feel 'civilized' and genteel even about having barbarically imposed themselves on the Africans."[16] In the centuries that followed and with the creation of the United States, immigrants from various European nations, not initially understood as White, were able to gain "U.S. cultural membership (as white)" as they performed "acts of 'nativism,'" and abandoned "the ethnic cohesion that attended their 'alienation.'"[17] Martinot notes that this performance often meant at least a "distancing" of the self from Black people, if not more overt expressions of anti-Black racism.[18] In this way, White supremacy was established and perpetuated through the United States' colonial beginnings and its history as a nation.

While understanding Africans as barely human was a vital concept in the perpetuation of African enslavement in the United States (an institution that Clyde Woods characterized as the

11. Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*. 131. Steve Martinot presents an interesting discussion about the beginnings of the shift of the English indentured servant away from the caste of servitude and the African into perpetual servitude with the 1662 act "Negro Women's Children to Serve According to the Condition of the Mother," which negated the English tradition of a child's social status being based on his/her father and set the stage for the future of "slave breeding." See Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness*, 40.

12. Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*, 134.

13. Ibid.,135.

14. Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness*, 41.

15. Ibid., 50.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 136.

18. Ibid.

ultimate expression of capitalism[19]), White supremacy has shifted in recent years: in this post-Civil Rights era, where public and explicit racist dialogue tends to be (though is not always) silenced, Whites are able to take full advantage of the racial hierarchy without acknowledging it. Such distancing and taking advantage applies to academic situations, as well, as they incorporate the normalcy of Whiteness into knowledge-dissemination institutions.

David Newman discusses how White supremacy and the normalcy that undergirds it seem to take on humble, self-deprecating tones within the academic environment, particularly as they apply to the White gaze. Each year, Newman asks his group of mostly White, mostly wealthy students to describe the "typical" Latino, Black, and Asian family, and the group easily complies. When he asks them to describe a typical White family, however, the discussion invariably "grinds to a screeching halt." Once students eventually assert that White families are "all different" and that "[t]here's no way you can come up with common traits" for them, Newman notes that his point has been made. Newman acknowledges that, "when we think of our own group…we're more inclined to highlight or at least pay heed to the diversity of individuals." Whiteness, however, is in the peculiar position of dominance in our society. Because of this,

> White families are simply "families." In the absence of a modifying racial or ethnic adjective, they're the default option. White families are assumed to be ordinary and regular. Consequently, they need no explaining, no special chapter devoted to their striking differences…In a racially imbalanced society like ours, whiteness, in general, is the yardstick against which "non-white" racial groups are evaluated. [20]

As Newman points out, despite a seemingly reverent, even celebratory discussion of how interesting, moving, or (dare I say it?) exotic some non-White groups/people may be, the problem still remains: this reverence, this celebration turns certain humans into objects of observation, full of problems to be explained by the observers, full of solutions to be expropriated by them. These objects do not have a frame of reference, a perspective, or a way of knowing that is their own. Indeed, they exist for the sake of the Whites, and what's an object of observation worth without the observer? While Newman's example seems relatively innocuous, this objectification has had devastating consequences throughout the history of Western modern education. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, discusses the ways that this objectification has been instrumental in the area of Western academic research, which, from its start, has subjected marginalized people around the world to various levels of outrageous intrusions—from physically devastating medical experimentation to outright theft of homes, objects, and bodies.[21] These instances of torture and theft, however, were instead called "research," with the researchers taking the role of innocent, objective observer.

This ability to take advantage while remaining ignorant of that advantage is one of the hallmarks of White supremacy. Robert Jensen defines the near-invisibility of Whiteness to Whites themselves as part of White privilege—the privilege to ignore the reality of a White-supremacist society when it makes Whites uncomfortable, to rationalize why this supremacy is not really so

19. See Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998).

20. David Newman, *Identities and Inequalities: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (Boston: McGraw Hill: 2007), 14, 15, 16.

21. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

bad, to deny one's own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected.[22] Both the privilege and normalcy accorded to Whiteness are indicators that this era of imperialism/colonialism has also been one of White supremacy.

Jensen defines a White supremacist society as one "whose founding is based in an ideology of the inherent superiority of white Europeans over non-whites, an ideology that was used to justify the crimes against indigenous people and Africans that created the [United States]."[23] Like Wynter, Charles Mills notes that such superiority ideologies are not necessarily abnormal; indeed, societies "structured by relations of domination and subordination" will feature "conceptual apparatus…shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s)."[24] This ideology, however, often leads to the ruling group's tendency to "find the confirmation" for their supremacy "whether it is there or not."[25] This ability to find confirmation of supremacy where there is none has important implications for the Western schooling systems, including K-12 schools and the academy, from what courses are offered in classrooms to how non-White students are perceived and treated.

H. Alexander Welcome notes that White ontology establishes what is and is not an acceptable mode of being, and that Blackness is understood as inherently abnormal in the ways it deviates from Whiteness.[26] In addition to Welcome's analysis, Owen Dwyer and John Paul Jones assert that White worldview assumes a separation between Whites and non-Whites (and, more specifically, between Whites and Blacks people) in terms of physical space, as well as social identity and position. Both types of "distance" allow Whites to "refus[e] the trace" that will implicate the historical and current injustices that are required in order for Whiteness to exist.[27] This distance encourages what Mills calls the "management of memory," which allows Whites simply not to know or acknowledge (through what Mills has called "White ignorance") the "crucial facts" that would trouble the concept of White supremacy.[28] Such ignorance becomes part of the "social memory," which is "then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, and monuments."[29] Meanwhile, the relegation of non-Whites by Whites to areas *away* from Whites—physically and psychologically—encourages White gaze and judgment[30]:

> [W]hiteness as an opaque façade that is at once apparent but whose depth is inscrutable—lest its true guilt be revealed. Likewise, whiteness does not represent its racialized Other as invisible but rather holds it in a state of transparent obviousness…These rationales for

22. Robert Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005), 2.

23. Ibid., 3-4.

24. Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 25.

25. Ibid.

26. For more discussion on blackness as abnormality, see Gagne, "On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines"; King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System"; and Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

27. Owen J. Dwyer and John Paul Jones III, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology," *Social & Cultural Geography* 1, 2000: 213.

28. Mills, "White Ignorance," 28.

29. Ibid., 29.

30. Here, White gaze is the use of White ontological and epistemological understandings to see, understand, and respond to the world, while not acknowledging that these standpoints are in use. See Dwyer and Jones, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology" for an extended discussion of examples of the White gaze.

> white privilege culminate in the representation of the white center as opaque and unknowable and, ultimately, non-existent, while the racialized margins are presented as transparently obvious and "debased"—and thus wholly responsible for their conditions. [31]

This discussion of White normalcy and the White gaze also applies to the academy. Such a gaze allows, for example, researching the practices of another group, making its members visible while maintaining one's own invisibility, all under the guise of objectivity. This objectivity (read: White distance) in academia—what Welcome calls "the 'white is right' perspective"—uses White experience as "the backing for the construction of the warrant/rules that are employed as to evaluate black experiences," thus pathologizing the experiences of non-Whites when they do not "conform to the parameters of white methods of navigating the social world."[32] Welcome addresses DuBois' important question of "How does it feel to be a problem?" by defining "problems" as "any deviations from the 'typical' white experience that do not produce the benefits that are associated with the relevant white mode of behavior."[33] When non-White groups deviate from the White norm but experience White-normed success, they are not seen as problematic. Non-White deviators that do not experience White-typified success, however, become problems, particularly in educational institutions and educational research; after all, if success is "normal," why can't these "problem people" be successful? Welcome discusses this further: "This process occurs because the cause of the status of whites is falsely attributed to the white methods of navigating the social world, while the paramount influence of the privilege and power of whiteness are obscured."[34]

A closer look at White supremacy's history in the United States, from its conceptualization to its present-day obscuring, reveals a pattern of thought and action that has long-been discussed in the Islamic framework. I posit that this pattern is an example of *shirk*.

Shirk

Abdel Haleem notes that *shirk*, which can be translated as "partnership" is "the sharing of several gods in the creation and government of the universe."[35] While many associate this definition with idolatry in the sense of worshiping man-made statues or images, *shirk*'s definition has also been connected to a life-consuming attention to wealth or another living being.[36] Qur'anist scholar Edip Yuksel even extends the definition of *shirk* to many Muslims' attribution of Christ-like status to the Prophet Muhammad, noting that "those who acknowledge the Quran do not favor one messenger over another (2:285), since all the messengers belong to the same community."[37] While the potential object of *shirk* may be debated, Yuksel notes three aspects of it that are useful here: (1) the attribution of The Creator's power to humans; (2) humans' instituting prohibitions

31. Dwyer and Jones, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology," 215.

32. H. Alexander Welcome, "'White is Right': The Utilization of an Improper Ontological Perspective in Analyses of Black Experiences," *Journal of African American Studies* 8, 2004:61, 62.

33. Ibid., 62.

34. Ibid.

35. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, xviii.

36. Yuksel references the following verses when discussing these objects of *shirk*: 7:90; 9:31; and 18:42. *Qur'an: A Reformist Translation,* trans. Yuksel, al-Shaiban, and Schulte-Nafeh. Please note that references to Qur'anic verses will be parenthetical in the body of this article, but will appear without parentheses in the footnotes.

37. *Qur'an: A Reformist Translation,* trans. Yuksel, al-Shaiban, and Schulte-Nafeh, 63, 89.

and their subsequent attribution of those prohibitions to The Creator; and, (3) human denial of *shirk* when it is evidently being committed.[38]

The Qur'an discusses "the polytheists" who are untruthful about their shirk, who argue against the truth of God's messengers, and avoid the truth while encouraging others to do the same (6:22-26). One translation notes that "[e]ven if they [the polytheists] saw every sign [of God's message] they would not believe in them," and that "they ruin no one but themselves, though they fail to realize this" (6:25, 26). Others attribute their *shirk* to the worship practices of their forefathers (6:148; 16:35) or as a way to get closer to The Creator (39:3), while others employ *shirk* to gain strength (19:81). Some say that God actually wills their *shirk* and has historically done so (6:148), while others knowingly tell lies about The Divine Will (3:78; 10:60). While not an exhaustive list of Qur'anic verses connected to the concept of *shirk*, these verses give a general idea of the concept of *shirk* and, perhaps most importantly for this article, its effects. The Qur'an extensively discusses, first, the willful, then the seemingly irreversible ignorance of those who commit *shirk*, so that offenders are eventually unable to access the truth, even if they try. It discusses ungrateful people living on lands and in communities that they did not cultivate or build, and how they benefit from others' labor. It discusses God's provision of messengers to different groups around the world, how reminders of the Oneness of God have come in different languages and in different regions throughout human history, and how those reminders have gone ignored.

While *shirk* could look like people bowing down before a wooden or stone statue, the above examples show that it is not limited to such actions. Rather, *shirk* is the act of giving anything else the attention and respect only due to The All-Knowing and All-Powerful Creator. To commit *shirk*, in the Qur'anic sense, means denying our basic humanity—indeed, it means denying the very purpose of our lives, which is living in the constant remembrance of the Oneness and Supremacy of God. Committing *shirk*, denying our purpose as humans, means that we get things confused: we think we have the power (i.e., the right) to do things that we should not; we create systems of abstraction and discourse to justify our actions, as well as mythologies and histories to establish them; then, we refuse to admit that we have gotten anything confused at all. We tell ourselves and our children that this is the way it always has been, and the way it always will be. We forget that our assertions are not true, though we vehemently defend them.

I use the personal plural pronoun here because, despite the subject of this article, committing *shirk* is not a White problem; rather, the Qur'an tells us is it a human problem, rooted in pride, and that this pride first emerged from the Qur'anic character Iblis:

> Your Lord said to the angels, "I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him." The angels all bowed down together, but not Iblis, who was too proud. He became a rebel. God said, "Iblis, what prevents you from bowing down to the man I have made with My own hands? Are you too high and mighty?" Iblis said, "I am better than him: You made me from fire, and him from clay" (38:71-76).[39]

Iblis' subsequent response to The Creator's anger was to swear that he would "tempt all" except God's "chosen servants" (38:82-83), meaning that nearly all of humanity would struggle with pride, or, in other words, we would struggle with the idea that The Creator is Supreme—at all times, and in all ways. Randolph Ware speaks of this story as the first example of racism, since

38. Ibid., 131, 135.
39. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, 458.

the Qur'anic character Iblis expressed his superiority over a man by arguing that he was made of better stuff.[40] While I do not disagree with Ware, I want to extend his example: in this story, the Qur'anic character Iblis exemplified the pride involved when human beings think they are superior to each other for any reason, including (though not limited to) race. This pride causes us to consider ourselves something we are not—namely, inherently better than others—which, in turn, causes us to participate in systemic racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

While clearly based on an Islamic framework, the concepts discussed here also extend to contexts not often perceived as religiously connected. Many Muslims read the stories in the Qur'an literally—that non-believers will suffer a fiery afterlife, that angels and demons are real and among us, that a physical paradise awaits the believers. While I have no opinion about the validity of this type of literal reading, I do believe that the Qur'anic text can help us understand the U.S. American sociocultural context. While the previous section addressed the history of U.S. American White supremacy, it, like most mainstream and academic historical discussions, does not address the spiritual influences of past events or their current spiritual implications, causing us to misunderstand the causes and effects what has occurred in our society. If we reconsider history of U.S American White supremacy within an Islamic framework, we can observe clear similarities.

In alignment with the aforementioned Qur'anic verses about *shirk*, history of White supremacy features the disbelief and willful ignorance regarding the existence and effects of supremacy (again, see 6:22-26). Religion has been used in myriad ways to justify, excuse, and further the project of White supremacy (see 39:3), as has been the perpetuation of family/community traditions and history-creation (6:148; 16:35). Others have intentionally lied or obscured the truth in the name of White supremacy, from the individual to institutional levels (3:78; 10:60), and others, of course, recognize the power and privilege attendant to White supremacy, and will do whatever they can to maintain it (19:81). U.S. White supremacy was instituted in order to establish control over others' lands, steal others' resources, and kidnap and use others' bodies. White America's refusal to honestly and completely recognize and address White supremacy often defies reason, as it kills anti-supremacy messengers then posthumously extols their virtues. It is a baffling, troubled society that prefers its heroes dead, but such societies are not new to mankind; indeed, while we lament White supremacy in this country, we should be heartened to know that a framework for addressing such ideologies has been in place for over 1,400 years. We just need to pay attention to it.

In his seminar "White Supremacy—The Beginnings of Modern Day Shirk?," Sherman Jackson connects the ideas of the Islamic concept to the global phenomenon of White supremacy. While he notes some of my aforementioned points about White supremacy, such as the positioning of Whiteness as normalcy, he also quite significantly asserts that White supremacy is not an "automatic tendency that runs through the blood of White people."[41] Instead, Jackson says that White supremacy is "not about White people. It's about ideas."[42]

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40. Ware mentions this story in various talks. For more on Ware's discussions on Islam in the West African and Black American contexts, see his presentations "The Qur'an in Chains," "Principled Pacifism in Islamic West Africa," "Key Lessons From the History of Islam in West Africa," and "Rethinking Islam in West Africa: The Walking Qur'an." Also see *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

41. Sherman Jackson, "White Supremacy—The Beginnings of Modern Day Shirk?" (presentation, Lamppost Productions, March 1, 2017).

42. Ibid.

This is an important assertion for present-day considerations of White supremacy, which tends to be Jackson's focus here. The concept of an idea-based White supremacy (rather than idea- and body-based White supremacy more dominant in the past[43]) means that those who believe in and enact White supremacist ideas do not have to be White themselves; indeed, Jackson argues that the modernity simply represents the era in which White supremacy has become a global phenomenon, which would have been impossible without the "buy-in" of non-White peoples. This concept of "buy-in" can be troubled, of course. Jackson presents this "buy-in" as if there has always been the option of accepting any other ideology instead of a White supremacist one in this country, and he seems to ignore that White supremacy has long been the default worldview based on the often-violently oppressive White supremacist state (or, before the state was formally established, state-makers) and its requisite control of all validated means of knowledge creation and transmission. While Wynter similarly discusses the modernity as the era of European global dominance, she also notes that it was fueled by a Church-inspired, Enlightenment-age dichotomy that replaced the previous poles of heaven and earth, sacred and profane, God and man with the Old World and New, European and non-European, (White) Man and Other.[44]

While "buy-in" may not be the best phrasing for describing why non-Whites may have been forced to take on (or at least perform) White-supremacist ideals in the past, Jackson's discussion of the effect of White normalization is important here. Many scholars, including those referenced in this article, have long discussed the power of representations of White normalcy. Jackson asserts, however, that it is the establishment of Whiteness as *normal*—rather than *superior*—that has given White supremacy its true power.

Jackson calls all humans, regardless of race, "contingent beings."[45] Being "contingent" means that we are not self-sufficient beings, exemplified by the fact that we have no control over when our lives begin or end. One of our most deep-seeded understandings is that we are contingent beings, whether we like it or not. The primacy of this understanding is evident: in very first surah revealed to Prophet Muhammad, God harshly critiques those humans who imagine some sense of non-contingency:

> [God] created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know. But man exceeds all founds when he thinks he is self-sufficient: [Prophet], all will return to your Lord. (96:2-8)[46]

Jackson further notes that this state of contingence is not only a biological one, but is psychological and emotional as well. We cannot even understand ourselves as individuals without the conformation of other "human subjectivities."[47] Jackson notes that, in the Islamic context, our need for outside validation exists because we are designed to need and worship God. Indeed, our entire self-worth is based on events outside of ourselves, and we cannot help it. As contingent beings, it's just how we're made. Further, Jackson asserts that the historic examples of idolatry—from a passing acknowledgement to a fervent devotion to physical objects, images, or representations—

43. While non-Whites still suffer harm within the White supremacist context, this sort of harm is qualitatively different from the harm of the past in this country. This is primarily because, in the past, it did not matter if you accepted the idea of White supremacy or not; your body would immediately suffer punishment if you did not at least pretend you accepted it.

44. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality."

45. Jackson, "White Supremacy."

46. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, 598.

47. Jackson, "White Supremacy."

were not based on ancient people's thinking that, say, a wooden statue could guarantee rainfall or cure an illness. Rather, idolatry was a way for contingent beings to manage their anxiety about their own contingency. And if, as Jackson cites the Prophet Muhammad, the best descriptors for humans are "worker/toiler" and "anxious," then much of human existence is likely centered on doing things to alleviate the insecurity inspired by our own contingency.[48]

In the Islamic context, then, humans have a basic sense of insecurity. Jackson notes that this is understood even in the "secular" world, where politicians and advertisers exploit the basic sense of human insecurity as a matter of course, and to much success.[49] Jackson further contends that the same insecurity has led White and non-White peoples alike to accept and internalize White supremacy: humans' need to feel accepted and secure makes us more likely to aspire toward whatever is perceived as "normal," rather than what is seen as "superior" (a sense of superiority makes cohesion and fitting in more difficult). While non-Whites living in the early modern era had little choice about whether they could openly reject White dominance, there is, relatively speaking, more choice for most of us today. So why does it feel so difficult to challenge and reject White supremacy—both for Whites that gain relatively little benefit in the White supremacist systems in which they find themselves, and for non-White people in general? It may have to do with the fact that, though we are clear that White supremacist systems are, at best, of little benefit to us and, at worst, actively harm us, they provide a semblance of security. At the risk of using a confusing pun, White supremacy is the devil we know: an identifiable nemesis, an ever-present thing to critique or rail against, a handy way to ignore the direness of our conditions. Within the White supremacist context, we may not be happy, and we may not be healthy, but we are as secure in our unhappiness and unhealthiness. What would the world *really* be like without White dominance? In truth, we have no idea, and that lack of knowledge, that insecurity, is frightening.

Jackson notes that, because we are contingent beings, humans will work for, attend to, fixate upon—indeed, worship—whatever we believe will bring us the security that we seek, and that tendency to worship anything that feels secure has led to a "mismanagement of how the human condition is supposed to be managed."[50] A major example of this mismanagement is the dominance of the White ideal in our lives. The only way to properly "manage" our anxious, ever-seeking condition is to worship (work for, attend to, fixate upon) The Creator, as that is The Only One that can give us purpose and hope within our own contingency. Other created, contingent things (i.e., everything else besides God) cannot do it—from tiny wooden statues to the grandest of ideologies. Submission (the very definition of the word *Islam*) to The Creator is the only thing that can bring peace to us created beings. I believe that the Islamic understanding of peace from submission to God has interesting implications for both religious and non-religious people interested in resisting White supremacy.

48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.

The New Ummah

Jackson closes his lecture with questions to help us consider White supremacy and *shirk*:

1. What value do we attach to the White West's validation?[51]
2. Whatever the valuation we ascribe to White Western validation, what price are we willing to pay for it?
3. To what extent will we allow the validation of the White West to serve as a substitute for validation that we should be seeking through connection with The Creator?

While Jackson invites us to consider our completely natural needs for outside validation and security using the above questions, he cautions against his assertions being understood as anti-White, anti-Western, or anti-non-Muslim, as all Western ideas are not inherently antithetical to Islamic concepts, and there are numerous White people that are actively working against White supremacy. I will also add here that there are many, many Muslims that find ourselves living at various intersections of Western Christian-influenced and Islamic worldviews. Jackson and others have also extensively discussed the White supremacy and anti-Black racism rampant in the so-called Muslim world, noting that non-White Muslims can more vehemently protect White supremacist ideals than many White people ever would nowadays, regardless of their religious, national, or ethnic backgrounds.

A consideration of the above questions, in conjunction with the reminder that current White supremacy is an *idea* issue rather than a *body* issue, brings us back to an Islamic framework. To consider solutions we are going to move from a discussion of *shirk* to take a closer look at the Islamic idea of *ummah*.

As noted at the beginning of this article, Wynter encourages all those interested in undoing White supremacy to push our ideas of humanity past any relation (or lack thereof) to the Western White normed ideal to understanding humanity as "a unit," based on our own truths about what it means to be human, and using the Islamic concept of global religious community, the *ummah*, as an example.[52] Elsewhere, she notes that this definition of humanness should extend to include all of those who experience oppression and marginalization within White supremacist systems.[53] An extensive portion of this article directly addresses aspects of Islamic thought that take certain things for granted, like an assumption of The Existence and Oneness of God, and the importance of using Islamic scholarship and the Qur'anic text to address societal ills. However, suggestions like Wynter's represent the true purpose of this article: to recognize some of the ways that Islamic frameworks (and, as I discuss elsewhere, other marginalized frameworks) can address the deleterious effects of Western White supremacy.

Though I am a Muslim, I would not tell anyone that they must adhere to a specific religious practice in order to resist White supremacy. However, I do believe that those of us interested in undoing supremacy should recognize the value of marginalized frameworks as an important first step. Further, these frameworks often offer clues and perspectives about oppression and resistance that way not appear elsewhere. Thus, whether the reader believes that an actual divine being

51. Jackson notes that there may be a *pragmatic/tactical value* in our consideration of White validation, and there is also what Jackson calls a *real valuation* of Western validation, where we do not feel whole or valued unless we are considered valuable by Western standards.

52. Thomas and Wynter, "Fanon, 'the Man,' Humanism and 'Consciousness,'" 22.

53. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System."

directly instructed humans against idolatry in all of its forms, or that this discussion of The Creator and *shirk* would be better understood as a metaphor for the destructive effects of pride and insecurity, a consideration of White supremacy from the Islamic context provides a way of evaluating and rejecting White supremacy in the myriad ways we encounter it, whether in our everyday lives or in our hearts.

The Islamic context further provides a more specific roadmap for resisting the *shirk* of White supremacy. If we recognize ourselves for what we truly are—insecure, contingent creations, no one any more capable than the other of changing the ebb and flow of life—perhaps we can move from structures that thrive on and exploit our contingent state through the use of false idols like White supremacy, and instead validate our shared existence as very small beings in a very big universe—a universe which we cannot control and about which we know so little. In other words, the Islamic framework can help us shift from the pervasive, sometimes invisible *shirk* of White supremacy to the conceptualization of an *ummah* whose shared "religion" is the very brief (relative to other created things, like, say, bristlecone pine trees or bowhead whales) experience of being human together. While I, of course, use the word religion very lightly in the previous sentence, our considering ourselves as evolutionarily unlikely, living, breathing, laughing, loving clumps of atoms and molecules and cells—indeed, mounds of elements that can *think*—may encourage us to resist any ideology that foolishly and dangerously assumes that one clump of cells is somehow better than another clump.

This brings me to our final Islamic concept, one that is discussed extensively on news media and in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts alike: the *jihad*. As opposed to other treatments of this oft-evoked word, Jackson describes what he believes is the "real" *jihad*: freeing ourselves from the "false god" of White supremacy. Jackson asserts that this *jihad* is

> not for the purpose of conquering the world. It is for the purpose of saving world from false gods and false regimes of validation that can never deliver humanity to the ultimate peace and serenity that men and women were naturally created to seek.[54]

While speaking from the standpoint of a religious adherent, Jackson's call is significant for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Though there are relatively few present-day examples of people who worship physical images or representations of deities, the conceptualization of Whiteness and adherence to a White standard affects nearly every aspect of our lives and represents the primary thing to which many of us strive. It is difficult for us to imagine the procurement and dissemination of knowledge, our relationship with the environment, our work and home lives, our beauty standards, and countless other things outside of the Western White standard. Even those of us that claim to fight against it have a hard time imagining or attempting life too far outside of it, and our efforts of resistance tend to fall safely within what is deemed allowable (and even predictable and/or encouraged) by the dominant system.[55]

When Jackson exhorts us to "rescue humanity from the false regimes of validation," he is encouraging us to work to free ourselves as well as each other. In an age where there are no longer golden calves on the way from Mount Sinai or hundreds of silent statues around the Kaaba, White supremacy is the idol that the religious and non-religious alike must resist and dismantle. In its place, may we work to create a world that validates each of us in our full humanity, as finite, unexpected sparks of life that are quickly here and too soon gone. Whether we think it took a few

54. Jackson, "White Supremacy."

55. Writing this article is an example of an 'acceptable' form of resistance.

days or hundreds of thousands of years to come to this moment of shared humanness, may we never lose sight of the miracles of creation that we are.

Education

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I am hesitant to offer specific instructions incorporating spiritual/religious framework knowledge into academic research practice and schooling curricula, as this article addresses larger themes of how we may understand our world and each other. These new understandings should then, in turn, be shaped to best fit the immediate environment in which the educator or researcher finds him/her/themselves.

That said, it is important that those of us interested in the various forms of education—whether K-12 schooling, higher education, or educational research—come to terms with our positions as the gatekeepers of knowledge in what are White supremacist institutions. The fact that our schools and universities are White supremacist institutions is not particularly pernicious: indeed, institutions that support and are supported by a particular state will be informed by and inform the ideologies of that state. Those of us interested in dismantling White supremacy may feel the tension of working in such institutions. While I would not venture to suggest long-term options for the many people that may find themselves living this tension, I have a few suggestions for these educators and researchers in the immediate future:

- **Be humble.** First, it is important that those of us interested in effecting change do so with an ethic of humility and to remember that, as I have noted elsewhere, "[w]e will get some of it right, but most of it wrong."[56] We will not be able to perfectly execute every moment as we venture into a world unknown to us, that is, a world without White supremacy. And that is okay. Let's be gentle with ourselves, but not so gentle that we avoid the important task that is ahead of us. Further, if we are part of dominant groups whose members have historically marginalized others, we must do the additional work of understanding the effect that our group's existence has had on the marginalized, and how we will enact the next three suggestions based on those new understandings.

- **Question everything**. We must question the information that we have received as fact, whether in our area(s) of expertise, about our institution, and about our society. While there is much that we take for granted in order to live our daily lives, man-made things tend to be created for specific purposes and to benefit specific people. Who benefits from the knowledge that we educators and researchers acquire and share? Does this information shore up a White supremacist framework? Why do our institutions exist in their current capacity? Who is benefitted by these institutions? And, further, who is being harmed? What should we do about it?

- **Seek new knowledges**. There is a wealth of information available to us, and, thanks to the internet, much of it is accessible. We must take the time to explore knowledge systems and frameworks that are unfamiliar to us. We should also note that this exploration primarily involves *independent* research, rather than a dependence on

56. Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson and Jennifer Esposito, "Using Others in the Nicest Way Possible: On Colonial and Academic Practice(s), and an Ethic of Humility," *Qualitative Inquiry.* (First published: Dec. 4, 2017).

marginalized people to "teach" us what we want to know. We must consider what stories our knowledge systems leave out and intentionally seek them out. We should learn from them and share your exploration with others, particularly if we work with students.

- **Find the metaphor**. Even if a new knowledge system or framework doesn't feel valuable to us, we can consider the framework's broader lessons about the world. What does this framework tell us about being human? About community? About the environment? About thought? How can these new understandings enhance (but not necessarily replace) our own? How can we gain enhancement without taking, encroaching, or appropriating? How can these lessons be incorporated in our teaching practices? In our research practices?

- **Stay open**. As we are on this journey to consider a world past White supremacy, we are not alone. Fellow travelers on this journey may not look or talk like us, but we all have a need for a healthy existence beyond one that exploits our natural insecurities to benefit a select few (who may not ever experience much benefit anyway). In the same way that we may find the metaphors in their frameworks, consider ways that we can best do the work of resisting White supremacy in our day-to-day life and assist others on their journeys. This openness may feel especially intimidating to those of us in education, as we tend to be the ones that were "schooled" quite well, and enjoy following the rules. As we continue to question everything, however, we must also question our hesitance to resist White supremacy in our classrooms and in our research. We must stay open to the possibility of an existence that will benefit us all, and to the possibility that we can reaching such an existence together.

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Meeting the Needs of Muslim Learners in U.S. Classrooms

Parisa Meymand

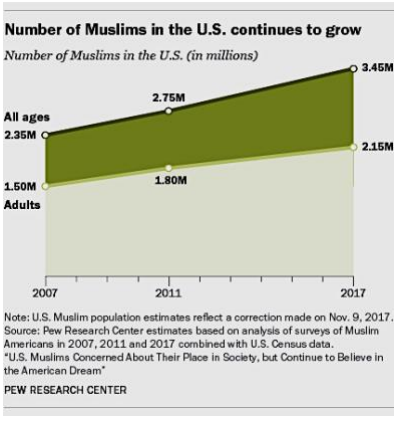
Abstract

Muslims in the United States make up a large, growing population from varied national backgrounds and ethnicities, displaying, naturally, numerous differences both internally and with respect to the larger American culture. Despite the increasing Muslim population, school practices often do not meet their educational needs. This article offers a new framework of Critical Southwest Asian Studies to address the ingrained fear of Southwest Asians among Americans that is often present in the media and politics and seeks richer, fuller narratives of those from the region. Many schools do not address Muslim needs - by not acknowledging student differences in race, religion and ethnicity, by not offering foreign language courses that represent the region, and by not helping to promote counter narratives of Islam. Suggestions for all teachers are offered to help better meet the needs of Muslim learners in our pluralistic society.

Keywords: *Muslim learners; Islamophobia and schools; Muslim student identity; culturally sustaining pedagogy; critical theory*

Introduction

With our increasingly diverse population, U.S. schools are filled with multiethnic students who bring their cultural backgrounds with them to the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This article focuses on how our schools typically do not meet the educational needs of Muslim students and suggests changes to address these shortcomings. These practices, such as the lack of relevant language instruction and curriculum issues, are discussed in this article. I offer a theory to frame the discussion and to address these problems, as well as an improved teaching tool to implement in the classroom. The article concludes with strategies for teachers to better meet the needs of Muslim students.



The need to understand Muslim culture and Muslim students is increasing: there are currently 3.45 Muslims immigrants in the United States, and the Muslim population is predicted to double by 2050 (Mohamed, 2018). Despite this fact, "the Muslim population often appears invisible and misunderstood in American society" (Callaway, 2010, p. 217). This invisibility intersects with the educational experiences of Muslim students, as their Muslim identity does not cease to exist when they walk into school settings. Many Muslims are also impacted by an increase in Islamophobia, a dislike or distrust of Muslims, particularly heightened since 9/11 (Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011; Eraqi, 2015). In the Post-9/11 era, the United States has witnessed an increase in Islamophobia, heightened by conflicts in Southwest Asia and by terrorist

attacks both in the United States and abroad, as some Americans associate Muslims with violence and terrorism. The rise of hate crimes, post-9/11, is one illustration of how increasingly difficult life is for many American Muslims. Politicians also play a role in continuing this negative portrayal of Southwest Asians. On January 29, 2002, during George W. Bush's State of the Union address, he categorized Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil," along with Iraq and North Korea. Such a statement provides little context besides reifying an "Us versus Them" (Said, 1978; Ladson-Billings, 2005) paradigm. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump proposed a ban on all Muslims coming to America (Gökarıksel, 2017), which is now partially implemented despite many legal challenges.

Muslims in the United States make up a large, growing population from varied national backgrounds and ethnicities, displaying, naturally, numerous differences both internally and with respect to the larger American culture. Muslims differ in terms of "their educational levels, occupations, socioeconomic backgrounds as well as geographical origins" (Callaway, 2010, p.218). Muslims also practice different forms of Islam. With the exception of Pakistanis, studies show the longer Muslims live in the United States, the more likely they are to want a more moderate or flexible interpretation of Islamic laws (Callaway, 2010). The diversity of Muslims makes "Islamic home life" difficult to capture. While differences exist, some characteristics of Islamic culture can be delineated: a patriarchal society, a strong focus on the family, traditional gender roles in favor of men, a high value on education, and modesty, particularly in women (Greenberg & Sagiv-Reiss, 2013).

It follows that Muslim students are diverse. Public schools in the United States are secular, leading Muslim students to navigate the complexities and difficulties of a dual identity—being both Muslim and American (Sarroub, 2005). Additionally, many Muslims feel the pressure to assimilate into American culture (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003). Given this tension between home and school life, the question becomes, how can schools and teachers better integrate strategies to educate Islamic students in the United States while also allowing them to retain their culture? Considering past and present hostilities towards Muslim people from Southwest Asia, it is important to examine how they are portrayed in classroom materials—and if this portrayal varies depending on the greater context of global events. Schools have both a unique opportunity and an inherent responsibility to help students embrace both worlds, rather than forcing students in one direction. I argue that meeting the needs of Muslim students in our schools is best achieved through the lens of Critical Southwest Asian Studies and teachers' use of *culturally sustained pedagogy*.

Critical SWAsian Theory: Power and Knowledge

I have constructed a Critical SWAsian Studies (CSS) framework that allows for analysis centered on the people and cultures of Southwest Asia. The region of Southwest Asia includes countries outlined on the map in Figure 2. Southwest Asia comprises a huge area of more than a dozen countries, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan (See map on next page), but the varied peoples of the region are often painted with a broad brush and viewed as one.

CSS draws it roots from *critical race theory*, as it addresses inequalities presented from the dominant narrative and aims to promote change (Zagumny & Richey, 2013). Three main tenets comprise critical race theory: ingrained racism, the importance of offering a counter-narrative, and interest convergence (Milner, 2007). The notion of ingrained racism centers on how deep-rooted racism develops, so that it becomes normalized. Additionally, people in society make up the educational system, and therefore our system is also entrenched in issues of racism. The second tenet of a counter-narrative is essential as a way to generate new knowledge from the dominant discourse. Individual and community voice are essential to critical race theory as people name their own realities that are often dismissed by society (Milner, 2007). The third tenet, of converging interests, states that until the interests of blacks converge with the interests of whites, racial equality will not be achieved (hooks, 1994). CSS acknowledges, in somewhat similar terms, the ingrained fear Americans have of Southwest Asians. The origin of this fear traces back to the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis in Iran, and continues in recent years and today, post-9/11, as people who look Southwest Asian in appearance are associated with violence and terrorist activities by many Americans. While this fear relates to the appearance, or skin pigmentation of people in the region, it is more accurately related to ethnicity than race. Beyond ingrained fear, CSS also acknowledges that people from Southwest Asia are often misrepresented in negative, demeaning ways—which contributes to this fear.

This fear manifests itself in schools as several Muslim students have faced persecution for their identity post 9/11 (Niccolini, 2016). While we don't know all of the stories of hate and persecution, prominent stories of students like Ahmed Mohamed who was suspended for bringing a homemade clock to school and a Muslim girl being asked if there was a bomb in her backpack (Niccolini, 2016) to Muslim students being killed on college campuses as hate crimes. There is a need for a more balanced understanding by educators and their students through a more accurate and inclusive approach—all benefit from this as stereotypes are broken and dehumanizing groups of people ends.

CSS also considers the impacts of mainstream media, which too often center on a negative and dehumanizing portrayal of Islam and of Muslims (Said, 1981; Ahmad & Szpara, 2003). Edward Said (1979, 1981) is thought of as the pioneer in research on marginalized groups in Southwest Asia. Said exposed the Western view of Asia, including Southwest Asia, to be simplistic and a "single" story, and instead offered a more nuanced interpretation. Single stories tend to define both the region of Southwest Asia and its people through stereotypes and misrepresentations by the media (Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011). Research on the media's role in the portrayal of marginalized groups has grown, post 9/11, with research finding that Southwest Asians continue to suffer from negative and stereotypical media spins to favor U.S. policy and create fear among Americans (Kamilpour, 2000; Maleki & Tirman, 2015; Brown and Vincent, 1997; Morgan, 2008). Even reputable news organizations such as the *New York Times* have published stories which reify a good versus bad portrayal, while also not distinguishing the actions of a government from actions of its people (Fayyaz & Shiraz, 2013; Jahedi, 2012; Alkahtani & Nwanko, 2002). Events such as the Iranian hostage crisis, sanctions against the Iranian nuclear program, and the 2009 Iranian election and protests have been filled with the use of negative language, depicting Iranians as barbarians and violent, while portraying

the U.S. in a positive light (Jahedi, 2012; Brown and Vincent, 1995). Muslims also have received negative portrayals in other Western countries, such as Australia, dating back to the Iranian Revolution (Ata, 1984). Ata's (1984) examination found that Muslims were positively portrayed 12% of the time in his examination of four Australian newspapers during the post-Revolution era. These media portrayals exhibit a deficit framework of distrust and conflict toward Islam and the peoples of Southwest Asia. The term "Islamophobia" (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2007; Faimau, 2015) describes this perceived fear of Muslims and of Southwest Asians, and is displayed all too commonly in the media, in political stances, and in U.S. society. As Islam continues to grow in the U.S. and globally, a better understanding and portrayal of Muslims is necessary to counter the binary, deficit approach of Islamophobia—and of seeing them as extremists and terrorists (Faimau, 2015).

If this negative, dehumanizing portrayal of Muslims also makes its way into textbooks, it reinforces the dominant narrative with a new generation of students. This, along with the casual discounting—or ignoring, of the Islamic culture of Muslim students not only isolates them in the classroom and schools, but leads to larger issues of social injustice: "Consequently, the distinctive cultural identity of American Muslims is neither recognized nor valued" (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003, p. 296). Eraqi's (2015) study of the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in five secondary US History textbooks, post-9/11, illustrates the bias that exists in textbooks, as he found that Arabs and Muslims were only mentioned post-World War II, in a conflict setting, and without much background information for the reader that would help situate it in a broader context. Texts emphasize stereotypes rather than portraying accurate information and do nothing to challenge the dominant narrative (Eraqi, 2015; Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011; Morgan, 2008). Morgan (2008, p. 318) finds that:

> In discussing religion, the textbooks often give faulty descriptions of Islam, which is frequently associated with violence when it is first introduced. Many authors write that Islam was spread by the sword, thus giving readers a biased impression, because there is no mention of the violence practiced by other religious groups.

Power and knowledge are intertwined, and nowhere is this as evident as in schools. Banks (1993) speaks of "mainstream knowledge" (p. 8) as the dominant mode of knowing, claiming to be based on objective facts and to be uninfluenced by the bias of the researcher. By contrast, "transformative knowledge" emerges from marginalized voices and challenges mainstream knowledge in its contention that knowledge is not neutral, but rather reflective of the researcher and reflective of power (Banks, 2016). Mainstream knowledge is privileged not only in society but also in school, where it ignores and misrepresents marginalized voices—including those of Muslims and of Southwest Asians. By addressing the power-relations of those who construct knowledge such as that in textbooks, transformative knowledge dismantles the supposed objectivity of the dominant paradigm. In this way, voices that are often silenced can finally be heard and make a difference in creating a counter-narrative, one which is their own positive alternative.

CSS acknowledges that those in power control curriculum, and that current curriculum reinforces negative, stereotypical portrayals of people from the region. The policies of the United States educational system tend not to reflect the diversity of the country (Ladson-Billings, 2009). While Christianity has an influential role in United States politics and education (Moore, 2009), the same cannot be said about other religions (Callaway, 2010). As a result, current schooling

practices largely ignore the religious diversity that exists in schools. CSS acknowledges that institutions and teachers often reinforce White, Christian values even in secular classrooms and values the lived cultural experiences of students from the SW Asian realm as part of creating transformative knowledge. Towards this end, CSS seeks richer, fuller narratives of SW Asians in the classroom and in textbooks to better reflect the diversity of individuals within Southwest Asia, including people of varying ethnicities, religions (but predominantly Islam), and language.

Muslim Identity and Curriculum Issues

Geographer Gillian Rose (1995) defines identity as "how we make sense of ourselves" (p. 87). Identity has a powerful presence; it is complex, nuanced, and fluid. The identities of Muslim students—and the difficulties faced by these students in public schools—are many and varied, yet seldom considered. Educators should consider the identities and difficulties of Muslim students by listening to the narratives of these students to learn how they feel about their educational experiences (Ahmad & Spzara, 2003). Previous research shows Muslim students feel that most of their teachers and fellow students have inadequate knowledge, including negative stereotypes, about Islam and its values (Fahlman, 1984; Nord & Haynes, 1998). This is in part because some teachers lack the communication skills and sensitivities to teach diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Fahlman, 1984). Some teachers have admitted to having negative attitudes and being openly prejudiced towards Muslims (Fahlman, 1984; Sarroub, 2005). These misconceptions affect Muslim students (Nord & Haynes, 1998; Sarroub, 2005).

The identities of Muslim students are not reflected in the Foreign Language curriculum. Muslim students speak a variety of home languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Farsi (Persian), and Urdu (Chacko, 2016). Although schools typically offer courses in languages such as French, German and Spanish, few offer Arabic or other SW Asian languages. Studies show that students in a supportive learning environment that affirms their cultural identity excel in school (Szpara & Ahmad, 2007). The language identity of Muslim students is often ignored because ideas of assimilation that do not promote their culture.

The ways educators depict Islam as a religion often confirms negative stereotypes (Uphoff, 1989; Nord & Haynes, 1998; Douglass & Dunn, 2003). While public schools certainly do not engage in practicing religion, they can and should acknowledge aspects of religion, especially as these relate to learners in the classroom. For Muslim students, as for every student, this would include a more holistic narrative of major world faiths. This would include the Islamic faith, covering history and aspects of the faith and attention to issues that affect followers of Islam—including the recent rise of Islamophobia. If the curriculum allows students to explore Islam only through the context of conflict and terrorism, this reifies the negative portrayal of Islam. Such portrayals lead to possible prejudice by mainstream students and frustration by Muslim students (Ayish, 2003). If textbooks are problematic, the lived and shared cultural experiences of Muslim students provide a positive alternative to give voice and power in providing a counternarrative. Historically, many Western countries have done little to include the local identities of students into the classroom curriculum (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008). When teachers become more learner-centered and include the identity of Muslim learners (and others), they invite all students to learn and increase their motivation and engagement.

Culturally Sustaining Practices as an Improved Tool for Educators

Twenty-two years ago, Ladson-Billings introduced *culturally relevant pedagogy* to the education field. It seeks inclusion of students' experiences in the classroom to enhance meaning making and learning. Teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy "can be identified by the way they see themselves and others" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 29). The goal of culturally relevant pedagogy is to move beyond mainstream portrayals that are often negative, to more accurate representations. Mainstream portrayal often depicts Muslim students' native cultures pejoratively and implies they should conform to the dominant group. Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy help students make connections between home, school, and community, and view knowledge construction as fluid and shared (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers and schools using culturally relevant pedagogy are "helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36).

From culturally relevant pedagogy emerged *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, an attempt to further Ladson-Billings' ideas. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to move beyond CRP by not only encouraging, but also maintaining, the languages and cultures of both the dominant and marginalized groups in the classroom setting (Paris, 2012). Students of any group bring their cultural identity with them to the classroom, and teachers practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy will see their students' culture as an asset (Milner, 2011), and likely will better meet the needs of their students – including Muslim students. A teacher practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes the fluidity of culture and the need to take care when depicting a culture. There is no ideal guide for teachers to meet the needs of their students in this way, but CSP can provide a strong foundation and practical ideas to foster a more equitable relationship.

CSP will require a reconsideration of teacher preparation to ensure that educators become more familiarized with cultural differences and learn their importance. Therefore, preservice teachers should learn about diverse cultures in their surrounding communities, as that may be their future. But time constraints are not the only challenge to raising cultural awareness; people often feel an inherent discomfort when addressing issues of cultural difference. Preservice educators may feel they should not acknowledge differences in race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Whatever the cause, teacher education programs should include discussions centering on student cultural differences and prepare their future educators to handle them.

Beyond teacher education programs, classroom teachers also need to engage students in critical thinking about Islam. Critical thinking fosters dialogue with students in critiquing what they think they know as well as what they read and hear from politicians, the media, and in textbooks (Callaway, 2010). The critical piece is transformative as it challenges assumptions grounded in Western thought, and also provides an opportunity to involve Muslim students in classroom dialogue. It is also important to note the nuances that exist with students, and to understand the comfort level of each Muslim student when speaking about their faith. Some Muslim students may not feel comfortable talking about their faith, while others may feel comfortable as long as the discussion remain religious rather than political.

To better reflect and promote the identity of Muslim students, schools could offer Arabic (or other languages of Southwest Asia). The number of students studying Arabic in the United States has increased more than any other language (Temples, 2013). For Muslim Arabic speakers, the offering of Arabic as a language and the use of Arabic in schools are immensely important in an attempt to maintain a dual identity (Sarroub, 2005). Indeed, including Arabic as a course offering strengthens the opportunities for all students in a school. Employment opportunities are

strengthened, as globally Arabic is the fifth most widely spoken language. For example, there are many government jobs for speakers of Arabic; the U.S. State Department has identified Arabic as one of several "critical needs" languages. Students who do not learn to speak Arabic fluently will still develop sensitivity, as it is hard not to learn about culture when learning a language (Jackson, 2013).

Since textbooks may misrepresent Islam, it is important teachers first acknowledge that textbooks are not objective (Eraqi, 2015). Additionally, teachers should search for ways to supplement the textbook. Teachers can examine supplements about Islam published by Islamic groups or local Mosques. Involving Muslim students or community members could also provide a counternarrative of lived experiences.

Conclusion

The previously mentioned strategies for in-service and preservice teachers, language offerings, and textbook bias, are general ideas for all educators to consider to better meet the needs of Muslim students. The suggestions below are merely guidelines that schools and educators might follow as they continue to redesign education to meet the needs of all learners—and in this case to meet the needs also of Muslim students.

Using the CRP framework and CSP as tools—and CSS as one guiding theory, teachers should remember that all Muslim students are not the same and cannot be painted with a broad brush, whether in terms of country of origin, ethnicity, language, or even religious adherence. There may be a number of Muslims in the same classroom who practice and show their faith very differently, and these individual differences deserve respect. Muslim students should be engaged in dialogue so that their lived experiences—and identities—also become accepted as knowledge beyond what is in the formal curriculum. Educators should critique textbooks and examine pre-conceived notions of Islam that enter the classroom—including their own. Instead of making assumptions or being afraid to say something, educators should ask for clarification about Islam if needed. Muslim students may enjoy serving as "fact checkers" for teachers as now they become the experts in the room. A positive classroom environment should be fostered, so students feel open and comfortable enough to engage in discussion and critical thinking. Such a conversation could move into other aspects of Islamic culture, such as food, dress, gender roles, space, and society. These kinds of discussions may well result in the positive growth of classroom relationships with Muslim students.

Teacher suggestions:

- ✓ Respect individuality within the Muslim student population
- ✓ Encourage dialogue about Islam
- ✓ Help Muslim students in honoring what is important to them
- ✓ Ask Muslim students for clarification on confusing issues, or generally about their traditions and culture
- ✓ Promote a positive classroom environment so all students feel comfortable having difficult conversations
- ✓ Continue the conversation!

In a pluralist, democratic society, the views of many rather than only those of the dominant should be visible in the classroom. How can Muslim students find their purpose when their cultures and voices are not present in the classroom? The dominant narrative of mainstream knowledge and identities are often present in education, silencing marginalized groups such as Muslims. Teachers and schools need to recognize the rich opportunity that the cultures of these students represent. When students' identities are reflected and celebrated in the classroom, counternarratives are produced and cultures are maintained. These counternarratives are part of transformative knowledge that challenge the assimilationist type of mainstream knowledge and empower marginalized voices. Employing this non-binary approach helps build the cultural wealth of a classroom, of a school, of a community, and of our country - in a way that moves us forward with respect for all. This is especially critical at a time when political debate is filled with isolationist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-SW Asian voices—and when refugees from some Muslim-majority countries have been banned from entering the United States ("Trump Travel Ban," 2017). In exposing some of the practices that exist, this work is intended to convince educators to allow Muslim learners also the opportunity to have their culture present and maintained in the classroom setting. In using CSS as a framework for acknowledging the negative bias and fear that many have toward Muslims, teachers can work with students to reconstruct a positive view of their culture. Teachers who use CSS and culturally sustaining practices encourage a positive view by welcoming the culture of the student to classroom.

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