4 Communicating and Contesting Islamophobia

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Introduction

In recent years, peoples, practices, and objects perceived as "Muslim" have been stereotyped by some people, groups, and state systems as representative of an existential threat to American national security. For example, certain kinds of language use that sounds "Muslim" has led to people being removed from planes and buses despite no immediate threat or justifiable reason. On April 6, 2016 Khair-ul-deen Makhzoomi was taken off a Southwest Airlines flight at LAX after speaking *Inshallah* ["God willing" in Arabic] while speaking on the phone. The airline had the Berkeley student removed from the plane based on a non-Arabic speaker's complaint (Revesz 2016). The language need not be Arabic—spoken in many Muslim majority countries. In fact, it can be Punjabi spoken while wearing a turban, as was the case for two Sikh-American men on a Greyhound bus in Texas (Wang 2016); or it might be Arabic numerals, such as when a math professor wrote differential equations in his notebook, garnering the fear of a fellow passenger for what she thought was Arabic (Rampell 2016). In each of these situations, the perception of language use as "Muslim" or "foreign" leads to bias and discrimination against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The use of Arabic in school assignments has also been perceived as suspicious. In December 2015, the Augusta County School District in Virginia closed due to security concerns following a worksheet assignment asking students to copy Arabic calligraphy. On social media, a caustic discussion erupted about religion, specifically Islam, in education (Brumfield 2015). This incident is part of a larger trend of anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, anti-immigrant bias in US schools. A 2013 study of Muslim American students in California found that one in five young women experienced bullying for wearing a headscarf to school. This report found that over 50 percent of Muslim American students in California have been bullied verbally and more than 10 percent reported physical bullying (CAIR 2013).

The recurring phenomenon across these events is that the language and, more importantly, the person using it, is perceived as "foreign," a foreignness that is synonymous with the category of "Muslim" and/or "Islam." These examples of bias are demonstrative of discriminatory linguistic profiling which is based on auditory and orthographic cues that may include racial identification (Baugh 2003). Unfortunately anti-Muslim bias is pervasive across American society, including schools, and it has crystalized in responses to the use of "Muslim-sounding" languages, seen as threatening and representative of terrorist sympathy or action. In some cases, simply possessing Muslim-sounding names is heard as evidence of crimality (Thanagaraj under review). Moreover the co-occurrence of racially ambiguous brown and Black *bodies* using Muslim-sounding *speech forms* becomes representative of a strategically constructed Muslim bogeyman—dangerous to an American body politic.

This unfounded fear of and systemic discrimination against Muslims is referred to as *Islamophobia* and is observable in everyday actions—mosque vandalism, hate speech and hate crimes—and structural discrimination—the sensationalist meida coverage of the "Muslim threat," selective policing and surveillance of Muslim communities, and the use of Islamophobic ideologies in election campaigns, including when Obama was erroneously said to be a Muslim (Shyrock 2010). Some scholars have argued that rather than using "Islamophobia" to understand the current political climate for Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies, we should consider the term "anti-Muslim racism" as a discriminatory set of practices for the racialized Muslim subject (Carr 2016). Others argue that despite its shortcomings, Islamophobia retains currency in the public sphere and thus remains useful (Beydoun 2018).

This chapter contextualizes how these contemporary formulations of the Muslim figure as Other are situated within a larger sociohistorical frame and draws attention to the micro-level linguistic phenomena to consider how new raciolinguistic formulations about Muslims take shape.

The Racialization of "Muslims" in America

While the category of "Muslim" does not fit into the categories of race as defined by the US census, racial demographics are a poor gauge to understand new racial formations. The emergent racial formation of "Muslim" relies on both the biological constructions of the "race" concept, drawing on darker phenotypic features, and the perceptions and stereotypes of Muslim "culture," such as visible Muslim-ness, i.e. wearing the hijab, and the use of "Muslim-sounding" languages (Omi and Winant 2015; Hall 1997). Furthermore the historicity of the "Muslim" subject as a racialized figure originates in the ways that religion has been key to the historical development of the "race" concept (Rana 2011). "The "raceing" of Islam has taken place not in a vacuum but within the context of specific sociohistorical relationships" (ibid., 48). Elsewhere Prashad (2001) explains that the "immigrant" category is racialized through xenophobic sentiments that place blame on migrants for larger societal deficiencies. To understand the historical context for anti-Muslim racism in contemporary America, we should consider the governmental mechanisms that have evolved alongside the ideological biases against the imagined "Muslim" figure. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) illustrated how centuries of representating the Oriental figure—or Muslim Other—as "weak, decadent, depraved, irrational, and fanatical" operated as a kind of self-flattery to say that the West was the opposite, i.e. civilized, dynamic, and superior, and that this influenced official colonial and later national policies (Grewal 2013, 5). Beydoun expounds on this: "Islamophobia is a modern extension and articulation of an old system that branded Muslims as inherently suspicious and unassimilable and cast Islam as a rival ideology at odds with American values, society, and national identity" (Beydoun 2018, 18). Despite the presence of Muslims in the Americas, which predates independence, many Americans have inherited and perpetuated this worldview of Muslims as Other and foreign.

Muslim-Americans are often racialized based on stereotypes that link physical presentation, sartorial choices, and language use. Despite cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial heterogeneities, Muslim and Muslim-"appearing" individuals experience forms of anti-Muslim racism, anti-Black racism, and/or anti-immigrant racism. Muslims may be categorized as Black, Hispanic, Asian, or White in the census, but as discussed, they are also racialized as the Muslim Other in everyday interactions and official policies. To better understand this process, we turn to transracialization, a framework that explains how the same body is raced and re-raced into multiple racial formations (Alim 2016). Transracialization considers not only how individuals might move across these racial formations but also to question dominant ideas about race and language *and* the relationship between language and phenotype. Across events of the discriminatory linguistic profiling of Muslim-sounding speech, the listener/observer dehumanizes the individual of personhood. Instead the listener/observer imposes a racialized type based on some combination of phenotypic features, sartorial presentation, and linguistic usage that draws on pre-existing racisms against the Brown or Black body and then racializes this person as a dangerous Muslim Other.

In Hill's (1998) analysis of Whites using Spanish in White public spaces, in which Whites (here speakers of standard American English) are the invisible normal, Spanish becomes a marker of racialized language practice. Hill explicates the various ways that White racism is ever-present in our everyday language practices in terms of what practices are marked as a deviation from acceptable language use in predominantly White public spaces. In relation to our discussion here, the mere mention of *Islam* or *Muslim* in White public spaces has come to function as a kind of *shifter* that indexes a condemnation, defense, or ambiguous value judgment about the racialized "Muslim" subject. Here, "shifter" is defined as a linguistic term used to denote words that combine both a referential and indexical function in speech (Jakobson 1971; Silverstein 1976). In its referential function, a shifter denotes a word that stands independent of the particular speech utterance. Used in its referential capacity, the term *Islam* can refer to a religious practice with about 1.6 billion followers worldwide. It can also have multiple meanings that are geographically specific or class-based. For example, the Islam practiced by adherents living in Jeddah is likely different than that practiced by Latinx Muslims in San Diego. And yet for both, those who claim a Muslim identity are all followers of Islam, referentially understood as a religion. In contrast, the indexical function of a shifter means that it can be understood through the context of the specific use, where meaning can shift based on the context. When we see the form *Islam* in a phrase like *radical Islam* or *Islamic terrorism*, the referential function is eclipsed by an indexical meaning of Islam as a negative, threatening, and even dangerous religion by linking the word *Islam* to "radicalism," "extremism," "terrorism." Some right-wing extremists argue that Islam is not a religion but a political ideology. The increasing use of "Islam" with *radical* or *extremism* in political speeches and platforms has altered its referential meaning within mainstream American media. For those convinced Islam and Muslims pose a threat to "western civilization," echoing Huntington's (1993) treatise, the words can denote a contemporary bogeyman—the dangerous, foreign Other—reproducing racist and colonialist logics in contemporary White public spaces. What is most troubling about this change in referential meaning from a religious group/faith to dangerous Other is that White public audiences do not require a particular interactional context to index this latter, more problematic interpretation. The mere use of Islam, Muslim, Arabic, or Muslim-sounding languages, as discussed earlier, can create a sense of paranoia and alarm, leading to bias, discrimination, and possibly violence.

Phonetic/Phonemic Distinctions of Islam/Muslim

We can consider the referential distinctions from a phonetically-based perspective. This allows for an analysis of how certain terms are pronounced by Muslim and non-Muslim speakers in the US and the metapragmatic commentary about these pronunciations. For some speakers and listeners, we can observe a marked differences between pronouncing Muslim as /mʊs-lɪm/ (Moos-lim) versus /mʊz-lɪm/ (Muz-lim), and perhaps even more so with an extended initial vowel /mʌz-ləm/ or /mʌs-ləm/. This is also manifested in the phonemic differences between /isˈläm/ (IS-lam) and /izˈläm/ (IZ-lam). In other words, one may pronounce it with either the voiced (/z/) or voiceless (/s/) form of the alveolar fricative consonant. The pronunciation of Muslim/Islam varies widely among speakers, and these variations understandably stem from the speakers' linguistic repertoires. In other words, there is no homogeneity within Muslim-only communities for what lexeme refers to a person who adheres to Islam since Muslims come from many different linguistic communities. The use of the voiceless /s/ consonant is most frequently used by Muslim speakers whose first language might be Arabic, Farsi, Urdu/Hindi, Malay, Bangla, and others. This is still true for speakers who use "Musalman" as a synonym for Muslim that has been modified from Arabic. Other speakers may use other variations such as MaSilamsi (Xhosa), Musilimi (Amhari), and Musulimi (Yoruba). While the fact that people pronounce the same denotational content in multiple ways is not remarkable, what is notable is when the decision to use one pronunciation or the other functions as a shifter indexing political values or ideological positions.

In all these variations, the voiceless consonant is used but for English speakers, specifically during colonial encounters with Muslim populations, the voiced consonant appears more prevalent. The use of the voiced consonant co-occurs with the use of the orthographic form, "Moslem," a term that was used during the colonial period into the twentieth century. However both the spelling and pronunciation of "Moslem" was perceived as insulting by some Muslims, in part because the term had a colonialist context, essentially mispronounciation, but also in that /mʊz-ləm/ [مظلم] translates to "dark," "black," or "very evil" in Arabic compared to /mʊs-lɪm/ [مسلم], translated as "one who accepts/submits." Based on a discourse analysis of British newspapers from 1998–2009, researchers found that while "Muslim" and "Islam" were used almost 200,000 times, Moslem/Moslems had 7,009 references with 97 percent of those between 1998 and 2003 (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013). In England, several daily newspapers adamantly held on to "Moslem" until 2004 when British Muslim groups, including the Media Committee of the Muslim Council of Britain, asked the media to stop using it (Baker 2010, cited in Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013). These phonetic and orthographic distinctions between a voiced or voiceless consonant, as well as the larger speech segments these words were used in, were understood as an indexical marker of political affiliation or immigrant sympathies. If using the voiceless consonant, orthographically marked by "Moslem," indexes someone who aligns favorably with immigrant Muslims/the "Other", then the decision to use a voiced consonant takes on the opposite signification, i.e. rejection/condemnation of the foreigner/Other. In each, the speaker is orienting to possible interpretations by listeners, and thus the subsequent discourse may question or critique the speaker's allegiance to social and political values, i.e. the speaker's position on immigration, the travel ban on seven Muslim-majority countries, or violent extremism.

During one of the 2016 Democratic Presidential Debates (November 14, 2015), presidential candidates Sanders, Clinton, and O"Malley debated whether or not the US was at war with Islam. In this debate, all three used the voiceless consonant, /isˈläm/. In contrast during an interview with ABC News" George Stephanopoulos, Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio explains that America is at war with radical Islam, using the voiced consonant /izˈläm/ (Oprea 2016). The co-occurrence of the voiced consonant in constructions where Islam is preceded by "radical" and followed by "terrorism" such as Trump's first speech to Congress on February 28, 2017 where the one time he mentioned Islam was in its adjectival form to describe criminal behavior: "Our obligation is to serve, protect, and defend the citizens of the United States. We are also taking strong measures to protect our Nation from Radical Islamic Terrorism" (Trump 2017). These individually-produced phonemic differences are embedded in digitally recorded videos, posted on various internet platforms and websites, and shared by media users, functioning as indexical markers of political values to the broader White digital public sphere. On right-wing media outlets, some argued that the voiceless consonant was evidence of pro-Muslim, pro-immigrant, and even un-American sentiments (Oprea 2016). When we cross-analyze this metacommentary on pronunciation with the larger media story about Islam/Muslims, the substance and form often focuses on how the foreign, immigrant "Muslim" subject is only relevant to immigration and foreign policy issues, specifically regarding the ongoing War on Terror.

A final example for how this operates is when Hoda Katebi, a Muslim-American fashion blogger, was interviewed on Chicago's WGN News to speak about her book *Tehran Streetstyle* (LeSavage 2018). The interviewer then switched to asking about nuclear weapons and Iran, to which Katebi offered a critical response that acknowledged the legacy of imperialism and colonization in the Middle East. To this, the interviewer stated: "A lot of Americans might take offense to that. You're an American, you don't sound like an American when you say [that]." Here a young woman was told she did not *sound* American, despite having a standard American accent, because her political ideologies might be offensive to "a lot of Americans," i.e. the larger White public sphere.

Interventions on the Figure of the "Muslim" in America

Many individuals, think tanks, non-profit organizations, and media companies have focused their work on countering the negative and racist stereotypes about Muslim figure circulating in media, politics, and education. For example, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding develop research projects that empower "American Muslims to develop their community and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States." Through this work, they hope to offer media and policymakers evidence-based strategies to counter Islamophobia. Focusing on the Black Muslim experience, Sapelo Square develops online materials that "celebrate and analyze the experiences of Black Muslims in the United States to create new understandings of who they are, what they have done, and why that matters." The Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, conducts research and public outreach work to counter claims by both Islamophobes and extremists that Islam is incompatible with modernity. Within these and other organizations, people speak publicly about countering anti-Muslim racism. Linda Sarsour, a Palestianian-American activist and co-organizer of the 2017 Women's March, speaks against anti-Muslim racism but also contributes to the national progressive movement through the organization MPower Change, a Muslim grassroots movement. Activist Amani Al-Khatahtbeh created her website (MuslimGirl.com) to give young Muslim women a platform for their experiences of living and working in America. The Nexus Fund, a secular think tank, is developing efforts to counter hate speech in the US, with the concern that certain populations such as women, LGBTQIA persons, and Muslims are especially vulnerable. Their "Dangerous Speech Global Fund" supports work to understand and counter hate speech that can catalyze mass violence in communities around the world – including the United States.

Conclusion

Since 2016, Americans have experienced intense political and ideological divisiveness. In this context, positions on the Muslim question become a litmus test for political allegiance. For Muslims, it is particularly precarious as we must address daily encounters with discrimination in a panoptic climate, where one's name, language use, dress, words or action can be seen as anti-American and threatening to national security. In other words, Muslims living in America experience a kind of conditional citizenship that hinges on a continuous process of transracialization, of where they must prove their loyalty to the state or be racialized as an aggressor/enemy of the state. The challenge for social justice scholars and activists is critiquing this emergent racial formation and by highlighting the hypocrisies of anti-Muslim racism and connecting this phenomenon to other forms of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia..

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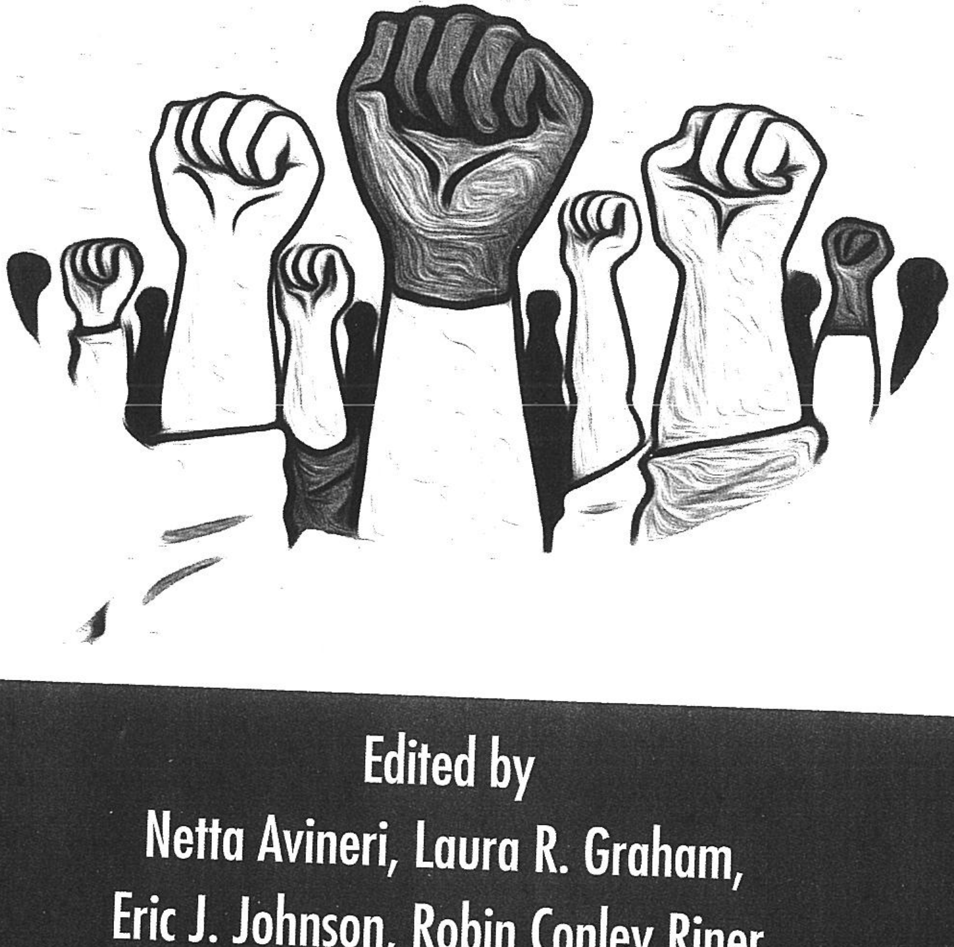

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