The Impossibility of Muslim Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

In this article I ask a seemingly simple question—How can a Muslim be a liberal citizen? In order to explore this question I define who and what was indexed by the term "Muslim" at various points in United States history. I argue that the figure of the Muslim has existed as an existential other upon which otherness, violence, and suspicion was written. I ask how the historic construction of Muslim identities fuels contemporary surveillance programs predicated on an intrinsic fear of Muslim bodies. Drawing upon a decade of ethnographic research with Muslim communities across the United States, I examine Countering Violent Extremism programs. I argue that such policing function re-inscribe and normalize White supremacy and Muslim suspicion of, and within, Muslim communities. Finally, I examine the question of citizenship in neoliberal times and ask how we might understand citizenship rights, particularly for Muslim communities, in the contemporary United States.

In response to provocations by Dr. Shirazi (2017) in defining this conversation, and Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz and Dr. Ayaz Naseem's lead essay (2017) in which they problematize the notion of extremism and ask how "othered" students are epistemologically known in schools, I consider the citizenship experiences of "othered youth." In this article I ask a seemingly simple question—*How can a Muslim be a liberal citizen?* Here I use the term *Muslim* not to specify ethnic or racial affiliation, nor gender, sexuality, or class status. Furthermore, I also do not specify citizenship status or formal relationship to the United States as a nation-state. While recognizing the vicissitudes within Muslim communities (as well as those read as Muslim), I have a modest query—can a Muslim exist in the United States, or is Muslim life one of permanent fragility, tenuousness, and unease? For this article, I ask this question of Muslims who are U.S. citizens in colleges and universities—citizens that dominant society might read as the most able to find footing within the project of American liberalism. If we find the project of citizenship impossible for these individuals, we can assume similar or more difficult experiences for individuals in less opportune circumstances.

A question of Muslim citizenship may elicit the response that millions of Muslims live happily as citizens with equal protections. Hate crimes, acts of bigotry, and discrimination are dealt with by the courts, or through new legislation protecting vulnerable communities. But, in this moment, policing agencies continue to survey and criminalize Muslim communities through both targeted community surveillance and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs (Aaronson, 2013), while Muslim communities are (a) wholly targeted by the U.S. President's Executive Orders (even if they are halted by multiple courts), and (b) victims of hate crimes at increasing rates (USDOJ, 2015). These actions are occurring on top of neo-redlining practices of using zoning laws to halt the building of mosques in local communities nationally (Center for Race & Center, 2016). In this moment, it is vital to ask what exactly is liberal citizenship, and what does it entail? In this article I develop a more complex understanding of issues that we might consider not only theoretically: How do policing programs

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(e.g., CVE) reify Muslims as purveyors of violence and inscribe otherness epistemically, while materially adding another layer of policing to Muslim communities?

Who and what does *Muslim* mean?

Understanding who and what a Muslim is in the United States is a complex task. Muslim identities are increasingly discussed and debated within American society, with much of the focus being on the suspicion placed on Muslim youth, their political affiliations and engagements. But, what exactly does the term *Muslim* mean—whom does it index, what does it reference, who is included, and who specifically is excluded?

Muslimness in American history

Representations of the Muslim Other have existed in the Western world for more than a millennium (Majid, 2009), from the European crusades through the Spanish Inquisition and more recently in U.S. media for nearly a century (Said, 1994: Shaheen, 2003); they have primarily been essentialized and gendered binary images of either violent, angry, and abusive men or submissive, oppressed, and voiceless women. The Muslim was the person whom the project of the West defined itself against within the European historic context (Majid, 2009). Since September 2001, this identity has been under higher levels of scrutiny and developed in historically distinct ways (Rana, 2011). Entertainment media, film, politicians, business owners, and ordinary citizens regularly discuss the fear of a Muslim presence in the United States (Cainkar, 2009), for more than 40 percent of Americans have stated they have cold or negative feelings toward Muslims (Pew, 2014). Far from a new phenomenon, the image of the Muslim as Other has not only been used to vilify Muslim communities, but also has been deployed to "make domestic communities foreign," as in the 18th century, when White American Mormon communities were popularly associated with Islam in order to construct them as outside of the American norm (Marr, 2006).

Furthermore, the history of enslaved Africans in the Americas complicates the history of Muslim identities. Muslims made up as much as 30% of Africans who were kidnapped from West Africa in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (Diouf, 1998). At various points, communication in Arabic was made illegal for enslaved peoples, as it allowed individuals from disparate regions to have a common language that was inaccessible by White slavers. Furthermore, throughout the 20th century Muslim life was most synonymous with Blackness in general, and Black radicalism in particular (Daulatzai, 2012). We only have to look at the history of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and Muslim Mosque Incorporated (Gomez, 2005) to recognize that Muslim life in the United States had origins intertwined in Black radical life. For example, in the latter part of the 20th century, we saw the figure of the Muslim expand beyond Black identities in the United States. In the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the United States saw a reinscription of anti-imperialist and anticolonial politics as synonymous with Muslim life (Said, 1994).

This history reminds us that we cannot reduce the contemporary construction of Muslim life in the United States to post-9/11 animus. One of the clear lessons from this history is that there are contradictions, tensions, and a lack of uniformity in how the term *Muslim* was long deployed, who it indexed, and how it created social otherness. But, a singular effect is that it has written the Muslim as threatening and a source of fear; Muslim signals one who is outside the realm of the citizen, or the person.

Anti-Muslim discrimination: Between race and religion

Being Muslim in the United States is neither about solely race or religion, but rather functions as racialized epistemological otherness—particular bodies, associated with Islam, are deemed less than human. In the most simplistic manner, Muslims are disproportionately among those whom

Fanon ([1963](#)) called the Wretched of the Earth, or those to whom the privileges of liberal citizenship do not apply. Muslims are those who simply exist in a state of exception (Agamben, [2005](#)), but whose existence is itself a State of Exception within liberalism. This messy understanding of Muslimness in the United States might have been best encapsulated by the words of U.S. Black American author Richard Wright. In speaking to Prime Minister Natsir of Indonesia (the host nation of the Bandung Conference in 1955), Wright ([1956](#)) stated: "You are classed as a colored man by the West . . . and yet you are religious. Now, many people fear the world of Islam. And that world is colored" (p. 105).

Although one can individually opt in and out of religious theology, the connections among religion, race, and region do not disappear in the postcolonial experience or imagination. Through examining the history of Muslim identities in the Western world we see that anti-Muslim bigotry functions as a form of racial and epistemic violence, not simply "religious discrimination." It is about being "raced" as a Muslim, and who the Muslim represents within the project of American empire. Violence against Muslim bodies is not mediated by theologies or manifestations of particular forms of devotional practice. It is not mediated by one's engagement with any particular iteration of Islam, but rather all Muslim life, and those who might be interpellated as Muslim are its victims. This is how, for example, non-Muslim South Asian and Arab communities are implicated in anti-Muslim racism.

Understanding citizenship in neoliberal times

Muslim life in the United States is precarious. But, the question remains, what constitutes life in the United States? What does it mean to be treated as a full participant in the body politic? What does it mean to be a citizen?

Though citizenship can minimally be understood a legal relationship to the state, debates about what constitutes political membership in a state remain unresolved. In this short article, I do not attempt any sort of comprehensive discussion of citizenship, but specifically discuss liberal citizenship as a set of claims and presuppositions explicitly directed toward the relationship of the social member (i.e., the citizen) to the state. Liberal citizenship in the U.S. context might be best encompassed in the Declaration of Independence, which states that "all Men are created equal." Indeed, this statement been critiqued and challenged for its limitations as speaking originally only to landowning, White males (Mills, [1999](#); Pateman, [1988](#)). Nonetheless, within this framework, the assumptive principle remained the same—if one was counted as a full person, one had full citizenship rights, both legally and socially. It then follows that the liberal citizen is an autonomous, rational individual who has full rights and serves as a preeminent political actor, that is, the individual is both the bearer of rights, as well as responsible for his or her own actions.

Furthermore, regardless of de jure relationships to the state, citizenship must be understood as not only functioning beyond a legal relationship with the state, but as the ability to equally access the rights of full human status within the state. This might be what Rosaldo ([1994](#)) defined as "cultural citizenship." In this manner, citizenship becomes about one's ability to be seen and engage as a full member of the body politic—that is, recognized as a full human. Returning to the project of liberal citizenship, when individuals are disenfranchised, or targeted as a group, this should serve as an affront to democratic liberal citizenship. Yet throughout U.S. history, communities of color broadly, and Muslims (among others) in this moment, are often viewed not as comprised of individuals with rights, but rather as a suspect community.

State targeting of Muslim bodies

Narratives of Muslim life as suspect abound in contemporary U.S. social policy, be it in policing, travel restrictions, or scientific interest and research. The current U.S. presidential regime has outwardly targeted Muslim identities, as evidenced by executive orders to ban travel from selected nations in what has been called the "Muslim Ban." U.S. District Court Judge Derrick Watson stated

in his judicial stay to the ban that no matter how the U.S. president argues for a particular iteration of this policy, "Any reasonable, objective observer would conclude, as does the Court for purposes of the instant Motion for TRO, that the stated secular purpose of the Executive Order is at the very least, 'Secondary to a religious objective' of temporarily suspecting the entry of Muslims" (*Hawai'i v. Trump*, p. 36). Additionally, Watson stated:

> The notion that one can demonstrate animus toward any group of people by targeting all of them at once is fundamentally flawed. . . . Equally flawed is the notion that the Executive Order cannot be found to have targeted Islam because it applies *to all individuals* in the six referenced countries. (*Hawai'i v. Trump*, pp. 30–31)

I quote Watson here not because his statement is novel, but rather to note even in legal discourse, animus, discrimination, or racialized violence do not need to be spelled out directly. In contrast, one can utilize the context of an action to understand its intended purpose. There are several institutions, policies, and efforts that begin with the assumption that Muslim life is threatening—or that show a clear pattern of targeting Muslims—regardless of the formalized purpose.

Countering Violent Extremism programs

Examples of a primary policing policy that targets and criminalizes Muslim communities nationwide are the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation programs called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). By design, these policies target individuals who are potentially suspect for being influenced to engage in "extremist actions" either domestically or internationally. Although on the surface, many U.S. liberals find this an important effort to "find the extremists" within Muslim communities, we might consider these policies akin to Bratton's "broken windows" polices of the 1990s in New York City. Broken windows policies were predicated on the notion that if police allow something simple like a broken window to go unaddressed in a local community, over time lawlessness will take over (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Thus, police enforced minor infractions that were not enforced in middle-class, wealthy, and White communities. Bratton's policies targeted Black and Latino communities wholly—criminalizing all aspects of life outside of the home (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Simply walking down the street would likely result in a "stop and frisk" and often ended with an arrest. Likewise, CVE policies target Muslim communities wholly. CVE programs are predicated on the notion of "preventative counterterrorism" wherein individuals become "radicalized" through community networks. Arun Kundnani helps us see that CVE programs predicated upon radicalization theory are both scientifically unsound and materially useless (2014). A CVE framework assumes any Muslim, at any moment, may be "radicalized" to engage in acts of nonstate violence. Here, moreover, we can see how the logics of counterterrorism draw on older epistemic traditions of Orientalism, in which Muslims are seen as irrational, enraged, and unpredictable simply because they are Muslim.

Although CVE programs are defined as focusing on all manifestations of "violent extremism," the vast majority of CVE programs target Muslim communities. In the wake of the Trump election, the White House has stated that White supremacist groups have been excluded from CVE programs, and furthermore, CVE programs will exclusively focus on Muslim communities (The White House, 2017). Accordingly, CVE programs serve to further inscribe and build White supremacy into communities of color and organizations that work as CVE program partners, as they become unwitting actors for normalizing White supremacy.

CVE, youth, and students

CVE is predicated on a radicalization model that assumes individuals "progress" from political engagement, to anti-imperialist politics, to eventual civilian acts of violence. Thus radical activism, leftist political thought, and anti-Empire positions are treated as steps on the road to terrorism. This is particularly true for Muslim students who have been the central targets of CVE

programs. Schools are particularly poignant sites where CVE programs and the carceral imagination of surveilling Muslim bodies come into direct contact with the liberal democratic vision of the school or university as a liberal and liberalizing space (through the notion of governance rather than political affiliation).

Furthermore, Paul Browne, spokesperson for the NYPD, warned, "Some of the most dangerous Western Al Qaeda linked/inspired terrorists since 9/11 were radicalized and/or recruited at universities in MSAs [Muslim Student Associations]" (Baker & Taylor, 2012). In turn, Muslim students are seen as the potential fifth column in U.S. society. Through my decade of research with Muslim youth in the United Sates I have found that the context of surveillance radically alters the experiences of Muslim students on college campuses. For example, my research in New York City showed how students were aware of NYPD officers posing as students in college classrooms and taking note of political perspectives. Students were especially cognizant of this if they were in classes addressing politics of the Middle East or Islam. Further, students were aware that policing agencies were actively targeting Muslim student groups. This caused many students to steer clear from participating in Muslim student groups (Ali, 2016).

Similarly, students in Southern California felt acute interpersonal surveillance by their classmates and peers on college campuses—feeling that all of their actions and words were being tightly monitored and observed as "potentially radicalized" (Ali, 2014). As news reports continued to emerge of police informants spying on Muslim youth in local communities throughout the nation, students did not know whom they could trust within their home communities either. The ramifications of police surveillance, spying, and federally funded programs (by security agencies) targeting Muslim communities was that young Muslims were targeted, spied upon, and did not know whom they could trust within their own communities. Regardless of their citizenship status, Muslim youth are not afforded the liberties of liberal citizenship; they are treated neither as individuals, nor as full citizens. Rather, their citizenship is fundamentally questioned and undermined through the project of anti-Muslim racism, surveillance, and CVE programming.

Security reasoning

Ample evidence shows Muslims commit acts of civilian-initiated political violence (or terrorism) in the United States at rates lower than White Americans (Kurzman, 2011). So, this raises the final question—if there is clear evidence that White Americans engage in acts of violence at higher rates, and there are significant public displays of racial extremism by White Americans, yet CVE focuses on Muslim communities, why does CVE programming not do what it purports to? Although we can simply write this off to the project of White supremacy, from a nonnormative citizenship perspective, we see White men as bearers of full citizenship rights—that is, constitutional protections against undue search and seizure, due process, the right to carry arms, and free speech are fully available to them. Furthermore, Muslims are summarily excluded from liberal de facto principles of individual rights and identities, and meanwhile the right to be free of collective responsibility for the actions of a "group" does not apply to Muslims, whereas White men benefit continually from such privileges. Thus, the question of who should be surveilled is not as important as the terms by which different communities have access to full citizenship rights, and which rights are denied at which points.

Since the 2016 presidential election, we have seen a radical spike in White extremist violence against Black, immigrant, and Muslim communities. Yet, these hate crimes (although seldom prosecuted as such) rarely fall under the auspices of violent extremism, although they can be seen as nothing else. We see White violence and White radical extremism not only on the rise on the political fringes, but increasingly in public discourse. Trumphal politics is closely correlated with White racism (Martin, 2017)—and what other examples of potential for extremism do we see other than this? For example, in South Carolina, Dylan Roof's murder of Black churchgoers does not warrant a shutdown of the White supremacists' websites in which his hate of Black bodies was fostered and where it festered. Similarly, when mosques are firebombed, or Muslims are attacked in

public, gun clubs are not raided, and White men are not subject to "enhanced interrogation." Rather, such actions are reserved for nonnormative bodies.

Conclusion

Given this history of Muslim exclusion and hypersurveillance in the present, a different set of concerns emerge: Rather than inquire if Muslim lives can be made less extremist, or if Muslim youth educated to be less radical and more liberal, this essay asks whether the project of American empire can absorb and integrate critiques and challenges to the racist and sexist nature of the liberal state. *What is the future of Muslim life in the United States?* As Nikhil Singh reminds us, the mid-20th century U.S. civil rights movements accepted a Faustian bargain as they traded de jure domestic equality in exchange for excising Black internationalism and critiques of U.S. empire abroad from the mainstream Black political agenda. Is this the only possibility of viable Muslim life? Is the erasure of global connectedness for Muslim communities, what Sohail Daulatzai (2012) calls the Muslim International, a potential way for Muslim Americans to be accepted as full citizens? As the economic foundation of the United States continues to hollow out, and the remnants of a liberal welfare state continue to erode, is the best option a desire for what Jodi Melamed (2011) refers to as a neoliberal multicultural state in which difference is accepted as long as it generates capital? It seems this bleak future is being replaced by a nightmare of a White supremacist neoliberal state, in which privatization and White nationalism will be tied to free trade and the erosion of any forms of social entitlements.

So the question remains, *Can a Muslim be a liberal citizen?* If we define citizenship as the same freedoms of association, free speech, freedom from unlawful search (surveillance), as well as rights to bear arms, all without suspicion, then the answer seems abundantly clear.

Notes on contributor

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