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Review of Liz Jackson, *Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism*
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RESPONSE

Islam and Islamophobia in USA: The Tip of the Iceberg

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  Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism was published in 2014. Yet in some ways it already looks like an historical artefact. The formatting, production, and printing of the text, from my 'final' versions sent to the publisher, took a mere seven months. Nonetheless, in that time the global and US narratives of 'Islamic terrorism' steadily continued to evolve. As I completed my research and wrote in mid-2013, the bombing of the Boston Marathon reawakened US public fascination with the linkage between Islam and terrorism, while beyond the country's borders 'Islamic State', 'ISIL', and 'ISIS' became household names. As Cecilia Orphan notes, a violent terroristic act involving Muslims took place in Texas as she completed her review of my text; Candyce Reynolds note in her review experiencing firsthand the public obsession with Islamic terror and Islamophobia, simply by carrying my book openly on her university campus this spring.

  It was partly due to this fundamental inability to tell the story of American Islamophobia and its educational implications in an historically conclusive way that stalled my work on this text, from when I finished my related doctoral dissertation in 2008. In that early outline and initial research, the still-living Osama bin Laden and recently executed Saddam Hussein loomed large, in the media and the textbooks. At that time the 'Arab Spring' was hardly a concept, not yet a series of compelling (if diverse) events in the Middle East, transforming the societies of Tunisia, Egypt, and—to a lesser extent—Turkey, whose peaceful multiculturalism had motivated me to take on Islamophobia in the USA post-September 11 (9/11) in the first place. When I wrote my dissertation, I was surprised to note the impact of Middle East politics on US textbook editions published in the 1980s and 1990s. I did not know at that time that more interesting changes to texts—and more fascinating debates about Islam in US popular culture and education—would take place toward the end of the 2000s, and into the 2010s.

  After completing my dissertation I was, like many other doctorate finishers, interested in moving on with my life, from the textbooks and nonstop media circus that consumed me in my doctoral research. I moved to South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and Hong Kong for work after receiving my PhD, thinking I would likely shift my direction in research significantly over time. However, I could never again ignore prevalent Islamophobia, wherever I went. I discovered in South Africa deep divisions across religious communities, and fear of religious difference and Islam among many educators. From Abu Dhabi, which effectively institutionalizes religious pluralism and public recognition of minority, non-Muslim lifestyles, I could feel shudders of fear reverberating off colleagues back in USA, about my living as a Western woman in a 'Muslim world'. Because my experience there was not more substantially sexist than in other places I had worked and lived, I found myself fighting with a few feminist colleagues back home, none of whom seemed to know anything about the particular society, when I merely observed it was a good place to work in comparison with US higher education—a position that seems increasingly defensible, as departments and entire institutions are closing there today. And in Hong Kong, to my surprise, the situation of the curriculum and textbooks is direr than in the USA. Although Muslims make up a substantial proportion of the population and religiously-related conflict is nonexistent, local Liberal Studies texts sanction the 'clash of civilizations' view and continuously, explicitly, uncritically link Islam with backwardness, gender oppression, and terror (Jackson,

2015). And from afar, I could not help but observe in astonishment the increasingly empowered, systematic backlash in the USA, against any positive, normal, average, or critical representation of Islam, in fictional or nonfictional, educational, popular culture, or news media—and staunch, stubborn entrenchment of the old stereotypical, broad-brush views.

In this context, the need to develop what Reynolds calls in her review an 'entry into examining the American educational system's difficult relationship with religious education beyond Christianity', and with Islamophobia in both formal and informal education, was clear. I could no longer sit back in good conscience and watch as conversations about religious education and multicultural education continued to spin in narrow circles that excluded Islam and Muslims (while at the same time any attempt at normalizing Islam in society was systematically bogged down in media in absurd, often staged, controversy). As Reynolds further notes, a major aim was to position Islam in the American educational story, or stories, expanding traditional mappings to ameliorate longstanding and increasingly problematic myopia about Islam and Muslims in the USA, and Islamophobia. And I aimed to explain why it is that people don't know what they don't know: how politically motivated individuals and groups have whitewashed textbooks to preserve traditional messages despite their inaccuracies and myopia—joining the chorus of corporate news and popular culture producers about the stereotypical 'Muslim': the violent and vengeful Arab terrorist. Less intentional but still problematic is the influence of the taboo that has emerged since 9/11 against portraying the 'nice, good Muslim', on well-meaning educators and other disseminators of information and attitudes. The evidence is clear in my book, in comparing textbooks and educational standards across the USA over time: less is being said about Islam and Muslims overall, and what is being said is less clear and helpful, and more negative. Teachers are on their own at best, and suspects of anti-Americanism in worse cases.

It is in this dynamic, seemingly deteriorating, cultural context (there was a brief moment in the early 2000s where the media situation improved) that I sincerely appreciate the spirit and comments of Reynolds, Orphan, and Si Belkacem Taieb, on major tasks I failed to face and take up in the book, but should have. As their reviews suggest, these challenges are practical and pragmatic, as well as political and theoretical. Here I explain my rationale and thinking further, but I do not mean to reject or deny the value of the many useful points they raise.

As Reynolds notes, I gestured towards teachers' everyday lives in the text, giving 'many examples of what teachers can do to facilitate discussion for democratic discourse and critical examination of media'. But, as Reynolds goes on, there is clearly a need for further guidance. Though I am humbled by Reynolds' view that I should go on, maybe in a next text, to 'provide a detailed compendium of strategies for teaching about Muslims and Islam' explicitly for teachers, I am hopeful someone else can assist with this important task, particularly as the educational system itself is simultaneously undergoing astonishing changes and challenges—another dimension I struggled with in preparing this text. Indeed, the changes in the educational system overall made me reflect more than once on whether in giving pedagogical details I was not in some critical sense splitting hairs, by discussing curriculum guidelines, learning outcomes, and educational aims that may soon be a thing of the past, as the Common Core looms large—whose founder E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is among major contemporary figures with a lot of negative, ideological, and nonsensical views about Islam in USA (as I discuss in the book). Looking toward the USA from Hong Kong, the educational environment there is starting to look strange and scary to me. I may be falling into a reverse Orientalism of a particular kind. But I have sometimes felt while working on this project that much bigger structural battles about educational means and aims need to take place before we can effectively settle down on the specifics of cultural representation, inaccuracy, and the place of ideology in the curriculum. None of this is said to excuse myself from these problems and challenges—instead, I mean to concur with Reynolds that yes, much more work remains to be done.

Some interrelated theoretical limitations of the book are elaborated by Cecilia Orphan and Si Belkacem Taieb in their reviews. These concern my treatment of Islam and Muslims, which both regard as inadequate in serious ways. Taken together, they provide a quite comprehensive

critique of the book's own representation of Islam and Muslims within and beyond US borders. As Orphan and Taieb note, the book does not deal significantly with the diversity of American Muslims, and in particular—as Orphan notes—with the historical conversion, for political and nonpolitical reasons, of many black Americans over the course of the twentieth century. In relation, the racialization of Islam globally is not a major focus of the text. Here Orphan cites the experience of Americans confusing Indian Sikhs for Muslims, elaborating that racialization is an important part of American misunderstanding of Muslims globally, against the larger backdrop of the intersectionality of identity.

I could not agree more with Orphan and with the heart of this critique. And I do not think Orphan's arguments are incompatible with my own in the text, but rather extend the conversation. Indeed, one of the reasons why I have come over time in my research to an *intercultural* perspective, in contrast with what I have called a *critical multicultural* perspective, is a concern with the possible dismissal of intersectionality from a structuralist perspective. On the one hand, Cameron McCarthy, among other thinkers with a critical multicultural orientation, has founded a compelling critique of the racialization of US society within conceptualizations of American literature and culture (2003). I am also keenly aware in my travels abroad that American racialization is distinct from that in other countries and societies, as a powerful but ungrounded social ideology. However, at the same time, appreciating intersectionality demands attention to nuance, going beyond black and white. Relatedly I would like to encourage American schoolchildren to begin to look beyond US borders and US conceptualizations, recognizing their limitations and rejecting their myopia, when it comes to categories of race, and communities such as Muslims, who are both within and outside the country—American and globally based. Thus, I have argued for an interculturalism that is not about identity politics, which can blot out inbetweenness, gendered and sexualized experiences of resistance and empowerment, global dimensions, etc.

Media treatment of the 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, racially white, Caucasian in geographic origin, and religiously Muslim, provides a window to this complex world of intersectional identity. His race, ethnicity, and background were obsessed over in mainstream media, and he is the only individual approximating the social category of 'Muslim terrorist' to grace the cover of *Rolling Stone*, a major youth culture magazine with a secondary focus on politics. Many US people did not apparently know that there are white Muslims. And as Orphan also notes, ignorance that many American Muslims are black rather than Middle Eastern and/or Arab is also part of a complex story of racialization of the religion in the USA. Echoing Orphan, such cases are clearly symptomatic of a larger picture of racialization and ignorance about Islam and Islamophobia in the USA. They are indeed cases I would like students to grapple with. I am thankful to Orphan for holding my own text up to scrutiny here as an educational representation of Islam, and indicating where it can be seen to fall short. I cannot agree more that telling the substantial story of American Islam, and not just global Islam, is critical to teaching about Islam and Muslims in US education.

Si Belkacem Taieb's review provides an additional angle, identifying the book's lacking from global as well as American Muslim perspectives. As Taieb articulates, the text does not offer guidance to American Muslims or global Muslims on how they can defend or empower themselves, while at the same time its own efforts 'reinstating Islam as a part of America today', are insufficient given the harms Muslims face due to American Islamophobia, ignorance, and entrenched discursive bias. I agree with Taieb that this book is insufficient in these regards. Yet while I have tried to give in the text as one crucial lesson about global Islam that, as Taieb observes, the religion is practiced differently across cultural boundaries, I do not see it as properly part of my mission to build up, create and revise Muslim and Islamic cultures, except from an outsider position.

Non-Muslims have been too prominent in representing Islam in the USA for too long. That Muslim voices need to be included in the future in education is an essential element of the intercultural approach I recommend. However, as I recognize identity as significantly dialogically

constructed, I will still challenge those disseminating and uncritically assuming stereotypes, with the contrasting Islam(s) that I have witnessed. And I argue that this is a crucial task of schoolteachers who want to teach for democracy and provide information rather than misinformation in their work.

In this way, I suppose I do want American culture to become a kind of winner itself, in parallel to Taieb's exploration of Maori *Korero* in New Zealand, Aotearoa. In my first read of Taieb's review, I felt quite saddened to read his evaluation of the book as distinctively American, and even ethnocentric, in relation. But reading his review again, I better understand what he means. My goal in this text has been to demand that my culture, a distinctively US intellectual culture, become one that is open to hearing the voices that have been for a long time feared, dismissed, and reflexively, thoughtlessly challenged and rejected, in contrast to voices like those that told me not to visit Turkey, not to make Muslim friends, not to study or defend a complicated, 'scary' religion.

As the world frantically moves forward, the sound of a cacophony of voices threatens to disorient rather than effectively guide the next generation toward a more peaceful world. In promoting democratic dialogue I have not meant to pick a partial US side in any debate (as Taieb questions)—but rather to reform the US side for the interests of all sides, through opening up US eyes and ears to the fuller range of voices that must be heard, if understanding and peace can become possible in the future, within that country and outside it. Once again, I want to thank Reynolds, Orphan, and Taieb for adding voices that need to be heard, while the diverse cultures and subcultures of USA, Islam, and the world continue rapidly skipping forward, with or without our chiming in.

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