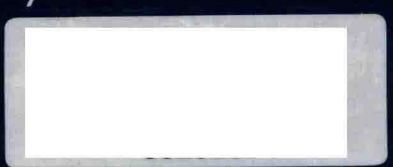
ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND SOCIETY

Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism and the Ethics of Pedagogy

Contested Imaginaries in Post-9/11 Cultural Practice

Edited by

[redacted]a K. Taylor and Jasmin Zine



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Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism and the Ethics of Pedagogy

Contested Imaginaries in Post-9/11 Cultural Practice

Edited by Lisa K. Taylor and Jasmin Zine

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Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism and the Ethics of Pedagogy

The decade since 9/11 has seen an accelerated circulation and enthusiastic reception of representations of Muslim women's lives. Marketed as a vehicle of intercultural understanding within the context of the "war on terror", these representations are neither random nor innocent but rather reflect and participate in a long Orientalist and imperialist history. Contributors to this volume examine the hegemonic and contested global production and reception of narrative and visual representations of Muslim and Arab women's lives in literature, poetry, cinema, television, visual art, and popular culture as well as college classrooms.

This edited collection provides a timely exploration of transnational and anticolonial feminist analyses that can work against sensationalized and stereotypical representations of Muslim women. It addresses the gap in contemporary conversations on the teaching of literary and cultural texts by and about Muslim and Arab women, bringing scholars from the fields of education, literary and cultural studies, and Muslim women's studies to examine the politics and ethics of transnational anti-colonial reading practices and pedagogy. The book features interviews with Muslim and Arab women artists and cultural producers reflecting on the transformative role of the arts as a form of critical public pedagogy.

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Acknowledgments

This collection is the culmination of a decade of conversations and collaboration. Sparked by an increasingly skeptical discussion among women friends and book lovers about a book set among a group of women book lovers in Tehran, the project traced the explosion of a defined genre of literature and literary memoir, one that encompasses a broad range of inspirations and target audiences but that has been met with a consistently "too quick enthusiasm" (Spivak, 1996, p. 248) among a particular Western public gearing up for invasion, occupation, and indefinite war. As we pulled apart this knot of enthusiasm with its Orientalist susceptibilities, co-optations, and complicities with empire, our expanding conversations have been informed and enriched by the growing antiracist and anticolonial analyses of a critical transnational feminist community, as well as by the inspired and inspiring ongoing creative work of Muslim and Arab women artists across all media.

This project has been nourished by a series of conference panels and less formal academic discussions with colleagues. Many panelists appear in this volume. Colleagues who have generously shared their critical insight number too many to name here, but we wish to offer special thanks to Hilary Davis, Patricia Molloy, Minelle Mahtani, and Ozlem Sensoy. Lisa is indebted to colleagues at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University, Montreal, for the clarity of analysis emerging from a collective antiracist feminist response to the targeting of Muslim Quebecers under the banner of "reasonable accommodation" and secularism in 2007. Jasmin wishes to acknowledge the community of sisterhood, support, and scholarship generated through her involvement with the Association of Muslim Social Scientists since 1997 as a source of personal and professional inspiration and strength.

We are indebted to our contributors for their commitment to this project and their exemplary scholarship. Our interviewees have also been extremely generous with their time and expertise. Barry Van Driel, editor in chief of *Intercultural Education*, was consistently supportive in accepting our proposal to guest edit with Hilary Davis a 2007 special issue from which certain chapters in this volume are reprinted here.

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Introduction

The Contested Imaginaries of Reading Muslim Women and Muslim Women Reading Back

Jasmin Zine and Lisa K. Taylor

We begin this collection with Spivak's and Freire's assertions that reading and reading back are central to processes of empire and resistance (Freire, 1970, ; Spivak, 1990, 2003, 2012). As the "main theatre of war has moved to Asia" (Koshy, 2003, p.x, cited in Spivak, 2008) with Orientalism as its dominant idiom, we find ourselves challenged as anticolonial feminists to parse the ways gender and sexuality are pivotal to empire's technologies of subjection, biopolitics, and necropolitics (Puar, 2007; Razack, 2008) through processes of racialization that work at the level not only of reading bodies, but also of bodies "reading back." As critical educators committed to social justice, we also understand our work to lie in the arena of reading and readerships where affect, desire, imagination, apprehension, and dialogue meet (Spivak, 2012; Butler, 2009). These embedded impulses manifest themselves in ways that shape the relations within and among differentially empowered groups in society, often shoring up the boundaries of privilege. The material effects of these discursive practices are of particular concern in times of imperial wars and neoliberal peace. We emphasize the importance of reading and "reading back" through counterhegemonic discourses as politically engaged actions that encourage and enliven critical consciousness and provide the grounding for an anticolonial educational praxis.

This collection traces its origins to a conference panel examining the reception and teaching of Azar Nafisi's 2003 memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In mid-2004, when the panel was conceived, Nafisi's book was the most popular among an explosion of memoirs, novels, nonfiction, and children's literature by and about Muslim women riding a boom of marketing and consumption in North America. The papers on this panel focused on the ways Nafisi's text was being taken up within an Islamophobic global context in which Muslim women were increasingly the subject of neo-Orientalist pity, fear, and fascination produced through a complex nexus of societal and imperial aggression. Now in 2013, the surge of writing and cultural production by and about Muslim and Arab women continues—texts that both challenge and perpetuate the currency of Orientalist writing and representation. Within the context of the contemporary global and geopolitical landscape and the "War on Terror," competing

imaginaries—Western[1] imperialist, Orientalist, and imperialist feminist as well as transnational feminist, anticolonial, and Islamic—form a contested terrain of knowledge production upon which the lives, histories, and subjectivities of Muslim women are discursively constituted, debated, claimed, and consumed through a variety of literary, academic, and visual forms of representation.

The past decade has also seen a growing body of scholarship critiquing the imbrication of much literary, visual, and cultural production about Muslim and Arab women with larger geopolitical agendas of war and empire. Authors such as Akhavan *et. al.* (2007), Yeğenoğlu (1998), Dabashi (2006), Bahramitash (2005), Naghibi & OMalley (2005), Procter (2011), and Ware (2011), among others, have raised carefully theorized and grounded concerns regarding the ways that historical and contemporary regimes of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, and empire continue to operate. Constant examination is needed of the contexts of articulation, circuits of dissemination, and horizons of reception within which tropes of Muslim and Arab women's experiences of gender inequality are recruited to justify imperialist wars and shape humanitarian and human rights policies (Abu Lughod, 2002).

At the same time, Muslim and Arab women artists, authors, poets, musicians, and film or video makers have continued to build an extensive body of cultural production that complicates these Orientalist essentialisms and speaks to multiple audiences and transnational publics. Recent anthologies, like Sarah Husain's *Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith and Sexuality* (2006), create a diasporic dialogue among selections of poetry, literature, and nonfiction. Other interventions include the International Museum of Women's[2] Muslima project, a global online exhibit showcasing Muslim women's art and voices in relation to themes such as power, leadership, appearance, myths, generations, faith, and connection. The exhibit uses art to communicate the broad narrative of what it means to be a Muslim woman regardless of the ways women choose to identify with that category and/or reexamine and rearticulate the meanings attached to it. Similarly, the Hijabi Monologues—an event based on the model of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* and popularized around American college campuses since 2006—has created an epistemological opening for Muslim women to reflect on their diversely configured identities and to explore and share their experiences on their own terms. Using storytelling, hip-hop, and spoken-word poetry, Muslim women carve new spaces to focus on issues that have meaning to them and that, more often than not, have little to do with the act of veiling. Sahar Ullah, the originator of this project (interviewed in this collection), discusses how the Hijabi Monologues inverts Ensler's approach: "Unlike 'The Vagina Monologues' where the vagina famously speaks and says it is 'angry,' the hijab never speaks and the veil is not the focus of any of the stories. The aim is to move beyond the stereotypes imposed by the

head scarf and create a better understanding of the Muslim-American woman" (Ramirez, 2009). By stretching the epistemic boundaries through which Muslim women's realities have become so narrowly construed, the Hijabi Monologues creates a space for women to project themselves into the public sphere as agentic subjects with diverse realities rather than mute victims of religion, patriarchy, or empire. While both the Muslima exhibit and the Hijabi Monologues are mindful of the post-9/11 geopolitical context out of which a need for these self-authorized narratives emerges, they also allow artists to speak to the whole of their identity and not simply the stereotypical or sensationalized representations they are otherwise constantly forced to confront and resist. These types of artistic and activist interventions are growing in Western societies and help to frame the development of a Muslim counter–public sphere (Zine & Bala, 2014 forthcoming).

This collection presents conversations with notable Muslim women artists and cultural producers in order to examine the role their work plays in redefining representational practices as well as the challenges of working within and against Orientalist imaginaries. We regard their work as a critical form of public pedagogy that examines, confronts, and transforms social worlds and embodies the educational ideals that this collection seeks to engage. As a pedagogical intervention, this collection is concerned with how the representations of Muslim women are taken up in various educational sites and within diverse publics with a view to addressing the politics and ethics of reading within and against these various constructs. To this end, we have included works that explore the literary, academic, and cultural genres through which Muslim women are represented in relation to the pedagogical considerations, ethical concerns, and political challenges arising from them.

COLONIAL LEGACIES OF REPRESENTATION

Contemporary images of Muslim women popularized in Western-based media, literature, cinema, television, and popular culture bear the imprint of colonial legacies of representation. Postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1978), Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998), Reina Lewis (1996), Malek Alloula (1987), Lisa Lowe (1991), Billy Melman (1992), and Rana Kabani (1986), among others, have documented the large historical archive of Orientalist images, travelogues, curated exhibits, and literary works that comprise the terrain of knowledge through which Europeans came to know of Islam and Muslim women. As many of these images are recruited and circulate within resurgent narratives of the neoimperial present, it is important to examine these colonial constructions in order to highlight their persistent saliency within contemporary geopolitical relations and the representational practices that are of concern to this collection.

Colonial era travelogues, literary works, paintings, and photographs tell a story of "the Muslim woman" as an archetypal set of contradictory figures and motifs that were objects of fascination and desire for Europeans. These archetypes include the odalisque, an exotic and seductive harem girl and courtesan commonly depicted bathing or reclining in diaphanous clothing in French, German, and British paintings, and the contrasting image of cloistered, veiled, and secluded woman of the seraglio. Each of these archetypes resonated in different ways with the masculinist colonial project of imperial conquest and the ambivalent psychological underpinnings of patriarchal desire, sexual curiosity, and disavowal of difference that these encounters invoked.

Mohja Kahf's (1999) work on the Western representation of Muslim women traces the shifting narrative of the Muslim woman in European literature from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The status quo image of the veiled and oppressed Muslim woman drawn from colonial narratives did not have currency during the Middle Ages. Kahf instead identifies an early archetypal figure in medieval literature as the *termagant:* a bold forthright Muslim queen who often bore a subversive textual presence. In the Middle Ages the Islamic empire extended from Spain to China and held vast economic, scientific, and cultural reserves, a fact that raises for Kahf the question: "How did the intensely perceived hegemonic dominance of Islamic civilization produce the European representations of the Muslim woman in high medieval texts?" (p. 18). Kahf traces the genealogy of the Muslim woman's archetypal presence in the Western literary imagination from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance as it was constituted in relation to the geopolitical and strategic shifts of power which produced these narratives. Representational politics were closely aligned to the material and ideological conditions during this period. Kahf's work is instructive in unpacking the complex connections between textual worlds and historical imaginaries and the political and material structures that shape and inform them. This is critical in addressing the recurring and resurgent nature of colonial motifs as they are produced and deployed in the neoimperial present.

The saliency of the veil as a complex and shifting signifier is also rooted in imperial legacies. Yeğenoğlu (1998) argues that the act of veiling was one of the most significant motifs in the Orientalist repertoire and central to the discursive constitution of the Orient itself and the fantasies it evoked. Women in North Africa and the Middle East were transformed into objects of European sexual curiosity and desire. In postcards and paintings their otherwise covered bodies were forcibly exposed and staged through a "pornographic gaze" (Alloula, 1986; see also MacDonald, this collection, for further discussion of these images) depicting women in various states of undress with partially unveiled bodies and exposed breasts. This forced exposure of the veiled woman was predicated not only on patriarchal heteronormative sexual desire but also on these women's ability to "see but

not be seen" through their veils and modest clothing, which was feared as a threat and affront to European masculinist power and penetration into the colonies (see Alloula, 1986; Fanon, 1965; Mitchell, 1988; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). Yeğenoğlu argues: "The veil *must* be hiding some essential truth, some mystery or secret. By hindering a true perspective on the Orient, the veil gives birth to an irresistible urge for knowledge and control and at the same time an irresistible urge for travel, for being there" (pp. 50–51). Women's bodies thus became a metaphor for colonial conquest and subjugation (McClintock, 1995; Shohat, 1993), and by denying European men visual access to their bodies, veiled colonial women undermined the conquerors' power. The integrity of colonial masculinist power that was lost in the encounter with veiled colonized Muslim women was symbolically recuperated through the images of these denuded women that were circulated on French postcards during the colonial era. Through these representations, women's bodies were subject to the corporeal and epistemic violence of being offered up for the visual consumption of foreign men within colonial cultures and regimes. The circulation of these repertoires simultaneously served to emasculate colonized patriarchal societies that were unable to protect women from this physical and visual conquest.

Both European men and women contributed to the politics of the "gaze" and forms of visual and textual representation that served to reinforce and uphold the *mission civilatrice* that justified colonial rule as the basis for rescuing Muslim women from the supposed degeneracy of their societies. However, the question of whether the feminist colonial gaze registered difference less pejoratively than the male gaze has been discussed and debated by postcolonial feminist scholars (see Lewis, 1996; Melman, 1992). Yeğenoğlu draws on Lisa Lowe's (1991) analysis of female colonial travel writing to address whether European women's access to and subsequent written accounts of the cloistered spaces of the harem (forbidden to men) offered a more feminist reading of these spaces that worked against earlier masculinist accounts. Lowe provides an examination of Lady Mary Wortely Montague, a British aristocrat and writer, whose letters depicting life in Ottoman Turkey in the early 18th century provided rare access for European readers into the seraglio and the lives of women who were normally secluded within. Lowe argues that while Montagu's letters maintain the tropes of an exotic, mysterious Orient, they also challenged some of the 17th-century male travel writer's perspectives of women, sexuality, marriage, and customs. Lowe sees Montagu's attempts to correct and reconstruct these earlier narratives as an example of resisting Orientalism from within. In *Gendering Orientalism* Reina Lewis (1996) similarly argues that women's writing was read through a "grid of differences" that often foregrounded gender but was also reliant on domestic distinctions of class, religion, and nation. She maintains that "we can use women's alternative 'take' on difference to throw light on the internal schisms within the fantasized unity of the sovereign imperial subject as it was constituted by