

## 'Why Do You Study Islam?': Religion, Blackness, and the Limits of Asian American Studies

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In many of my professional encounters, I am asked the question: *Why do you study Islam?* For a long time, I fumbled with the response. I've always understood the query's impetus. How does the asker situate me—a cisgender (East) Asian American woman who does not cover her hair or look "Muslim"—within common-sense paradigms around race, gender, class, and religion? As such, the question feels overly personal, and an answer is, and has always been, hard. The reasons we study what we study are at once intensely intimate and wildly alienating: driven by what we know everything yet nothing about; shaped by what draws, confounds, and terrifies us. Perhaps that is particularly applicable to those of us in ethnic studies fields—how we are fueled by desires to track how race makes, delimits, and forecloses humanity, how we are to live in the face of distortion and violence.

Over the years, I've arrived at a standard answer—an "elevator pitch," if you will—that generally succeeds in transitioning the focus away from me and onto the work. It goes something like: *I started in the Ph.D. program in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley the week before 9/11. I was interested in Black-Asian cultural intersections and political coalitions. I got involved in activism between Japanese Americans and Muslim Americans. I became interested in Islam as a religion. I noticed tensions between Black, South Asian, and Arab American Muslims. I met my future husband, a second-generation African American Muslim. There was little existing scholarship on the intersections of race, gender, and Islam in the United States. So I decided to study them.*

It occurs to me now that my answer leaves out mention of my scholarly and political investments in the field of Asian American Studies (AAS). That would require more engagement from me in that conversation than I'm generally inclined to offer. However, on the occasion of this roundtable to consider Asian American Studies, the War on Terror, and the changing nature of the university for this issue of *CUNY Forum*, I am grateful for the opportunity to add this: I study race, gender, religion, and Islam in the U.S. because of, through, and against the capaciousness and limits of Asian American Studies. To rephrase this in terms of how AAS should incorporate and consider the scholarly and political exigencies of the War on Terror, I want to suggest that while the field must certainly enlarge its purview and highlight the critical continuities between historical legacies of Asian immigration, exclusion, and U.S. orientalism and contemporary logics of anti-Muslim racism and terror, it is also imperative that its practitioners acknowledge and articulate the field's limitations, and in particular, as I will discuss in a moment, its abilities—and inabilities—to address religion and Blackness.

Though I am receptive to many of Moustafa Bayoumi's suggestions in his call for this roundtable, namely that Asian American Studies "include Muslim American studies and Arab American studies," I want to urge caution about how this sentiment may be advanced as praxis. While I believe AAS is an ideal institutional and ideological locale to take up initial questions of who is "Middle Eastern American" and the racialization of Muslims in the U.S., I am unsure of whether AAS should "include" these issues and topics, as much as position itself as a *junction*, or even a *transfer point*, in their formation, one which fosters exchange between multiple sites, i.e. Ethnic Studies, Religious Studies, American Studies, Islamic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, etc.

These thoughts arise from how I came to study Islam in the United States and U.S. Muslim women, because of Asian American Studies. Yet I realized I could not continue to do so as an Asian Americanist.

(I'd also like to make clear in the remarks that follow herein, I address primarily the formation of Muslim American Studies instead of Arab American Studies, which has its own distinctive histories and genealogies apart from AAS.) As Bayoumi also writes, many of the tensions within AAS for the past three decades have stemmed from whether its practitioners approach the field as "origin-based" or "based on a politics of transformation." Questions as to whether AAS should be delimited to engagements with those perceived as "Asians" (or those from "Asia") within the U.S. racial imaginary, or whether AAS should continue to advance the transformative political aims, which shaped its formation and institutional inception, following the 1968 Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State University. As well as subsequent struggles for the formation of a Third World College and Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

Though I am a strong proponent of scholarship that aspires towards social transformation, I am also realistic about academia's limits in this regard, particularly in light of the corporatization of higher education that has taken place in the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, such debates around AAS's political investments initially took shape in the 1990s, when I was majoring in Asian American and Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, and as we confronted how its institutionalization in the university was shifting the field at the start of the 2000s. There was much hand-wringing at the time regarding the increasing distance between the space of the university and the communities and grassroots struggles from which AAS emerged,<sup>2</sup> as well as in the cleavages between social structure and cultural theory approaches.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, these debates have never quite been resolved.

The attacks of 9/11 crucially impacted Asian American Studies. In the scramble to make sense of what had occurred, Asian American and other ethnic studies scholars quickly attempted to address new forms of racialization and state practices impacting U.S. Muslim communities through their expertise in immigration, U.S. orientalism, and histories of American imperialism. Yet many, though not all, of these engagements did so without the same types of strong grassroots engagements with the communities under siege. Thus, they were most effective in producing narratives of power, of how suddenly hypervisible communities of South Asian and Arab American Muslims came to be interpellated through the tropes of the terrorist and the veiled and oppressed woman, and how such logics shaped and undergirded the statecraft and infrastructure of the War on Terror. While AAS scholarship addressed the racialization of Muslims—and more specifically, the racialization of Asian and Arab American Muslims—it generally did not engage the lived experiences of being Muslim in the U.S., nor how people's religious views and practices were shaping and being shaped by post-9/11 logics of terror.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the discussions and treatments of Islam and Muslims also sidestepped or marginalized the critical role of Black Islam and African American Muslims—and thus the centrality of Blackness in American Islam—despite the fact that prior to the 1970s, the vast majority of Muslims in the United States were Black and even now, almost one-third of U.S. Muslim communities are African American.<sup>5</sup> In the case of my own writing and research on U.S. Muslim women's lives and subjectivities across the past century, while Asian American Studies helped form the initial of my work, I would need to immerse myself in histories of Black religion in the U.S., debates around secularism in philosophy and religious studies, discourses of Islamic theology, histories of Islamic feminism in the Middle East and beyond, etc. in order to get a grasp on the story I was trying to tell.

I am well aware such multidisciplinary is par for the course in any scholarly endeavor. However, I found that as I progressed further along with my research, the less my work seemed to "fit" in the field that had originally led me to it. This was partially due to the fact that in order to tell a history of women and American Islam in the 20th and 21st century U.S., the vast majority of my subjects were African American. Yet it was also due to a lack of research—and interest—on religion and religious subjectivities in the field (and particularly non-Christian religions), and more broadly, work addressing the intersections of race, gender, and religion.<sup>6</sup>

Bayoumi's call clearly warns against approaching Muslim Americans as "not solely a post-9/11 population in the United States" and proposes that we "should also be developing Muslim American Studies on its own and connecting it to African American studies, too, as one example." So my suggestions here are not to argue against the inclusion of Muslim and Arab American Studies in AAS, but simply meant to articulate the obstacles I have personally encountered over the last fifteen years of studying race, gender, and Islam in American, Asian American, and ethnic studies fields. Thus, while I am fully supportive of any and all moves to create conversations and produce spaces in AAS in this regards, I admit I am wary about how the field's ideological origins, political legacies, and contemporary formations may foreclose upon substantive engagements with Islam as a *religion* (as opposed to a political or cultural marker), which may restrain examinations into Islam and Muslims through frameworks of race *and* religion in American life.

In addition, as I argue in my forthcoming book *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color and American Islam* (NYU, forthcoming Spring 2018), "A central component of Islam's presence in the United States is its enduring presence and significance as a Black protest religion and expression of Black Cultural power." While it is incontrovertible that, as Bayoumi writes, "A large segment of the Muslim American population [has] origins from different parts of Asia." It is also true that Black Muslims and histories of African American Islam are consistently elided and/or marginalized in discussions of American Islam or U.S. Muslim communities, not only in scholarship, but the larger public discourse. As such, I would simply urge care and caution in how AAS incorporates Islam and Muslims, as to not replicate these same elisions in the field, and to constantly remind our students and readers that the understandings of the U.S. Muslim experience and Islam's history in America must always exceed AAS.

The classroom is a critical site in which such dialogues can take place. For example, in Fall 2017, I will offer my course on "Islam in/and America" at Rutgers-New Brunswick for the third time. It is a survey course that approaches Islam as a lived religion and a racial-religious cultural presence in the U.S. across the past century. For the first half of the semester, I focus primarily on African American Muslim communities and Islam's entanglements with Blackness in the nation's cultural imaginary. We look at the experiences of Black women who converted through the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam—a South Asia-based Islamic missionary movement—in 1920s Chicago; consider the extensive state surveillance on the Nation of Islam (NOI); read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as well as the poetry and writing of Sister Sonia Sanchez, who was a member of the NOI in the 1970s. I then turn to histories of Asian and Arab immigration to the U.S., the formation of new U.S. Muslim subjectivities and communities, and how these intersect and impact existing Black American Islamic institutions and organizations.

I tell my students that these comparative histories are critical in thinking through the roles of race, gender, and religion in contemporary iterations of anti-Muslim racism as well as in understanding intra-racial and intra-ethnic relationships within U.S. Muslim communities today. I assign readings, screen films, and bring in guest speakers from AAS, African American Studies, Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Middle East Studies. While the course is offered through the American Studies at Rutgers University, I would suggest that such a framework would also work well as a course offered through an Asian American Studies department, *and* cross-listed with any or all of the other departments I name above. Such "cross-listing," I want to suggest, is critical to the ways Islam and U.S. Muslim communities are engaged in Asian American Studies. To put it another way, instead of asking "Who gets included—and who doesn't get included—within Asian American studies?" we should be asking, "How can Asian American Studies and its practitioners facilitate crucial dialogues between communities and disciplines?" Indeed, for me, AAS has operated as a key juncture, a critical site in the study of U.S. Muslims and American Islam.

#### Notes

- 1 For example, see Nicolaus Mills, "The Corporatization of Higher Education," *Dissent* (2012), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-corporatization-of-higher-education>.

- 2 Such sentiments are perhaps best articulated in Glenn Omatsu's 1994 essay, "The Four Prisons and Movements of Liberation," in which Omatsu decries the erasure of "the larger goal of liberation" in AAS, which was rooted in the radical and revolutionary politics of the 1960s. See Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
- 3 As Michael Omi and Dana Takagi write in their editor's Introduction to a special 1995 issue of *Amerasia Journal* dedicated to concerns about the role of "postmodernist" theory in AAS, "This rethinking (about theory) has created a curious intellectual divide within the field. On the one hand are historians and social scientists who vigorously defend concepts of 'social structure,' and on the other are literary and cultural studies intellectuals who, heavily influenced by postmodern thought, privilege 'discursive practices'...we would argue that (this divide) profoundly affects the work produced and claims made (in Asian American Studies)." See Michael Omi and Dana Takagi, "Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies," *Amerasia Journal* 21, no. 1-2 (1995).
- 4 Moustafa Bayoumi's excellent *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* is an excellent exception to this critique, though as the title suggests, it focuses on the experiences of Arab Americans, as opposed to Muslim Americans. See Moustafa D. Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
- 5 An exception here is Jamillah Karim's *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah*, which examines relationships between African American and South Asian American women, and won the Association of Asian American Studies Prize for the Best Book in the Social Sciences in 2010. See Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); *ibid.*
- 6 This is not to say there has not been excellent scholarship on Asian American Religion, especially by those scholars involved with Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative (APARRI), an organization I have been proud to be affiliated with for many years. I am simply noting that though AAS does boast a significant body of work addressing Asian American Christians, and to a lesser extent, Buddhists and Buddhism in America, religion has rarely garnered for Asian Americanists than those working in other ethnic studies and race-based fields, i.e. African American, Native American, and Chicano/Latina Studies.

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Commentary

## Caught in a Racial Paradox: Middle Eastern American Identity and Islamophobia

Erik Love

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The Middle Eastern American identity has been caught up in a racial paradox, with Islamophobia affecting many communities ascribed with it. Crudely applied collective terms like "Arab," "Muslim" or "Syrian" conflate ethnic, religious, and national origin groups of Middle Eastern Americans—especially in Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian American communities. Paradoxically, at the same time, the unique structural and institutional forms of American Islamophobia have not been specifically recognized as *racism*. Recognizing racism in this phenomenon is key to understanding Islamophobia in the United States as it plays out in lived experiences and in the construction of policies and practices. Yet, a discourse connecting White supremacist racism to Islamophobia has been absent from almost all mainstream discussions. Unpacking complexities like these will reveal the confounding effects of the racial paradox that renders Middle Eastern racial identity invisible.

Unfortunately, in many scholarly analyses and examinations in today's popular media, Islamophobia is described in ways that ignore the dynamics of U.S. racism. For example, after President Donald Trump introduced new policies to ban travelers and refugees from several Muslim-majority countries, analyses described the discriminatory executive orders as "Muslim bans" that created unconstitutional abridgements of religious freedom. While they indeed did just that, the motivation and sweeping effects of these "Muslim bans" were also quintessentially racist. These and other Islamophobic policies affect Muslims and other faith communities, in large part because of race.

The intention behind these cruel and ham-fisted orders was, as Trump himself proclaimed, "to keep terrorists out."<sup>1</sup> By positioning the policy as a "counter-terrorism" effort, Trump continued in a