

Guest Editorial

The papers in this special issue and the one preceding it have their roots in a panel titled “Ethnography, Misrepresentations of Islam, and Advocacy,” which Timothy Daniels and I organized for the 116th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. We were joined on this panel by Alisa Perkins, Katrina Thompson, Robert Hefner, and Yamil Avivi, where we all grappled with our struggles with the increasingly political nature of our work on Islam. Although we work in a variety of geographic regions, with diverse subjects, we all shared similar concerns regarding the complexity of accurately depicting the Muslim communities we study while challenging the anti-Muslim stereotypes that exist in popular culture and contemporary news media. At the same time, we did not wish to reify popular divisions between “good” and “bad” Muslims or inaccurately depict the lives of our research subjects in order to cater to that popular division.

As I reflected on our work in the months that followed the panel, I realized there was another parallel thread running through all of our work; our concerns regarding Islam, (mis)representation, and advocacy were echoed by our research subjects, who were also aware of the charged images of Muslims against which they negotiate religious self-expression, sartorial and speech practices, activism, and the construction of hyphenated identities. All of our papers noted that our subjects had deep concerns regarding the Islamophobia, threats of violence, and flawed representations of Islam they encountered in their everyday lives, as well as a variety of strategies for mitigating these problems.

The “war on terror” in post-9/11 America leads to the politicization of Islam and the division of Muslims into “good” and “bad” based on the needs

of the government and/or media figures. These (mostly) non-Muslim individuals claim to know and speak for Islam, selectively drawing on the Quran and Hadith to present a distorted image of what Islam “truly” is. Increased religious discrimination resulting from these representations racializes Muslim religious identity, converting all adherents of Islam into one large undifferentiated minority. At the same time, the American Muslim community is subdivided into many groups; while they are lumped together in popular discourse, there are many contestations over identity, religious practice, and conformity to American social and political settings which play out among Muslims. Subdivisions among Muslims relate to class, gender, sexual identity, and country of origin, to name only a few. Within Muslim groups, there are also tensions regarding which figures are authorized to create and represent the “Islamic position” on political and social issues.

American Muslims wishing to secure belonging within larger American communities experience intense pressure to perform Islam and Muslim identities in ways which validate and reinforce American values. Muslims presenting themselves as “good” are required to espouse particular political and social positions related to patriotism, activism, the international *umma*, and LGBTQ communities. At the same time, those Muslims who hold these “liberal” positions are aware that their expression of their beliefs could contribute to the depiction of other Muslims as “bad” for deviating from liberal orthodoxies and are reluctant to play into this division. These interactions are visible in all of the papers in this issue.

This background lends itself to both scholars and practitioners of Islam having a hyperawareness of the charged discursive field in which they operate. The existence of these (mis)representations serve as a backdrop to Muslim activism, official responses to acts of terror, conversion narratives, and performances of race and ethnicity. Muslims in America must navigate around these ever-present (mis)representations while constructing identities and creating discourse. Discourse regarding Islam, ways of being a Muslim, and complaints regarding inter-Muslim relations run the constant risk of being coopted by the larger national conversation surrounding Islam, a fact which impacts the conversations Muslims can have with each other and with outsiders.

How do we negotiate these tensions sensitively so as not to play into the larger media narratives about Islam? These are challenges for both our subjects and for us as scholars. All four contributors to this special issue grapple with issues of representation, as well as showing the ways in which their research subjects are thinking about representation while going about

their routine activities. All of the papers in this issue highlight the agency of Muslims in America as they confront racism and Islamophobia. By creatively and advertently negotiating the (mis)representations of Islam circulating in the US, Muslims in America create room for new political and social constructs within their own communities, and new spaces for Muslims in a broader social context. These acts of advocacy have larger social impacts even when they are confined to their individual communities.

Timothy Daniels explores the ways in which Blackamerican Muslims draw on the Islam-derived constructs of *adab* and *akhlāq* to deal with their marginalization by the State, by immigrant Muslim communities which present themselves as the default American Muslims, and by scholars of Islam in America. Daniels describes the ways in which Blackamerican leaders' everyday advocacy and preaching, in which they challenge biases and incorrect representations, as well as calling for tolerance and good *akhlāq*, seeps into larger discourses regarding Islam and Muslims. Daniels also documents the ways in which a focus on *adab* and *akhlāq* allows his research subjects to sidestep contemporary paradigms related to members of other faiths and to LGBTQ individuals. Their *akhlāq*, he suggests, offers a mode of interacting with individuals whose "illegal sexual activity" they might not condone in a compassionate and caring manner. Daniels suggests that through their advocacy of *akhlāq*, his subjects create an alternative model for what it means to be a "good" Muslim, one that is not beholden to the political constructs of outsiders and politicians. His approach points to the possibility that Muslim individuals can create social change not only through an explicit engagement with US politicians and media figures, but through the promotion of a more subtle internal shift of paradigms.

Alisa Perkins' article describes responses to the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting within Muslim communities in Kalamazoo and Detroit, and continues the theme that ordinary Muslims can create change both within and outside their communities. Perkins describes the ways in which different kinds of Muslim leadership—community leaders, faith leaders, and activists—take on representational burdens aimed at demonstrating the position of their religious community while also telegraphing their own individual moral orientations. Perkins' research subjects are very aware of the outside scrutiny they are under and feel the pressure to demonstrate, through their actions, that Muslims support LGBTQ individuals and condemn violence. At the same time, religious leaders are accountable to their congregations, who might condemn them for too-open support for LGBTQ individuals. Perkins demonstrates that a number of individuals are responsible for creating and

projecting the “Muslim position” on social and political issues. Imams’ refusal to openly endorse LGBTQ identities does not preclude their acceptance by Muslim communities, which are also home to civic leaders and activists who serve as allies and create welcoming spaces and discourses. As with Daniels’ subjects, Perkins’ subjects create spaces for inclusion, express alternative forms of self-identification from those endorsed by dominant discourses, and modify socio-political climates through their own actions and advocacy.

Nazreen Bacchus’ article on second-generation American Muslims further develops the theme of Muslims agentively altering their social and political surroundings. Instead of focusing on the anti-Islamic experiences these individuals face, Bacchus focuses on these individuals’ resistance against contemporary rhetoric which targets them. This resistance seems to unite individuals across ethnic backgrounds, create new forms of identity, and allow for participation in local grassroots political organization. Bacchus’ research subjects draw on their second-generation identity to advocate for a greater inclusion and acceptance within US society.

Yamil Avivi’s work on Latina Muslims in the forum section further demonstrates that individual acts of advocacy and identity creation can empower other Muslims. His Latina subjects curate social media and children’s books to challenge Islamophobic portrayals of themselves; these media impact both other Muslims and outsiders. Avivi argues that Muslims’ cultural production of their positionality can help undo the flattening effects that Islamophobia has on media portrayals of Muslims and Islam.

All of the papers in this issue argue that Muslims in America are creating nascent structures of resistance in order to challenge the Islamophobic environments they live in. These structures are fragile but effective, even when confined to Muslim communities. Moreover, Muslims engaging in these efforts exemplify a variety of responses to the regimes of misrepresentations within which they live; Daniels’ subjects refute them and focus on internal community building, while Perkins’ and Bacchus’ subjects confront Islamophobia and engage in image management with outsiders. All of our subjects attempt to correct the (mis)representations they encounter. As editors of the prior special issue and this one, Timothy and I hope that our contributions as scholars will add to these efforts.

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