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Muslim girls and Critical Race Feminism: Towards an understanding of CRF in Education

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Abstract: This article uses counterstory narratives to demonstrate how Islamophobia is present in the lives of young women in schools in the United States. The objective of the piece is to analyse how CRF can help understand the lived experiences of these youth and inform teachers to transform their classroom practices.

Keywords: Islamophobia, counterstory, social justice, feminism

Muslim Girls and Critical Race Feminism: Towards an Understanding of CRF in Education

I have worked in an afterschool program for 1.5¹ and second generation youth of refugee families for more than five years now. Because our program serves young people from all over the valley, I spend a lot of time driving them around in a van. The van is an interesting space because it allows me to observe my passengers without interfering in their interactions with each other. As the driver, the young people acknowledge my presence there but assume that I am not paying attention to what is going on behind me, since I am paying attention to the road. My route created a context where I only had female passengers in my van, which allowed for a safe space for young women to talk freely about several topics. On our way to program site, talking and laughing in the back of the van, they usually talked about fairly typical topics for teens: boys, NBA crushes (Trey Burke, OMG!) and high school drama.

This time, however, the topic was a little different than their typical van ride conversations. Halima² was talking to Amina about a health science class, “I raise my hand every time she asks a question but she never calls on me and she keeps asking me if I am understanding the lesson. I think she thinks I don’t speak English.” Halima is Somali-American, and her clothes usually reflect the hybridity of her identity—she wears hijabs and skirts on top of her trendy jeans. Halima was born and raised in the United States and only marginally speaks her parents’ native language, Somali; English is her first language. Despite Halima’s “native” English pronunciation, her teachers assumed she was foreign born just by looking at her. Had her teacher bother to speak to Halima but once, she would have been able to see that Halima can

¹ 1.5 generation refers to immigrants who moved to their new homeland at a young age, which makes their ties with the new land stronger than the ties with the native land.

² All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

clearly comprehend everything she hears in English and that English is her first language.

CRF: A Definition

Critical Race Feminisms (CRF) is, according to Adrienne Wing (2015), “a gender intervention within CRT [Critical Race Theory] by noticing that men of color may face different kind of discrimination to their female peers” (p. 164). Like CRT, CRF emerged from the field of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) in the 1990s. Originally developed as an area of study within Law during the 1960s, CLS was officially made into an area of study in 1977 during a conference at University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Legal Information Institute. In the decades that follow, several distinct fields emerged in CLS that focused on how race, sexuality and gender interfered with the way law was understood and applied.

The development of Critical Race Feminisms can be traced to the work of legal scholars who were concerned that CRT did not thoroughly address the many forms of discriminations that women of color face within the judiciary system (Crenshaw, 1991; Bartlett & Kennedy, 1991; Espinoza, 1997; Harris, 1990). Examples include analyzing the way courts dealt with cases of domestic violence (Crenshaw, 1991), street harassment (Davis, 1993), challenging the way legal theory is constructed by demanding recognition for women of color as valid interpretations of laws (Matsuda, 1989), and recognizing Latina counterstories as a mean to construct legal theory (Montoya, 1994). In so doing, these women and their peers demonstrated that a central reason CRT did not fully explore the relationship between law and discrimination was its lack a consideration and attention to the intersectionality of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

Critical Race Theory imbricates individual experiences with questions of race in ways that shift legal understandings in significant ways (Ladson

Billings & Tate, 1995). This nested understanding is predicated on several understandings, including the ideas that racism is endemic, that the legal system in the United States is not neutral or objective, that laws and policies need to be contextualized historically, and that whiteness is property. Building on this framework, Critical Race Feminisms sought to attend to and privilege women's perspectives in a field (law) dominated by men. Similar to the CRT tradition in which the theoretical goals are clearly enunciated frameworks for action, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) proposed the following definition for Critical Race Feminism:

- Critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color's experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women;
 - Critical race feminism focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression;
 - Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e. anti-essentialist);
 - Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breath;
 - And Critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression.
- (p. 20)

Wing and Smith's (2006) discussion of CRF is strongly aligned with Evans-Winters and Esposito's construction, asserting that, women of color may consciously or unconsciously face multiple and simultaneous discrimination, not only on the basis of their race/ethnicity and gender, but also due to their religion, class,

disability, sexual orientation, nationality, language, age, stature, marital status, parental status, and/or political ideology. (p.747)

This is not a naïve positionality. Just as CRT scholars identify racism as a central aspect of American society (e.g., Bell, 1979; Delgado, 1988; Freeman, 1990; Gotanda, 1991), in a parallel move, Wing (2015) highlights the permanence of sexism in American society, noting that sexism will not cease to exist during her lifetime. However, CRF does believe that its praxis provides women of color with “the tools for challenging subordination at its core and understanding how various oppressions are connected and interrelated — setting the stage for truly transformative change in our society” (Onwuachi-Willig, 2006, p.736). That is, while Critical Race Feminism recognizes the permanence of sexism in American society, it encourages women of color to continue to resist White patriarchal understandings of their realities. Furthermore, Critical Race Feminism follows a rich historical tradition of intellectual black women who have been thinking about how race and gender play a crucial role in black women’s lived experience (e.g., Cooper, 1892; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984).

As is now widely known, three central methodological tools in CRT are counterstories, personal narratives and testimonies, all of which are narrative pathways to present perspectives different than that of the dominant discourse (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001/2002; Yosso, Villalpando & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). In keeping with the feminist idea that the personal is political, CRF is not only concerned with the legal aspects of the law, but how it influences the lived experiences of individuals (Berry, 2010). As a result, and in combination with CRF’s understanding that an absence of women’s and girls’ narratives are often a central concern in regards to Critical Race Theory, counterstories and narratives become even more important when associated with CRF.

In regards to utilizing CRF in educational studies, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) argue that CRF “may provide legal and academic stratagem for studying and eradicating race, class, and gender oppression in educational institutions” (p. 19). Whereas much has been written about the ways in which young men of color are overpoliced and undervalued in educational setting (Anyon & Jenson, 2014; George, 2015; Lindsay, 2017; Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2005; Welch & Payne, 2010), the understandings of how educational policies affect young women of color are still not still fully developed as an field in larger academic circles. Evans-Winter and Esposito (2010) further discuss how the study of the marginalization of all young women of color in the educational system, and Black girls in particular, can provide solutions for schooling as a whole. From this perspective, CRF is not only part of a contemporary movement in feminism that recognizes the importance of knowledge and cultural production in marginal spaces but is also significant because the perspective of Black girls is rarely taken in consideration in school reforms, focusing instead on White girls or Black boys. A recent uptick in research about Black girls (e.g., Morris, 2016), is made all the more clear through this absence. For this and other such reasons, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) affirm that “research with and on behalf of Black Girls benefit the whole society” (p. 22), adding disenfranchised voices and what their perspectives can teach us about systems of schooling and the reproduction of often harmful norms and values that tend to disenfranchise Black girls in school and beyond.

Following the call of Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), this paper seeks to present stories from and about the marginal spaces in the educational system. Instead of focusing solely on Black girls, this paper will focus on the intersection of race and religion, one which has not been explored in depth within CRF. The stories presented here are those of Muslim young women in the Utah educational system. Not all of the young women depicted in the

narratives here are Black, but all of them have been racialized due to their religious affiliation (Aziz, 2006).

My understanding of racialization follows Ibrahim's (2004) definition of race as a performative category. Departing from a feminist understanding of performance and social construction, Ibrahim (2004) argues: "race is not a category we occupy or slot our selves into, but a performative category that we 'do' everyday. It is a role we play, a plot, a representational language that is beyond our control" (p. 77). In this day and age, the deployment of clearly Islamophobic policies by federal and local government bodies (Arab American Institute, 2015) marks of Muslimness ritualize and inscribe racial meaning to Muslim women's bodies. As argued by Jacqui Alexander (2005), Muslim women "are not born women of color but rather *become* women of color" (Cooke, 2008 p 9) when in contact with racism and Islamophobia in the United States. Tariq Modood (1997) argues that Islamophobia "is more a form of racism than a form of religious intolerance" (as cited by Jaffe-Walter, 2016, p. 27). Recent federal policies, such as the "Muslim Travel Ban" executive action signed by President Donald Trump in his first week in office, and reports that American citizens were stopped, detained and questioned when returning home from abroad in airports further the idea that Muslimness is becoming racialized in this country (Agency, 2017; Associated Press, 2017; ESPN News Service, 2017).

Extrapolating from Ibrahim's (2004) understanding of racialization, it is possible to conclude that race is an embodied experience. The embodiment of race "suggests an experience that is constantly in the making, that is continually being constituted and reconstituted from one moment to the next" (Weiss, 1994 p. 43). Muslim women's bodies are racialized by their constant interactions with Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses in society. Ibrahim (2004), a Sudanese refugee himself, poignantly explains how his body became the battle ground for the racialization process when he moved to North

America, writing, “[m]y Black body speaks a language of its own, it cheats me, it ritualizes me, where I become a condensed moment of historicity, an inscribed repetition of conventions” (p. 78). The concept of race, then, is intrinsically connected with the historical and social context in which it is inserted. Despite the mainstream discourse, race is not about the color of our skin, the texture of our hair or the features of our face. It is a process by which “Others” are made to differentiate humans from nonhumans (Spiller). Or, as Ahmed (2000) so eloquently argues, “[e]mbodiment take shape through encounters with others” (p.39). While race is not about physical attributes, it is through the reading of certain bodily characteristics that one becomes raced. For Muslim women, the veil becomes the boundary that marks their body as being foreign.

The next section brings this lens to bear on how the racialization of Islam post-9/11 has affected the lives of these young Muslim women living in a state known for a particular kind of religious expression (Latter Day Saints/Mormons) in the United States.

Muslima, an Iraqi refugee, loves playing basketball. In 9th grade she and her friend, Raghda, also from Iraq, decided to try out for their school team in hopes to play together. I met the young women during the afterschool program that I worked at. We met everyday after class at a mostly white middle school. They talked about the try out and their imagined success in the team for weeks before the event. The day finally arrived and the young women could hardly contain their excitement; they came in to the afterschool classroom less than a minute after the final bell rang to let me know they would be going to the try-outs and therefore missing the program that day. Their excitement was contagious and I could hardly wait to hear about how it went. The next they came into the afterschool classroom full of hopes. Raghda, 5’11” and super skinny, was sure they made the team. “We are so

much better than all of the other girls in the try-outs”. Muslima nodded her head in agreement and whispered “so much better!” I asked them when the decision would be made and they said the list should be posted on the announcements board by the front office in the next week or so.

A week later, Muslima came in fuming. “Nobody new made the team. Ms. Smith only picked the students that played last year!” Raghda came right behind her. “I can’t believe this, we are so much better than the other girls!” We had a conversation about expectations, failures and possibilities for the future. “There is always next year” I told them, “don’t let this discourage you from playing”. “It’s okay,” Raghda said, “I kinda expected this to happen. I can tell Ms. Smith doesn’t like us. The other day, in P.E class, I didn’t want to run and I heard her calling me a lazy Mexican to the other coach.” I was pretty surprised by the comment: “who’s a lazy Mexican, you?” I asked Raghda. “For them we are all the same,” she said, “Ms. Smith knows Muslima is Muslim because she wears a hijab. But me, because I don’t and I am brown, I can only be Mexican, right?”

The next year when they entered High School, Muslima and Raghda tried out for the basketball team. Raghda made the team. Muslima did not. The coach at the high school told her that she could not wear a hijab in court despite the fact that the NCAA, the governing body that oversees High School and College sports, allows for uniforms to be modified to fit student-athletes’ religious beliefs (Lawrence, 2008).

To Be a Muslim Girl in the Western World

The racialization process does not happen evenly, though, among all Muslim subjects. Though men and women report Islamophobic incidents (Chakranborti & Zempi. 2012), Muslim women are twice as likely to face public harassment than men (Cainkar, 2008). Hamzeh (2011) argues that Islamophobia is enacted more strongly against females since religious participation among women is physically marked by the clothes they wear.

The literature on the topic generally agrees with the gendered aspect of Islamophobia (Allen, 2015; Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Choudahanry, 2005; Chakranborti & Zempi, 2012; Hamzeh, 2011; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2011; Jamal, 2011; Keddie, 2009; Shirazi & Mishra, 2010; Zine, 2006). Scholars have argued that Islamophobia is more present in the lives of Muslim women than men due to the fact that Muslim women usually wear their religion on their bodies in the form of traditional garbs (Chakranborti & Zempi, 2012; Hamzeh, 2011; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2011; Jamal, 2011). Jiljab, hijab, niqab and burqa are but a few examples of this outward physical adornment. This discrimination is so prevalent that Hamzeh (2011) coined the term “hijabophobia” to directly refer to the gendered aspect of Islamophobia. Hamzeh argues that Westerners see the veil as an identifier of otherness and female oppression, a point that adds to growing hijabophobia in Western countries. To this end, perceptions exist that Muslim women’s use of any kind of head cover, the “headscarf [is seen] as a statement that is anti-feminist and anti-Western” (Allen & Nielsen, 2002 p. 34). Within the United States, Cainkar (2009) argues that Muslim women are seen as a symbolic threat to the American ideal of freedom. If the women sporting the hijab chose to wear the veil, they are understood as having rejected rights protected by the constitution. It is a confounding paradox; Muslim women’s rights to freedom of religion and speech seem to put in question the very nature of these rights.

While not all Muslim women are women of color, as demonstrated above, all women who observe the hijab are read as being racially different. It is important to note that not all Muslim women observe the hijab³, and their choice has no bearing in their belonging in the Ummah, the global Muslim community. However, this essay focuses specifically on hibajis (women who

³ While the term hijab is usually associated with the piece of cloth that covers a woman’s hair. Hijab, in Arabic, means to cover, and Muslim women can observe the hijab in various different ways.

observe the hijab) because of how their bodies are read in the United States and its educational system. The covered Muslim woman body's "embodied relationships to the world and themselves, once understood as an enactment of structures of inequality, often serve as the theatre in which already known projects, affects, and commitments are played out" (Mahmood, 2001 p. 224). Jacqui Alexander (2005) affirms that "the body thus becomes a site of memory" (p. 297), not only personal memory, though that is part of it too, but also a collective historical past that is engraved on our bodies. In short, the history of Orientalist cultural production and policy, as well as War on Terror rhetoric, is imposed on Muslim students bodies.

Further, in the context of the War on Terror, women have been used to explain and justify invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, then First Lady Laura Bush mentioned in a speech in 2001 that, "Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorist" (Bush, 2001). Afghan and Iraqi women were depicted by the White House and media outlets as being helpless victims that needed to be saved by the West. As Leti Volpp (2003) argues, "by positioning 'other' women as perennial victims, it denies their potential to be understood as emancipatory subjects... it [also] diverts one's gaze from the sexism indigenous to U.S. culture and politics" (p. 398). In the ongoing reification of status and societal place, it is by defining Muslim women as victims needing to be saved that the construction of the liberated Western woman is possible, and it is in part by pointing to the perceived limitations of Muslim women that the constraints of Western patriarchy are rendered invisible.

This discussion is particularly relevant when it comes to Muslim women living in the West. In 2004, France passed legislation that forbade all religious symbols from being displayed in public institutions. Though the policy banned crucifixes, yarmulke, turbans and headscarfs, it was clearly

designed to affect the growing population of Muslim women who immigrated to France from former colonies or are children of immigrant Muslim parents. In accordance with what is understood by White French people as being the *true* French identity, then “French President Jacques Chirac stated that, “France ‘would lose her soul’ if she succumbed to Anglo-American multiculturalism” (Wing, 2002 p. 755) and allowed schools to become a site for the display of religious difference. Or, as Aziz (2012) argues, “the headscarf “marks” women as sympathetic to the enemy, presumptively disloyal, and forever foreign” (p. 3). Joan Scott (2007) argues that in France, the hijab-wearing young in school was a threat to the French republic and its ideals of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality.

It would therefore appear that it is impossible to be truly French and wear a headscarf. Despite President Chirac’s views of what he saw as the differences between what is inherently French and American multiculturalism, the situation in the U.S is not much different than the one faced by Muslim women in France. In Houston, TX, for instance, a Muslim young woman attending a public high school was told that she had to have a permission slip in order to wear hijab to class. Making an already difficult context even more so, the intersectionality of race, gender and religion is similarly overlooked by “Muslim civil rights advocacy organizations, women’s rights organizations, or civil liberties advocates” (Aziz, 2012 p. 1). Aziz (2012) continues, noting that the understanding of the headscarf in the United States is not that different from the French perspective since it marks Muslim women “as an unassimilable foreigner with the attendant suspicions of disloyalty and anti-Americanism” (p.10). Similarly to its French counterpart, American understanding of liberty requires that Muslim women embraced the perceived freedom of not veiling. “Muslim women are both visible targets and silent victims” (Aziz, p. 1), because they are easily observed but also not allowed to express their opinions of decisions made about their own lives.

For example, in response to French law, Wing (2002) observed that a vital perspective was missing in the public discussion about headscarves, the women who would be affected by the policy. Similarly Arshad Ali (2014) argues that Muslim young women are not included in conversations around policies that regulate their bodies in schools. This lack of Muslim women's voices in the debate about the policy on public display of religious symbols is discursively similar to Laura Bush's speech; Muslim women need to be saved by the West. Said discourses work to further "the negative stigmatization of these women who have been essentialized in the West as voiceless, faceless, exploited people whose customs and religion cast them in an inferior status" (Wing p. 167). Despite the rhetoric around help and freedom, the West is the one rendering Muslim women voiceless. This hypervisibility, however, creates a paradox: women wearing hijab are surveilled everywhere but not allowed to present their truths.

My first work with young people was at an afterschool program in a suburban elementary school. Though the school had a sizable Latinx population, Amina, a third grader, was the only Black student in the whole school. She was also the only Muslim student and wore hijab. Amina was bright, not only was she "school smart" but she was also "street smart," always with a clever answer to the snarky comments her peers made about her religion and her traditional garment. One day, she surprised me, arriving to the program with her head down and holding back tears. I asked her if she was okay, and she said yes but asked me if I thought she should take off her hijab. I told Amina it was up to her to decide how to follow her faith but asked what had happened that day to make her want to take such a possibly drastic change.

“My friends always ask me why I cover my head. They’ve asked me if I’m bald, if I had cancer... I’m usually okay with it. I tell them about being Muslim and how it is part of my religion”.

“Ok”, I said, “it seems like this is going on for a while... Have you talked to your teacher about that... That it bothers you when they ask you these questions”.

She shook her head. “They wouldn’t do anything” she said. I asked her how she knew how teachers would behave if she had not yet talked to them. “Today, during recess, these boys... 6th graders I think, decided to pull off my hijab... I told them it was haram⁴. I can’t show my hair when boys are around. But they kept doing it. Mrs. White and Mr. Smith were there. I know they saw it. They just didn’t do anything”.

Spirit Injuries and Soul Wounds

Wing and Smith (2005) use the term “spirit injury” (p. 779) to describe the deep consequences of racism and sexism, the “psychological, spiritual, and cultural effects of multiple types of assaults upon women” (p.779). The concept of “spirit injury” is similar to the idea of “soul wound” as described by Pizarro (2005). Both constructs account for the invisible scars that discrimination and microaggressions cause in the receiver of such offenses. However, “soul wounds” also take into consideration the added effect of centuries of colonization and imperial domination that communities of colors have suffer as “the memory of our ancestors lives deep within our consciousness” (Pizarro, 2005 p. 267). The young women in these counterstories carry the weight of the indignities suffered by their foremothers. Wars, bombs, deaths, in the name of freedoms they did not know they did not have. Hundreds of years of colonization and imperialist policies have displaced them, imposing a new form of colonization on their bodies. They are to shed, literally and figuratively, their culture and religion in

⁴ Haram means something forbidden by Allah, a sin.

order to be worthy of West's "freedom". For Muslim women in the United States, freedom is not free. On the contrary, it comes at a high of a cost that often materializes in the form of laws and educational policies that are designed to alienate and humiliate these young women. These policies that are not created in a vacuum, they are not neutral nor are they objective. Rather, they work to perpetuate of systemic racism, sexism and anti-Muslim sentiments that deepen the pain of soul wounds/spirit injuries, which "ha[ve] been reborn in each generation" (Pizarro, 2005, p. 267).

In the French context, the history of colonization and imperial domination of Arabs, especially those of the Maghreb region needs to be taken in consideration when analyzing the way Frenchness and Muslim-ness are seen as incompatible. While more studies could be done to understand the matter of the compatibility of American-ness and Muslim-ness; the counternarratives presented here demonstrate that, in fact, Muslims are consistently and continuously seen as foreigners on American soil. Young Muslim women living in the West often find themselves in a complicated situation; despite being "quite comfortable with their racial identity [they] are still struggling to find a way to be comfortable in a society that challenges their worth" (Pizarro, 2005, p.268). Narratives about the experiences of these young women in the American educational system provide great examples of how their ethnic and religious identities are constantly under attack despite the multicultural discourse that present in schools around the U.S (Wing & Smith, 2006).

As part of a leadership program, my High School students where in charge of creating a skit to represent interactions they have with the school staff. Afra played the school principal. She entered the room, her posture perfect and a smile on her face; she turns to the other young women, extending her hand for a handshake, and tells them "I'm principal Afra. It is

so nice to meet you! You are all beautiful! Where do you come from?” The girls playing the role of students answer. Ethiopia. Eritrea. Nepal. “Well, that is nice,” continues Afra, “you are all so beautiful and I’m happy you are here!” The skit continued as the students had a conversation with Principal Afra about the issues plaguing their school, unhealthy foods, not enough choices for students that for religious reasons did not eat meat or pork, strict access to driver’s ed, school schedule and bullying. After the activity we debriefed the skits, Afra’s character was by far the favorite of all of the students. When asked where she got her inspiration from, Afra said that “all the principals, you know in elementary school, middle school and stuff, talked to us like that. First thing they ask is where we are from, than they tell us we are beautiful.” The other students nodded in agreement. Afra continued “I’m not sure why they feel like telling me I’m beautiful all the time. I mean, I know I’m gorgeous”, the room bursts into laughter, “but every day damn...” Afra’s twin sister, Naima jumps into the conversation by explaining that “when they ask me where I’m from, I know they don’t want me to say Utah. That’s where I was born. My parents arrived in Salt Lake when my mother was pregnant. But I know what people want to hear so I always tell people I’m from Somalia, even though I have never been outside of the state of Utah”.

Conclusion

This paper combines the tradition of Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and counterstory telling to illustrate how Muslim young women suffer discrimination and racialization in schools. The first section argues that CRF provides a significant set of tools to analyze the indignities that Muslim women in the global West are submitted to because it places intersectional identities as the front and center of its theorizing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand the multiple ways that policies and laws continue to fail these young women without consideration for all of the aspects of their identity. CRF also accounts for the “spirit injuries” and “soul

wounds” that hundreds of years of colonial, imperial, racist, sexist and anti-Islamic practices have caused. Muslim women’s bodies carry the burden of being the Other. There is a longstanding dialogue of scholars who have unpacked the myth of the exotic Oriental others who are often seen through representations of covered, voiceless, or scared Muslim women (Ali, 2014; Cainkar, 2009; Lughod, 2002; Stabile & Kumar, 2005) This article imbricates such theories with narratives to push back on the narrow space spaces that these counterstories are often given, not only in the mainstream society but also in academia. All the inclusive policies and multicultural lesson plans in the world will not solve the real issue; the bias against Muslims that permeate all institutional layers of our society. Evans-Winter and Esposito (2010) argued that it is only by listening to voices that have not been heard before that meaningful changes in education will be achieved. It is those who view schools from the margin that will provide us with new perspectives.

Muslima and Raghda were inseparable friends, so much so that they told their White peers that they were twins. They took every single class together and could not bear to be without each other. Their relationship was so close that I found myself confused one spring day when Muslima came running into the computer lab by herself. I was surprised she came to me alone. “Where is your twin?”, I asked her. She had a worksheet in her hand. “Look at this”, she said. She handed me a Geography worksheet entitled “World Religions: Islam”. Written in what appeared to be Arabic (I don’t speak the language so I was not sure) boarded both sides of the paper. Before I was done inspecting the worksheet, Muslima said “It says Allah is great. All. Around. The paper”. She was really upset. “When I was leaving the classroom I already saw a bunch of worksheets on the floor. People are just throwing this paper into the garbage, ripping it up, and step on it”. In Islamic tradition, the printed name of Allah is sacred, the only proper way to dispose of it is by

burning the piece of paper in which it is written. I asked Muslima if she wanted to go talk to her teacher. I suggested that , maybe he did not know. “I’ll accompany you,” I told her. But she did not feel comfortable discussing the incident with the teacher so I asked if she wanted to go talk to the assistant principal, who had been supportive of our program. She agreed. We walked to the front office, where we found Mrs. Cutler standing by the door. “Muslima wants to talk to you, do you have a minute”? Mrs. Cutler smiled and we moved to the hallway. Muslima showed her the paper and explained the problem. Mrs. Cutler listened attentively and responded, “I will talk to Mr. Baker. I’m not sure if this is district approved material. If it isn’t I will ask him to stop using it. If it is, we can come up with a plan for next year where we cover the Arabic writing with some paper when we make copies.” Muslima was satisfied with the solution, maybe Mr. Baker was unaware of what was happening. The young woman followed up with the Assistant Principal, who explained that her she had talked to the teacher.

The next year Mrs. Cutler was transferred to a new school, Muslima moved on to high school, and a year later, another Muslim student came running to the computer room waiving “World Religions: Islam” and yelling “it’s haram, it’s haram!”

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