
Unlearning the Arab Muslim Hyphen:

A More Equitable Discussion of Muslims in the Global North

ABSTRACT Hyphenated identities continue to be prominent in twenty-first century scholarship meant to uncover and confront assimilative structures of power in the Global North. However, the “Arab-Muslim” hyphen, in particular, continues to be used as a convention without a proper examination of its assimilative and racial dimensions. This commentary confronts the power dynamics at play in the use of the hyphen and calls for a more equitable understanding of Muslimness as it intersects and diverges from American Arabness. Ultimately, this commentary seeks to build from the already vigorous resistance to xenophobia and ethnocentricity in Muslim Studies, Arab American Studies, and other branches of Ethnic Studies by calling attention to the ways in which the hyphen counteracts the scholarly imperative of equity at the center of these frameworks of inquiry. **KEYWORDS** assimilation, racialization, Arab American, hyphenated identities, Arab-Muslim, Muslimness, decolonial, intersectionality

For me, writing about Muslim social and cultural practices is extremely important in that they are constitutive of the formation of transnational communities, political subjectivities, and decolonial forms of active social engagement. This scholarly agenda, though complex already in its investments in multiple scholarly fields, was made all the more difficult by its complicated relationship with the widespread convention of the hyphenated “Arab-Muslim” identity. The more I delved into an exploration of how Muslimness is discussed in scholarship, including scholarship that was meant to reject the denigration of Muslim ways of life in the Global North, the more aware I became of the need for a scholarly corrective to the Arab Muslim hyphen and a nuanced recognition of the power dynamics that make it a legitimate framework for critique.

It is important to historicize the hyphen’s use before delving into a discussion of its current function, thereby recognizing the ways in which it arose out of a need to recast a term originally used to denigrate. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century United States, the “disembodied category: the hyphenated American” was used as “phraseology” meant to denigrate what was presumed to be the “divided loyalty” of the migrant “foreigner.”¹ During this period of time, it was employed in complex ways to signify anti-migration in the public sphere and then became a feature of assimilationist political rhetoric in journalism and government to support an “Americanism” agenda.²

1. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, 2nd ed. (Rutgers University Press, 1992), 198.

2. Theodore Roosevelt, “True Americanism,” *American Ideals and Other Essays, Social and Political* (Best Books, 1897), 14–32.

Ultimately, it served nativism within the United States that, in its ethnocentric nationalism, draws on “cultural antipathies” and “translates them into a zeal to destroy the enemies of a distinctively American way of life.”³

The “hyphenated American” subsequently became reclaimed by postcolonial critics in the same way that many other terms and categorizations with xenophobic and other-phobic histories have been recast to empower. Postcolonial scholars in the Global North found this term an especially useful way of discussing the vilification of Middle Eastern Muslims during the colonial period and subsequently in Europe and the United States. For scholars, the hyphen became both a form of multiculturalism and its converse, the rejection of the melting pot ideals of earlier US politics. W. M. Verhoeven describes hyphenation as a “linguistically neutral and politically correct short-hand for multiculturalism,” adding that it “has traditionally been regarded as a way of dealing with these ethno-political tensions.”⁴ Though this author differentiates between the function of hyphenation in the US and Canadian contexts, he argues nonetheless that hyphenation plays an important role in social diversification. Hamid Naficy also emphasizes the recasting of the hyphen, but in a way that explores it as a tool for cultural resistance. He argues that the adoption of the hyphen in contemporary cultural productions, within what he calls “identity cinema,” functions “as a marker of resistance to the homogenizing and hegemonizing power of the American melting pot ideology.”⁵ Thus, though these scholars differ in their understanding of the function of the hyphen, they both see it as a way to engage with diverse experiences of marginalized peoples. It is clear, therefore, that an examination of hyphenated identities continues to factor in scholarship meant to uncover and confront assimilative structures of power in the Global North.

However, the Arab Muslim hyphen continues to be used as a convention without proper examination of the relationship between it and the assimilative and racial role that it often plays. For example, in “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” a groundbreaking call for co-resistance to the logics of oppression (capitalism, colonialism, Orientalism, and heteropatriarchy) that can impact “people of color organizing,” Andrea Smith uses the forward slash to hyphenate the positionalities of Arab and Muslim women. In doing so, however, her intersectional argument inadvertently slips into erasing communities of Muslim women. Smith describes that

the premise behind much “women of color” organizing is that women from communities victimized by white supremacy should unite together around their shared oppression. This framework might be represented by a diagram of five overlapping circles, each marked Native women, Black women, Arab/Muslim Women, Latinas and Asian American women, overlapping like a Venn diagram.⁶

3. Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*: 4.

4. W. M. Verhoeven, “How Hyphenated Can You Get?: A Critique of Pure Ethnicity,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 29, no. 3 (1996): 97.

5. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 15.

6. Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” In *Transformations: Feminist Pathways to Global Change: An Analytical Anthology*, edited by Torry D. Dickinson and Robert K. Schaeffer (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 265.

Further along in the article, Smith replaces the forward slash with a solitary mention of Arab women. Muslims who do not identify with the linguistic, cultural, geographical, or political nature of Arabness come to be, therefore, folded into the category of Arab women and, by virtue of this, inadvertently assimilated in Smith's text—which, I must say, is quite obviously a profound and impactful rejection of “frameworks” that homogenize the experiences of communities.

What makes Arab Muslim hyphenation dangerous (be it through the added hyphen or the forward slash) is that it obscures power hierarchies that infiltrate the way in which scholarship about US Muslims is conceived. We see this expressed in *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers*, where Amal Talaat Abdelrazaq describes that “in a political environment of increasing hostility toward Islam, Arab American women writers demonstrate the face of Islam—neither as essential and monolithic nor mere passive victim.”⁷ In Abdelrazaq's statement, Arab women, in their heterogeneity, become the visible representation and a marker of legitimacy for Muslim communities that, themselves, are quite heterogeneous. This important challenge to the denigration and essentialization of Muslim women, therefore, becomes entangled in the assimilation of Muslimness into Arabness—an assimilation of the experiences of Black Muslims, Latino Muslims, and other marginalized peoples who make up the majority of Muslims around the globe.

Loubna Qutami's author notes in “Censusless: Arab/Muslim Interpolation into Whiteness and the War on Terror” add to this examination of the hyphen by pointing to function of the hyphen as racial lexicon. Qutami describes that “when discussing systemic forms of oppression and racialization, I discuss Arab/Muslim subjectivity together because racial lexicons do not decipher between the two.”⁸ It is this very racial lexicon of which Qutami writes, not the authors mentioned or their texts, that reinforces the flattening of Muslim experiences and the ethnicization of Muslimness. Therefore, to leave this power-laden convention unchallenged is extremely dangerous.

The complexities of hyphenated identities, in that they “contain within themselves a bi-polarity, a movement between cultural identity and nation states,” necessitates that the nature of this convention in Critical Ethnic Studies be questioned.⁹ If this dual polarity is the structural logic of the hyphenated identity, we must consider how she who is identified with both poles occupies a central position, even if the hyphen is a disruptive mechanism of belonging and displacement. The Arab Muslim hyphen results in Arabness and Muslimness becoming the normalizing exemplar of experiences of Muslims and Arabs. Therefore, it becomes an exclusive identity position.

One could go even further to posit that the bipolarity described by Hussain is too eerily reminiscent of the racial binary, in which nature and culture function as two poles

7. Amal Talaat Abdelrazaq, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (Cambria Press, 2007), 4.

8. Loubna Qutami, “Censusless: Arab/Muslim Interpolation into Whiteness and the War on Terror,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 2 (June 2020): 164.

9. Nasser Hussain, “Hyphenated Identity: Nationalistic Discourse, History, and the Anxiety of Criticism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*,” *Qui Parle* 3, no. 2 (1989): 1.

that are, nonetheless, mutually constitutive. Gilroy reminds us that “nature and culture may have functioned as neatly exclusive poles in early modern thought, but as the organic overtones of the word ‘culture’ reveal, the boundaries between them have always been porous.”¹⁰ When the hyphenation for Arabs and Muslims indicates an in-betweenness, there is a risk that biology is conflated with linguistic or regional identifications. In this case, Muslims who are not Arab are not even subsumed and assimilated, but racialized and denigrated.

We see the function of this exclusive categorization in the writings of Black Muslim authors. Well-known author Jamillah Ashira Karim, for example, describes how her experience of Muslim commonality was impacted by her positionality as a Black woman. She argues that her “peers were not willing to see the African American cause as a ‘Muslim’ cause. For many of them, a ‘Muslim’ cause was one that had to do with Muslims only. This type of worldview separated me from my second-generation American friends at the same time that our common identity as Muslim students made the connection between us inescapable.”¹¹ The understanding that Muslimness is a region-specific practice reinforces its conception in the Global North as an ethnic category and furthers problematic stereotypes about the foreignness of Muslimness. This impacts *both* Muslims who identify with Arabness and those who do not, in that they both come to be relegated collectively as the existential threat in the Global North.

I would, therefore, venture to ask whether it might be justified for scholars to do away with the hyphen as to allow for a more nuanced, politically aware, and inclusive understanding of Muslimness. However, I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge my hesitancy to do so. As I write, Arabs are experiencing intensified xenophobia not only in the media or politics, but also in institutions of the Global North. In July of this year, the Arab American Studies Association (AASA) published an open letter urging “the California Department of Education to retain Arab American Studies as an exemplary dimension of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum” after efforts were made to exclude it in high schools.¹² The AASA rightly called for recognition of the “decades of research and teaching that place Arab American lives, cultures, and histories at the center of inquiries into the racialized operations of gender, sexuality, nationalism, immigration, war, political economy.”¹³ The importance of centering Arab American voices is indeed not only warranted, but a necessary component of equitable and decolonial pedagogies.

With that said, and if we take the assertion made by hooks, Anzaldúa, and others about the margins being the site of resistance and locus of social critique, we must also recognize that Arabness and Muslimness both offer a way to understand structures of power and the Other in the Global North, while also facilitating, in their intersections

10. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 33.

11. Jamillah Ashira Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah* (New York University Press, 2009), 9.

12. “An Open Letter from Ethnic Studies Scholars in Support of Arab American Studies Curriculum in California High Schools,” *Arab American Studies Association*, July 2020. <http://arabamericanstudies.org/an-open-letter-from-ethnic-studies-scholars-in-support-of-arab-american-studies-curriculum-in-california-high-schools/>

13. “An Open Letter from Ethnic Studies Scholars in Support of Arab American Studies Curriculum in California High Schools”

and tensions, the various forms of social positioning that facilitate communal resistance and self-actualization. It thus follows that, in order to combat what Fadda-Conrey calls the “limited readings of Arab and Muslim bodies in the U.S.,” there needs to be “a transformative project” in both Arab American Studies and the engagement with Muslimness, which “captures the complexity and heterogeneity of their communities,” while also interrogating the power dynamics of the “racial” lexicon underlying the conflation of the two subject positions.¹⁴ ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to scholars who have been a beacon of academic generosity and scholarly rigor in the English Department at Marquette University. I offer my gratitude to Dr. Jodi Melamed, for her humanity, mentorship, and guidance through many sessions of exploration and complex social and cultural critique. I would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Samantha Majhor for “worlding” my engagement with Indigenous Studies in a way that has imprinted itself onto my work and being.

14. Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.