

Thinking Twice: Uses of Comedy to Challenge Islamophobic Stereotypes

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Abstract

This research and writing is presented as a “pre-curriculum,” containing theoretical frameworks within which antiracist educators may apply their talents and sensitivities towards opening dialogue and critical exploration of the functioning of Islamophobia. Resistance to sustained examination of dominant Islamophobic stereotypes in this time of ongoing military aggression towards Muslim populations internationally and racial and religious discrimination domestically, poses exceptional challenges. Entrenched media representations and political discourse on both right and left tend towards demonization at worst or flattening and invisibilization at best. Oftentimes dedicated, sophisticated facilitators who are immersed in antioppression curriculum and antiracism work in particular, share that they “hit a wall” when it comes to Islamophobia, or express a distancing lack of knowledge. This paper poses the inquiry: How can political humor and social justice comedy effectively open up greater curiosity, deeper engagement, and interrogation of Islamophobic and anti-Arab narratives, and illuminate the deployment of stereotypes with a critical media literacy lens? Strategic incorporation of comedic “texts” offers a form of epistemological inquiry that can surface and problematize what is “known.” As diverse comic artists employ humor as educational bridge-building outreach, antiracist educators can in turn draw from this prolific material as pedagogical

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Why engage topics that are not laughing matters with humor? Among diverse strategies to invite critical reflection within the classroom, the incorporation of socially conscious humor and comedy clips can serve the ongoing project of critical inquiry towards social justice and (re)humanization. As an undergraduate educator who focuses on racism and militarism, I notice how quickly attention can disengage with numbness or a flaring up of prejudice. I have also often observed how the room shifts into warmth with the introduction of an Axis of Evil Comedy clip, as a more curious listening is sparked by hearing this troupe's name alone, attaching "comedy" to the Bush administration's term. A similar shift occurs by inviting analysis of the media build-up to war against Iran with *The Onion* headline, "Iran Worried U.S. Might Be Building 8,500th Nuclear Weapon." "Getting" the humor frequently works on multiple levels, by getting the wider context that is eclipsed with a fear-mongering spotlight on the enemy Other, reversing the gaze, and inviting critical dialogue. This paper is based on years of experimentation strategically using humor in the classroom to engage distancing and biases particularly associated with Islamophobia. It also draws from interviews I conducted with Muslim American comedians, and research for a paper presented at the Fourth Annual International Conference on the Study of Islamophobiaⁱ at the University of California—Berkeley in 2013.

In both educational and antioppression facilitation environments, it seems that sustained concern with anti-Muslim racism is underexamined, peripheral, or absent. I was struck by the Intersections Radio interview with social justice educator, artist, and activist Amer Ahmed. He expressed shock at the feedback

from participants in his White Privilege Conference (WPC) session "White America's Islamophobia," who expressed how little they knew about the realities Muslim American communities are facing, as "This is one of the most salient issues of racism going on in our society" (Intersections Radio, 2013). He draws attention to the [pervasive avoidance](#) of Islamophobia being discussed in social justice education, which resonated with my observations in different settings over time, as a non-Muslim educator working with groups who are mostly non-Muslim and not of Middle Eastern descent. This avoidance is significant, during a time of U.S. foreign policies of military occupation and aggression against Muslim majority countries, domestic policies of profiling and surveillance of Muslim communities and institutions, hate crimes and bullying (targeting Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim), anti-Muslim rhetoric in political campaigns, curtailing of civil liberties, and the mid-2010 poll that revealed a fifth of Americans believe President Obama is a Muslim, seen as a suspicious, non-American identity.

I would like to argue that those of us who are not targeted by Islamophobia (both racial and religious targeting) know far more than we may think we do about how its core stereotypes operate. Indeed, we have all been a captive passive audience to Islamophobic narratives broadcast through news, film, television, literature, political speeches, and ads, prior to 9/11 and with heightened intensity and frequency since.

The pedagogical strategies and resources presented in this paper are intended to focus critical reflection on dominant narratives that naturalize anti-Muslim sentiment and policy, with comic techniques that have arisen since the early

2000s to challenge stereotypes openly. The comic material I am drawing from is not about the “truth” of Islam, or in-depth analyses of domestic and foreign policy or politics in the Middle East, but rather about seeing with greater lucidity the frames through which our nation is conditioned to see the “enemy Other.”

Oftentimes a media collage is a highly effective tool to make plain this cumulative and subconscious familiarity of narratives. To illustrate the repetitive demonized and degraded images of Muslims and Arabs that have bombarded American imaginations for generations, filmmaker Jacqueline Salloum (2005) combined footage from scores of movies and television programs in her trailer-esque montage [Planet of the Arabs](#) to illustrate this systemic racism in American popular media. This short film is an inspired tribute to the work of Dr. Jack Shaheen (2001), whose epic analysis *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, reviews nearly 1,000 feature films from early silent film to today’s blockbusters that portray Arab and Muslim characters, to reveal an overwhelming majority of more than 900 negative, narrow, homogenous, and villainous stereotypical depictions. He continued this analysis of the ongoing and historic connection between fiction, film, public opinion, and public policies post-9/11, calling attention to the consequences of leaving these caricatures unexamined, stating, “During times of war, government campaigns and media systems exert an especially strong influence in helping to create and shape public attitudes about the other” (Shaheen, 2008, xxii). The ubiquity of anti-Muslim representation in the contemporary media landscape has become so normalized as to be unremarkable, invisible, or unconscious among people not targeted by Islamophobia. Yet it can take

little to ignite the latent collective expertise of this background of produced stereotypes for popular consumption and political agendas. Educators may be familiar with analyses of cinematic portrayals of African Americans and Native Americans over many decades, such as Marlon Riggs’s *Ethnic Notions* (1987), or Ward Churchill’s *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians* (1992), and be able to draw connections to *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001).

Socially critical jokes serve to make this unthinking absorption explicit and open space to recognize their entrenched familiarity, a space social justice educators can artfully use to guide critical analysis. Forms of humor can bring into a sharp focus the humanity that the blurry lens of Islamophobic stereotypes distorts. They do not mock injustice, but mock the taken-for-granted assumptions that uphold injustice as normal.

In the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes, there are key historical connections between dominant U.S. culture’s denial to targeted groups of a capacity to have a sense of humor, both in general and specifically about jokes that serve to normalize inequity and violence (unable to “get” or “take” jokes). Monolithic representations of Muslims echo historic and contemporary stereotypes of the “angry black man,” “angry black woman,” or of “angry, un-funny” feminists and other groups fighting oppression. This discourse of negation undermines core aspects of being seen as fully human, as humor (conceived as a sense) is a fundamental communication realm of bonding and generating shared symbolic and social meaning within different cultural contexts. Against this backdrop, the more specific level of denial of humor functions to dismiss

sociopolitical causes for anger at injustice, discrimination and violence, pathologizing the targeted group for not being able to share laughter at jokes that demean them.

Conversely, targeted groups are often simultaneously portrayed in popular media as superficial comic relief, and incompetent buffoons. PBS's *America at a Crossroads* film [STAND UP: Muslim American Comics Come of Age](#) cites the "age-old tradition of immigrants using comedy to combat discrimination," and presents diverse work that shows there is no contradiction to being Muslim and American, and observes, "Most Americans might view the phrase *Muslim comic* as an oxymoron" (Baker, Naim, & Cardillo, 2008).

Selected examples, discussion questions, resources, and grounding frameworks to help hold and guide reflective inquiry are offered in this paper, intended specifically for college, graduate or adult learners, given the sensitivity or "adult-themes" of some of the material and issues. The reference list contains links for ongoing education and exploration, both for students and educators. An immense digital wealth of material is available online,ⁱⁱ allowing for this material to be appreciated beyond comedy venues.

Frameworks

Andrea Smith presents the framework of "three pillars of white supremacy" that identifies the ways in which "white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated logics" (Smith, 2006, p. 67). She names the three pillars Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Colonialism, and Orientalism/War, and summarizes this third pillar as animating xenophobic racism, configuring immigrants as a perpetual foreign threat to the U.S. world order:

The logic of Orientalism marks certain peoples or nations as inferior and as posing a constant threat to the well-being of empire. ... These people are still seen as "civilizations"—they are not property or "disappeared"—however they will always be imagined as permanent foreign threats to empire. Consequently, Orientalism serves as an anchor for war, because it allows the United States to justify being in a constant state of war to protect itself from its enemies. (p. 68)

A traditional definition of "Orientalism" is a Eurocentric way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, and distorts representation of Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies as compared to Europe, a form of knowledge/power that portrays the Eastern Other as exotic, barbaric, dangerous, mysterious, timeless, and static, in opposition to the Euro-Christian "self" as rational, civilized, enlightened, modern, and dynamic. European Orientalist scholars provided ongoing rationalization for European colonialism in which the West defined its superiority against the essentialized East as different and inferior, therefore in need of Western intervention, control, or "rescue." Numerous works provide analysis and historical context on "rescue narratives" in Orientalist and Islamophobic discourses, and the particular form of "saving" Muslim women, characterized by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as "white men saving brown women from brown men," such as Deepa Kumar's illuminating historical overview of ["imperialist feminism."](#) In "The Making of the Arab Menace," Rayan El-Amine (2005) connects forms of representation, national attitudes, and foreign policy that underlie the

forceful resilience of current anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, as he summarizes, “It is easier to justify control of a region when you demonize and dehumanize its people and culture” (para. 8). Domestically, an established, well-funded fear industry bolsters, legitimizes, and disseminates anti-Muslim propaganda. For a recent in-depth report, see “[Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America](#)” (2011) by the Center for American Progress. In her comprehensive primer *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, Deepa Kumar (2012) confronts the “clash of civilizations” discourse, popularized by Samuel P. Huntington (1996), by redirecting attention to how “(T)he image of the menacing ‘Muslim threat’ has been mobilized largely by ruling elites to serve a political agenda, whether the domination of Europe by the papacy in the eleventh century or U.S. expansionism today. An external enemy is usually paired with an internal one against whom palpable fear and hatred are generated” (p. 193).

Edward Said (1997) states in the introduction to *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*:

I am not saying that Muslims have not attacked and injured Israelis and Americans in the name of Islam. But I am saying that much of what one reads and sees in the media about Islam represents the aggression as coming from Islam because that is what “Islam” is. Local and concrete circumstances are thus obliterated. In other words, covering Islam is a one-sided activity that obscures what “we” do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature are. (p. xxii)

Preparation to engage these issues in the classroom can be informed by familiarization with the historical roots, key ideologies, and regimes of representation that influence the present.

The term “Islamophobia” was first introduced as a concept in a 1991 and defined in a 1997 Runnymede Trust Report in the xenophobic context of Muslims in Europe as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (p. 2). The report pointed to commonly held attitudes and beliefs, such as: Islam is monolithic and cannot adapt to new realities; it does not share common values with other major faiths; it is archaic, barbaric, and irrational; and it is a violent political ideology.

Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism are not interchangeable, yet they share similar stereotyping, and the conflation of Muslim and Arab identities in media and political discourse focuses on the figure of the Arab Muslim as a national security threat. The majority of Muslims worldwide are not Arab, and most Arab Americans are Christian. Iranians are Persian, not Arab, yet they are often referred to as one people. This lumping together is integral to the functioning of Islamophobia, which targets individuals and diverse communities perceived to be Muslim with a broad scapegoating brush. The Sikh community in particular has been the victim of recurrent violence and hate crimes.

The framework of cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1997) informs the understanding of the key processes of stereotyping: Its method is to reduce, essentialize, naturalize, and fix “difference”; and to deploy a strategy of “splitting” the normal and acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable. It tends to occur where

there are gross inequalities of power, and thus serves as part of maintenance of the social and symbolic order (pp. 244-245). Contesting stereotypes may include the diversification of the range of images, inclusion of “positive” images (which may still be reductive), and most importantly for the discussion in this paper, strategies that take the images apart and creatively turn them against themselves. As Hall states, “Interrogating stereotypes makes them uninhabitable—it destroys their naturalness and normalcy” (p. 148). Humorous strategies contain the potential capacity to “unfix” dominant meanings, turn them against themselves, and affix new meanings that destabilize the underlying assumptions of Islamophobia. As anti-Muslim narratives and the injustices they rationalize continue, forms of creative comic resistance have arisen in direct response to break stereotypes.

A Decade of Humor Intervention

Said (1997) utilized the term “thought-stopping headlines” to point out the phenomenon of intentionally created visceral fear in the journalistic enterprise of “covering Islam.” As a counter to thought-stopping headlines, thought-provoking punchlines reopen and reignite critical thinking. Historian of humor Joseph Boskin observes, “Just as humor has been used as a weapon of insult and intimidation by dominant groups, so it has been used as a weapon for resistance and retaliation by minorities” (as cited in Lewis, 2006, p. 14). As the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” began, Muslim American and Arab American comics began to intervene individually and collectively into the atmosphere of extreme polarization, hate, fear, and violence. A number of stand-up comedians shifted their material to candidly confront Islamophobia, openly identify as

Muslim on stage, or leave former jobs to engage audiences through the immediacy of stand-up, driven by activist concern.

Iranian American comedian Tissa Hami regularly employed visual switching in her physical appearance, entering the stage in *hijab* (headscarf) and *chador* (long outer covering) and then taking them off part way through her routine to undermine assumptions projected onto Muslim women and show that she is the same person covered or not (Baker et al., 2008; Hami, 2008). Dean Obeidallah, who had previously worked under his middle name of Dean Joseph, began to use his Arab last name and use that choice as material: “My last name is Obeidallah, I know many people here can relate to this, for the non-Middle Eastern people, do you know what it’s like being of Arab heritage with a Muslim last name living in America the last few years? I could use a hug [laughter]” (Simon, 2008).

The troupe Allah Made Me Funny, conceived in 2003 by veteran African American Muslim comedian Preacher Moss grew to become the historic longest-running collective of Muslim American comic performers, along with Azhar Usman and Mohammed Amer. Palestinian Americans Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah founded the New York Arab American Comedy festival in the same year to change the way people of Middle Eastern descent are perceived and to showcase the works of Arab American comic artists. In 2005, in response to the Bush administration’s use of the label “Axis of Evil,” to demonize Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani, and Aron Kader formed the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, which performed worldwide until the group disbanded in 2011. Egyptian American comedian and actor Ahmed Ahmed stated in the PBS film *STAND UP: Muslim American Comics*

Come of Age, “We can’t define who we are on a serious note because nobody will listen. So the only way to do it is to be funny about it” (Baker et al., 2008).

These comic first responders shaped the emergence of the prolific genres of Muslim American and Arab American political comedy, continuing in the tradition of stand-up comedians who have used the stage as a platform for social commentary and criticism and examination of the processes of identity formation, belonging, and difference in the United States. Socially critical stand-up comedy is a unique analytical vehicle to reveal public engagement with stereotypes and realities that individuals and communities face.

Among core anti-Muslim representations, the stereotype of inherent humorlessness is both glue for racist othering and its weak spot. The denial of humor and embodiment of severe threat create a highly generative backdrop. Comedian and actress Zahra Noorbakhsh explains the relation between the current context of Islamophobia and Muslim American comedy as a distinct phenomenon of our times:

It’s ripe ground for comedy. Subverting is what comedy does. ... I think there’s a lot of absurdity inherent in the assumptions people make, which makes it easy to make jokes about—through naming it or claiming it, for me to get up on stage and be like “I’m Muslim, so look out!,” you know, it’s ridiculous, playing with hyperbole. ... Comedians are in a great position to reveal a lot of that absurdity. (personal communication, February 25, 2013)

In examination of the “ripe ground” for the art form of comic inversions, sociologist Mucahit Bilici (2010) states,

Muslim ethnic comedy is part of the Americanization process: the power of comedy becomes a means of undoing otherness. The comic vision rehumanizes Muslims and allows comedians to engage in a symbolic reversal of the social order. Muslim ethnic comedy is the world of Islamophobia turned upside down. (p. 207)

Many phenomenal educational outreach programs to reduce ignorance and prejudice attempt to fill gaps in what nontarget groups don’t know. A complementary pedagogical strategy is to engage what people do “know”—the inherited filters, inherited “truths,” and controlling images that reinforce rigid ideas, block counterinformation, and normalize injustice. Humor interventions are able to stir up what is “known” as an audience enters into a shared experiential understanding of “getting” social and political context through getting the joke. Comic performance has the ability to bypass barriers that reinforce stereotypes, potentially transforming their unreflective acceptance into an object for critical inquiry.

Comedy as Critical Pedagogy

Azhar Usman enters the stage and opens his recorded set for the documentary film of the comedy group Allah Made Me Funny by taking direct aim at the stereotype of humorlessness to set the tone and make space for the rest of his act. An Indian American Muslim man who wears a full beard, he greets the audience with the line, “Hey listen, so let’s get this out of the way. I’m perfectly aware most of you have never

seen somebody who looks like me smile before” (Kalin, 2008), as he slowly breaks into a broad contagious grin and the audience laughs. His smile becomes the punchline against the background of what is normatively shown and “known” about Muslims: They do not smile or laugh. That successful subversion can occur at this basic human level is itself commentary on Islamophobia. What elicits laughter is often serious, as it arises from the combined tragedy of such a low representational bar and such high stakes in lived realities.

Much of the early stand-up material focused on airport anxieties, travel bans, no-fly lists, and discrimination based on name and appearance. Configuring Muslims as both internal and external enemies of the United States, the airport functions as a militarized border, a site of racial and religious discrimination and, as such, has been a prominent theme in Muslim stand-up comedy, to shine a light on common experiences of “flying while Muslim (FWM).” In *Axis of Evil’s* Comedy Central performance (2008), each performer enters the stage through a TSA scanner, in a mock ritual of screening by a security agent, the stage itself transformed into a symbolic airport (Simon, 2008). With *Allah Made Me Funny*, Usman shares with the audience that while he loves being a comic, he dislikes all the travelling: “The worst part about it is the moment when I have to walk into the airport. Come on people, you can write your own joke right there” (Kalin, 2008). He invites the collective knowledge of profiling from the mixed audience’s insider and outsider understandings.

A technique that connects with the audience as a form of educational critique is the sharing of questions and real life comments directed at the performers by friends and strangers not of Middle Eastern

descent: “Oh you’re Arab. But you look so nice!” “Oh you’re Arab! What a coincidence, I love Indian food” (Obeidallah cited in Simon, 2008); or the solicitation of “insider knowledge” on “the street” about when the next “terrorist hit will come” (Jobrani cited in Simon, 2008). Transformed into verbatim jokes in themselves, they give the opportunity to discredit unexamined assumptions and hear these forms of liberal racism and structured ignorance with louder clarity. In this vein, Queen Rania of Jordan’s 2008 YouTube project to dissolve stereotypes presents a similar opportunity for viewers to hear with greater comprehension common othering statements, as in the piece [“Don’t Call Me That!”](#) by comics and friends of Middle Eastern descent, sharing what they have been told or asked, ranging from “entertaining to unsettling to hateful.”

A collective form such as this gives space to think twice for nontarget listeners who have perhaps said, thought, or overheard these statements and questions. Unintentional and unaware biases are transformed into material for critical thinking, of both their harmfulness and ridiculousness.

Research on the use of humor in pedagogy, “How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!” (Garner, 2006) has focused on the creation of a positive learning environment, heightened engagement and receptivity, and increased retention of material. Strategic caution is advised, “For humor to be most effective in an academic setting, it must be specific, targeted, and appropriate to the subject matter” (p. 178).

Prompts (see reflection questions at end) used for pre- and post-viewing of clips focus engaged inquiry for dialogue in dyads, or small or large groups. The use of informal

writing in response to clips or films, or reaction papers, can further allow emotional space for students to consider the effects of stereotypes and the effects of humor as resistance. The focus on media provides an analytical distance, while inviting closer investigation of the internalization and institutionalization of Islamophobic narratives. Directing learning goals to a critical media space is important to minimize defensiveness that may arise; to avoid situations where students who come from communities living with and resisting anti-Muslim racism are put under pressure to explain and educate; to ensure that young veterans who may be grappling with the effects of war in their lives are not put on the spot; and to help students who are not targeted by Islamophobia to more deeply consider, without having to “out” prejudices or biases, how their perceptions are shaped.

Directly addressing what people do “know,” comic subversions serve as a form of epistemological inquiry. They invite questioning of what is known, where that knowledge comes from, and the power that produces it—these are key components of critical media literacy, the examination of the sea of images and messages in which we swim. This involves not only recognition of stereotypes on the level of awareness, but analysis of how they function, and critical exploration of systems that make them appear “normal.”

Destabilizing Media Frames

As James Baldwin observed, “The country’s image of the Negro, which hasn’t very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a kind of frightening accuracy the state of mind of the country” (as cited in Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. ix). Comic interventions hold up a mirror to the “mind of the country,” national obsessions,

fears, and fantasies. For example, in looking at the singular, one-dimensional image broadcast of Muslim men as frightening fundamentalist fanatics, the juxtaposition of the following two jokes in the Axis of Evil documentary point to deconstruction of what is portrayed inside the mainstream media frame, and questioning what is outside the frame.

Iranian American actor and comedian Maz Jobrani has delivered variations of this joke:

The thing that frustrates me is when you see us on TV nowadays, who do they always show? They always show the crazy dude burning the American flag [waving flag gesture] and going “Death to America!” Always that guy. Just once I wish they would show us doing something good [applause], just once, like, you know, baking a cookie or something. Right? ‘Cause I’ve been to Iran, we have cookies. Just once I want CNN to be like, “And now we’re going to go to Mohammed in Iran” and they go to some guy who’s like, “Hello, I’m Mohammed, and I’m just baking a cookie. I swear to God, no bombs, no flags, nothing. Back to you, Bob!” (as cited in Simon, 2008)

Ahmed Ahmed explains his transition from acting to comedy due to chronic typecasting in terrorist roles. He narrates his decision to audition for “terrorist #4,” not to try out for the part but to make fun of it, with an over-the-top exaggerated portrayal. Ahmed then switches to embody the enraptured face of the wide-eyed director who enthusiastically responded, “Yes ... show me more of the Middle Eastern anger ... that your people possess” (as cited in Simon, 2008). In the example of this one

joke, the century-long history behind Hollywood's *Reel Bad Arabs* is conveyed. "Importantly, as 'jokes' they condense a huge amount of cultural knowledge and the conventions that govern 'getting the humor'" (Hartigan, 2009, p. 5). Ahmed's autobiographical material exposes this marketing of stereotypes. It invites analysis of what demonized identities are broadcast inside the Hollywood frame and whose vision constructs it. Jobrani's joke provokes reflection of whose realities exist outside the frame, what is never shown, the humorous incongruity of the televised threatening specter contrasted with a glimpse of a disarmingly ordinary domestic moment.

Jamil Abu-Wardeh, who founded the Axis of Evil Middle East Comedy Tour to contribute to the "stand-up uprising" in the Arab world, outlines three key questions for media producers, "Is the Middle East being shown in current time, and correct context? Do theme characters laugh or smile, without showing the whites of their eyes?" (TED Talks, 2010, "Axis of Evil Middle East Comedy Tour"). While presented in a comic form, this is a mode to convey serious transformative considerations.

In the fall of 2013, [*The Muslims Are Coming!*](#) made its debut in theaters. Produced by Negin Farsad and Dean Obeidallah, this docu-comedy follows a road tour of Muslim American comedians through the United States to interact with people who have only ever "met" Muslims through the mainstream media. Crossing gaps of perception, they perform free shows followed by dialogue. They stage public interventions such as setting up an "Ask a Muslim" booth, or running a "Name That Religion" contest, during which they read quotes from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Qur'an and ask the public to guess the correct source; or standing with

signs that invite people to "Hug a Muslim" in town squares.

The tour and film seek to shift the discourse around Muslim Americans, citing the controversy over the "Ground Zero mosque," the perceived national threat of Shar'ia law, the FBI and NYPD surveillance of Muslim groups, the accusation that President Obama is a Muslim, and "the idea that Islam is somehow antithetical to American culture [that] just won't go away" (Farsad & Obeidallah, 2013). The stated ultimate goal is to highlight similarities between major religions, foreground overarching shared concerns, and to present an "Americanized" face of Islam, and, "to give you a new stereotype. Yeah, this movie is going to convince you that Muslims are just a bunch of hilarious people" (Farsad & Obeidallah, 2013). Negin Farsad explains, "If you've never had a Muslim friend, if this movie is your first Muslim friend, which is cheesy, but we're happy with that, we want that to be the case" (personal communication, March 20, 2013).

At the same time, actor and comedian Aasif Mandvi, regular "Middle East correspondent" on *The Daily Show*, pointedly asks in the film, "Why do I have to prove to you that I'm not dangerous?" (Farsad & Obeidallah, 2013). Mandvi stars in *The Daily Show*'s pilot of "[The Qu'osby Show](#)", which mockingly performs exaggerated sit-com expectations of "normal, good American" assimilation in the effort to counter negative perceptions of American Muslims.

Social Media Case Study #MuslimRage

A different example of participatory humor to destabilize a demonized frame was generated through a global Twitter moment—a case study of a monolithic

“controlling image” (Collins, 2000) and “thought-stopping headline” (Said, 1997) made “uninhabitable” (Hall 1997). On Sept. 17, 2012, *Newsweek* magazine deliberately courted controversy with its shock-journalism cover released in the wake of the low-budget YouTube video *The Innocence of Muslims*, packed with offensive representations of the origins of Islam, and the ensuing protests in the Middle East. Across the top in bold red capital letters, the blaring headline: [MUSLIM RAGE](#). Underneath the title, a close up photo of Middle Eastern men, yelling, saliva flecked, faces contorted with fury. Underneath the photo, the featured subtitle by famous highly polarizing critic of Islam Ayann Hirsi Ali, “How I Survived It. How We Can End It.” *Newsweek* reduced vast diversity and complexity to a singular transhistorical psychological feature. The intended cycle of controversy, condemnation and defense was posed to begin.

The *New York Times*, reporting from Cairo in September of 2012, summarized predictable patterns:

After a week of violent protests over an online video demeaning the Prophet Muhammad, the American news media has conducted a searching psychoanalysis of the Muslim mind to ask why such an offense should trigger such wrath. Essayists have generalized about resentments dating back to the 8th century, an anachronistic discomfort with modernity, or the excesses of Islamist politics, among other familiar themes. (New York Times, Sept. 2012)

Newsweek attempted to steer the public conversation with the invitation, “Want to discuss our latest cover? Let’s hear

it with the hashtag: #MuslimRage” @Newsweek.” Seizing on the moment to discuss its cover via Twitter, users of the social network around the world unleashed an inspired showcase of satire at its best, as hilarious and humanizing tweets and re-tweets flooded Twitter. Ranging from the sarcastic to serious, the #MuslimRage meme appropriated *Newsweek*’s headline into a generative backdrop for humor that made every comment a punchline.

Two of the most re-tweeted read:

“I’m having such a good hair day. No one even knows. #MuslimRage” (Hend @LibyaLiberty, Sept. 17, 2012).

“Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can’t yell for him. #MuslimRage” (Hijabi Girl @ HijabiGirlPrblms, Sept. 17, 2012).

A hashtag serves to frame, organize, and amplify attention. In this social media moment, the frame itself, focusing attention onto the eternalized and incomprehensible rage of the Muslim Other, “one terrifying collective person” (Said 1997, xxxii), was brilliantly mocked from hundreds of angles. The stereotype of Muslims not being able to take a joke was turned inside out as Muslims and non-Muslims transformed *Newsweek*’s headline into an international joking platform, turning the boiling headline down to simmering mirth. The #MuslimRage tweets shift the discourse, as Said (1997) described, from what the Muslim “Other” is, to both what the Western media *does* and what everyday Muslims do, with real and imagined moments of mundane irritation.

Orders pancakes at IHOP, came with a side of bacon. #MuslimRage (Hamza Giron @ HamzaGiron, Sept. 17, 2012).

The shawarma guys wraps my sandwich too tightly, so I have to rip off little pieces of paper bit by bit. #MuslimRage (Evan Hill @ evanchill, Sept. 17, 2012).

Tried to make a bowl of cereal this morning, but I didn't have enough milk. #MuslimRage (JD @Polyonymous Sept. 17, 2012).

Shaheen (2001) points out how the omission of everyday ordinary life in media representation can be as damaging as one-dimensional portrayals on the screen. *Gawker* magazine contributed [13 Powerful Images of Muslim Rage](#), heart-warming daily life photos juxtaposed with the heart-chilling headline (Read, 2012). When we ask what makes these funny, we are led back into the tragedy of this context in which humor arises, as the monolithic backdrop of undifferentiated, inexplicable, vengeful anger is what makes the appearance of moments of tenderness, fun, and creativity jarring to such a degree. A dominant theory of humor, which is helpful to foreground in this context, is *incongruity theory*, in which humor results from the “unexpected juxtaposition of two or more frames of interpretation” (Gournelos & Greene 2011), which may make the implicit frame or association bias explicit. What makes these juxtapositions effective?

Another category of #MuslimRage tweets point the camera back to the ignorance and hyperbole of Western media frames:

Television “experts” saying Iran is an “Arab” country. #MuslimRage (Juan Cole @ jricole, Sept. 17, 2012).

Suspect that #psychoturbanedfourwivedbarbarian mohamedians was 2nd on Newsweek’s list as a potential hashtag after #muslimrage (@Sarahcarr, Sept. 17, 2012).

While social media moments may be fleeting, educators can slow down and draw from the produced material for sustained dialogue. Please see the Appendix for a fuller archive from various media sources.

The tidal wave of the #MuslimRage meme does not direct the conversation to the actual and various causes for outrage over the inflammatory video. Rather, they splinter the reductive frame of understanding through painting unexpected portraits. In the momentum of this media moment, independent journalist Shirin Sadeghi created a poignant reversal that speaks back to Western perpetration of violence, “what ‘we’ *do*” (Said, 1997)—the Iraq and Afghan wars, the terror of drone strikes, humiliating TSA treatment—with an “alternate cover that depicts the evidence and aftermath of Anti-Muslim Rage. ... And that’s just the four images that could fit on a cover” (Sadeghi, 2012).



Figure 1. An alternative to *Newsweek*'s 2012 "Muslim Rage" cover.

Sadeghi's shifting of the frame of attention poses the inquiries: What are we made to feel horrified by, and what are we not horrified by? What violence is seen as unremarkable? We can further ask, what tweets, individually and collectively, render the hatred irrational, as well as assert the rationality of the targeted? How do they disorganize the intended meaning? How does satire reframe the conversation? Absence can signify as much as presence (Hall, 1997). How do these tweets and alternate cover invite awareness of what is not represented, and help us critically ask what exists beyond the spotlight of public scrutiny?

Naming White Privilege

"Before 9/11, I'm just a white guy living a typical white guy life, all my friends had names like Monica and Chandler and Joey and Ross [laughter] I go to bed on September 10th white, wake up on

September 11th and I'm an Arab! [laughter]," narrates Dean Obeidallah, who is of Palestinian Sicilian mixed heritage and able to pass as white (as cited in Simon, 2008). He goes on to impart a distilled lesson on white privilege for the audience:

White is status. ... The difference between us and White people is White people never suffer as a group when a few people do something bad in their group, you know, Middle Eastern people do, and honestly White people, to be honest, you've done your fair share of bad things, corporate scandals, presidential assassinations, NASCAR, Paris Hilton, country music. That is audio terrorism to me. (as cited in Simon, 2008)

The strategic use of his own biracial appearance to make visible the violence of this polarized dividing line connects essential understanding of presumed white innocence and individuality reinforced against Arab/Muslim suspected collective guilt by association. As this is basic analysis for WPC educators, discussion of such material may join the different, recurring, and interrelated ways in which whiteness is (re)constructed against and above racialized others. Tim Wise points out how a white person who commits an act of political violence will be viewed as "an exception to an otherwise non-white rule, an aberration, an anomaly," and thus, be "able to join the ranks or pantheon of white people who engage in (or have plotted) politically motivated violence meant to terrorize—and specifically to kill—but whose actions result in the assumption of absolutely *nothing* about white people generally, or white Christians in particular." (Wise, 2013, para. 5)

White privilege is a recurring thematic thread in the work of various Muslim stand-up comics and as such, important to draw out for closer consideration in education of how privilege and oppression work in tandem.

From another national context, Australian stand-up comic of Bangladeshi descent Aamer Rahman (half of the comedy duo *Fear of a Brown Planet*) (2013) powerfully dismantles the notion and charge of “reverse racism.” He claims that he could indeed be a reverse racist, if with the aid of a time machine he traveled back to the time before Europe colonized the world and systematically reversed centuries of domination.

This [time-travel piece](#) in itself speaks to the three pillars (Smith, 2006) of white supremacy: slavery, colonization, and war, which may complement pedagogical strategies to help understand racism as structural and systemic, not only on the level of prejudiced attitudes.

Conclusion: Same Courage

In “Vocabulary of Change: In Conversation with Angela Davis and Tim Wise” Davis and Wise identify Islamophobia’s “rewriting” of historical racism and call on the “same courage” to combat it (as quoted in Soriano-Bilal, 2012, p. 11). Paul Kivel (2013) raises the need for urgent and ongoing allyship and points to our direct implication with Islamophobia as a cost to those who are made “secure” against it. “It threatens our civil and religious liberties when one group is singled out as not entitled to constitutionally guaranteed rights” (para. 16). As with other -isms and -phobias that the WPC community brilliantly engages, challenging Islamophobia in all its forms should not be

wholly on the shoulders of those targeted by it.

Within the ecosystem of creative resistance and social change, forms of socially critical humor are tools to unsettle inherited perceptions that filter out more nuanced inquiry, and denaturalize the xenophobic “clash of civilizations” binary. This very partial offering of comic art forms may encourage social justice educators to close the distance to Smith’s (2006) third “pillar” of white supremacy, Orientalism/war/xenophobia, to weave analysis with related systems that may be more familiar terrain. Resources offered here, which all point to wider realms of possibility, can support antioppression facilitation to view “the state of mind of the country,” to shift from being a passive audience of damaging stereotypes to active engagement, to understand, unlearn and uproot Orientalist ideologies and ways of seeing, bringing capacities honed in other contexts to bear, with courageous comics as companions.

Questions for Discussion, Writing, and Reflection

- What do Islamophobic stereotypes do and make possible in the world?
- How do we know what we know? Where does that knowledge come from? Who produces it?
- What are the histories of these stereotypes in the United States?
- How is humor elicited against an incongruous backdrop? What is brought into the foreground of conscious awareness? What are we being invited to laugh at, make visible, absurd, mock?
- What is the importance of making implicit association biases explicit?

- What historic and contemporary connections exist in ways that dominant culture in the United States portrays targeted groups as both full of irrational anger and lacking a sense of humor?
- How does the work of Muslim American comedians resonate with and build upon earlier trailblazing work by minority comedians?
- How is social justice humor offering reframes?
- Who is being spoken to in comic expressions? How might different audiences experience the same material differently?
- Does raising stereotypes reinforce or destabilize them? What related examples exist?
- How are core Islamophobic stereotypes gendered?
- How are they classed?
- Does laughter that mocks injustice provide relief from responsibility or does it engender critical reflection?
- What key tropes of xenophobia are being challenged?
- If something is funny because it is surprising or defies or violates our expectations, how can we examine those shaken-up expectations?
- What strategies are being used by comedians to de-escalate threat perception of Muslims?
- What mirrors are being held up to mainstream public opinion?
- What injustice and violence is facilitated through representation of a people as scary? As humorless? As unintelligible? As sub-human?
- What does it do to put whiteness in the spotlight of scrutiny when challenging anti-Muslim racism?
- What representations and assumptions about U.S. Christians (religious and secular) would be seen as ludicrous, which are routinely directed towards Muslim communities, leaders, and organizations? What questions arise for further education and exploration?

ⁱ This year's conference, hosted by the Center for Race and Gender, was the Fourth Annual Conference on the Study of Islamophobia: From Theorizing to Systematic Documentation. My paper was entitled, "The Cultural Politics of Humor in (De)Normalizing Islamophobic Stereotypes."

ⁱⁱ YouTube, the personal websites of the artists featured in this paper, Amazon, and Netflix are all places to locate films and clips to familiarize oneself with and draw from as appropriate.

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Appendix: Collection of #MuslimRage Tweets

Below are a collection of #MuslimRage Tweets as they appeared in the following media outlets *Wired*, *CNN*, *New York Times*, and *Gawker*.

Wired

BREAKING: NYPD vows to protect Wall Street holy sites from angry protestors bent on offending the profit. [#s17](#) [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

When you machine wash your dry clean only burqa. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

The shawarma guys wrap my sandwich too tightly, so I have to rip off little pieces of paper bit by bit. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

Lost your kid Jihad at the airport. Can't yell for him. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

Damn it, [@Microsoft](#) is not selling new Kinect in the Middle East. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

Shawarma with no garlic sauce? [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

Tried to make a bowl of cereal this morning, but I didn't have enough milk. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

Orders pancakes at IHOP, came with a side of bacon. [#MuslimRage](#) (Wired)

CNN

I told my shrink I was feeling suicidal and he reported me to the FBI. #Muslimrage (CNN)

When everyone in history class turns to you once 9/11 is brought up. #MuslimRage (CNN)

When I wear a white hijab to a TV interview with a white backdrop. #floatingHead #MuslimRage (CNN)

Television "expert" saying Iran is an "Arab" country. #MuslimRage (CNN)

Couldn't toss football around since the ball was made of pigskin. #MuslimRage (CNN)

New York Times

When you behead an infidel but your iPhone did not record properly so you don't get the credit you deserve. #MuslimRage (New York Times)

BURN ALL WESTERN LITERATURE ... onto a zip drive so I can listen to it while driving. #MuslimRage (New York Times)

There's no prayer room in this nightclub! #Muslimrage (New York Times)

“What do you mean you don't serve chocolate milk at this pub?!” #Muslimrage (New York Times)

When you have no hijab to go with your cute outfit you just bought. #MuslimRage #waitwut (New York Times)

Wearing Hijab made by CHRISTIAN Dior. #MuslimRage (New York Times)

Hearing Americans state publicly that they're afraid that [@BarackObama](#) is an Arab. #MuslimRage (New York Times)

When people fear Shariah taking over the US constitution & some people have never read the US constitution #ConstitutionDay225 #MuslimRage (New York Times)

Huffington Post

Suspect that #psychoturbanedfourwivedbarbarianmohamedians was 2nd on Newsweek's list as a potential hashtag after #Muslimrage. (Huffington Post)

Muslims just hijacked @Newsweek's hashtag. Pun intended. #MuslimRage (Wired)

I'm having such a good hair day. No one even knows. #MuslimRage (Huffington Post)

Lost your nephew at the airport but you can't yell his name because it's JIHAD. #MuslimRage (Huffington Post)

When you realize that if you have a 5 o'clock shadow it can be deemed a security threat. #Muslimrage (Huffington Post)

When you order halal chicken and find out the chef cooked it in alcohol! #Muslimrage (Huffington Post)

You go to a football watch party and all there is to eat is pepperoni pizza and beer battered chicken wings. [#MuslimRage](#) (Huffington Post)

i dont feel any rage. ... does that mean i am not muslim? #someonegetmeadrink
[#MuslimRage](#) (Huffington Post)

Gawker

When my mom got mad at me for putting a pudding cup in the microwave. #MuslimRage
(Gawker)

Wrestling is fake? #MuslimRage (Gawker)

NO BEEF PEPPERONI AT PIZZA HUT? #MUSLIMRAGE (Gawker)

“A new column by Thomas Friedman.” #Muslimrage (Gawker)