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## The Urgency of Visual Media Literacy in Our Post-9/11 world: Reading Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media

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### **Abstract**

A decade after the 9/11 attacks, educators concerned with social justice issues are faced with the question of how media representations powerfully constitute the subjectivities of teachers and students. The roles of Muslim women in society are often narrowly construed and projected via media cultures – an unofficial curriculum of the everyday much more influential than the formal curriculum on offer in our schools. Given that much of what we “know” about Muslims we learn from the mass media, it seems urgent that as educators we become more attuned to how they are being portrayed and how such depictions are complexly taken up and/or resisted. In this paper I analyze how dominant meanings about Muslim women are produced in print news media sites, stressing connections in-between local and global contexts. I am particularly interested in visual epistemologies and how meanings produced via media images come to be attached to the bodies of North American Muslim women. I then propose three pedagogical strategies for taking up media images in the classroom to disrupt dominant meanings that reproduce binary understandings of self and other. Drawing upon relational theories of identity and learning, I argue for a need to interrogate and negotiate identities in ways that move us beyond simplistic understandings of self and other towards more complex, embodied meanings.

*Keywords:* intercultural education, Islamophobia, visual media literacy

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In our troubled post-9/11 world, intercultural education has become an urgent project. We learn more about issues related to our society and the world from media discourses than from all other sources of education (Macedo 2007), making media literacy a key to negotiating our relationships with difference, both locally and globally. Most are unaware of the ways we are being educated and positioned by the media because their pedagogies tend to be “invisible and absorbed unconsciously” (Kellner & Share 2007, 4). This is especially so with images, whose seldom-questioned messages on otherness circulate widely. By linking intercultural education with media literacy pedagogies and a social justice agenda, it is possible to examine the unspoken role of visuality in our social relations. A vibrant democracy depends on an informed citizenry willing and able to engage with difference within and outside national borders. Drawing on the example of visual representations of Muslim women in the North American print news media, I argue that critical inquiries into such images open up spaces for much-needed intercultural conversations in the classroom.

Teachers may be uncertain about how to bring issues related to peoples and cultures they are unfamiliar

with into the classroom, but doing so offers opportunities to grapple with the inevitable messiness and difficulty of complicated conversations as a necessary component of civic engagement and responsibility. An intercultural approach to media literacy therefore involves not only the ability to critically inquire into representations of otherness, but also a willingness to situate ourselves in relation to stories being told in the media. As Mihailidis (2009) argues, it is not enough to focus on media content alone, “but also on the citizen as the nexus of the information world” (65). Students should understand the media’s role and responsibilities in a democratic society and the importance of being able to critically read and respond to the messages on offer. With regards to intercultural education, this entails an awareness of how texts and images swirling in-between local and global contexts constitute our personal and collective stories, and the possible implications of these stories.

Our media-saturated lives are increasingly complex, and learning to acknowledge and negotiate this complexity is one of the major challenges of this century. During times of war and crisis the temptation to view the world in simplistic, binary terms intensifies. Recent events such as the tragic terrorist attacks in New

York City and elsewhere have understandably led to increased distrust and fear. At the same time, as media literacy educators it is crucial to critically examine narratives that neatly divide up huge swaths of the world – and our own societies – into “us” and “them.” Such binaries do not reflect lived experiences, yet they have the power to impact on intercultural relations and on the life possibilities of marginalized groups. Critical inquiries into visual representations of otherness can provide insights into how inclusions and exclusions are structured in public discourse (Luke 1999), and permit us to examine our own positioning in relation to dominant discourses. Media literacy pedagogies designed to deconstruct binaries potentially enable more complicated readings of our selves and others to emerge.

### **Visuality and the Case of Muslim Women**

The question of how we make meaning and construct our identities through seeing is indeed a pressing issue for media literacy education. I use the example of visual portrayals of Muslim women in the North American media to outline some of the issues and to propose pedagogical suggestions. I am particularly interested how meanings associated with the Muslim female bodies we see pictured in the news media impact intercultural relations. Women who wear Islamic covering are visually marked as Muslim and may be categorized and judged on that visual fact alone. We gain a great deal of information about another person solely based on visual perceptions (Berger 1999), and exclusionary practices may take place based exclusively on appearances. It is taken for granted that sight provides us with immediate access to the outside world. However, perception is never pure because it is always mediated by language. This means that as interpreters of “otherness” – either in face-to-face encounters or via images – we are part of the act of interpretation. The meaning of an image (or a body) is not inherent in the image, but is a process of exchange between the image and the viewer, whose beliefs inform one’s interpretation. Our interpretations depend on historical context and the cultural knowledge we bring to our reading of a photograph or another person.

Although visual cultures continue to be largely neglected in education, they are enormously significant given their epistemological authority in our image-saturated world. Rose (2007) describes *vision* as what the eye is physiologically capable of seeing, while *visuality* refers to how vision is constructed in various

ways since it “learned and cultivated and not simply given by nature” (Mitchell 2002, 232). For Mitchell (2002), *visuality* refers to “practices of seeing the world and especially of seeing other people” (166). As Berger (1999) explains, when we look at a given photo it “activates” us by setting off the appropriate responsive chord; it “exploits what is already in our heads, the cultural lore we have stored up as a result of our education and experiences” (80). Mitchell thus suggests we turn the act of seeing into a problem for analysis. However, this task isn’t self-evident because “vision itself is invisible” (166). We don’t see what seeing is – how it is socially constructed. Mitchell argues that seeing needs to be put “on display” to make it accessible to analysis, a process he refers to as “showing seeing.”

Returning to the example of Muslim women (we could also refer to any other group or individual considered “different”), we might ask our selves and our students how we know what we think we know, as well as why the answer to this question matters in a just, democratic society. In spite of the fact that social practice varies widely, many non-Muslims have tended to view Islam – and particularly women’s roles – as fixed and homogenous, and western cultures produce a set of assumptions and representations about the Islamic practice of covering for women which construct it as a symbol of backwardness, religious fundamentalism, male oppression, and terrorism. Even women who choose not to cover report being questioned about their Muslim identity (Watt 2007, 2011). They are sometimes asked if it’s possible to be a “real” Muslim if you don’t wear hijab. An uncovered Muslim female disrupts assumptions about who a Muslim woman is and what she should look like, even though the majority of North American Muslim women don’t cover. A woman’s decision not to cover is seen by some as a sign that she is more “modern” and “open-minded.” Few realize there are numerous young, North American-born, Muslim women who are choosing to wear hijab for the first time even though their own mothers have never done so (Watt 2011). The point is, there is no single, fixed, Muslim, female identity (or any other identity) out there in the lived world, yet we live our lives as if there is.

### **Visual Media Representations of Muslim Women**

In a course I teach on the sociology of schooling in a Bachelor of Education Program at the University of Ottawa, teacher candidates are asked to consider the role of the mass media as curriculum on

otherness. To link intercultural education with media literacy and social justice issues, one of the topics we discuss is Muslim student identities, the mass media, and schooling. Teacher education programs have long been concerned with how teachers reproduce and challenge social inequalities, so one of the main goals of this course involves a personal inquiry into the social influences on identity. Many teachers aren't aware of the mass media's influence in defining otherness and in constructing an interpretive framework related to minority groups (Henry and Tator 2002; Grossberg et al. 2006; Hall 1997; Kellner and Share 2005, 2007). For this reason teacher candidates are asked to inquire not only into how media representations potentially constitute their students' identities, but also their own. This work is ongoing over the course of one's career given what we know about how classroom relations impact on the learning situation.

To provide background information, we start off looking at research on representations of Muslims in the mass media. This ensures teachers realize this body of research exists and also raises awareness about issues related to identities and the mass media as curriculum, including the role and ethical responsibilities of the news media in a democratic society. We look at a variety of texts and images to see how meanings are constructed and complexly taken up and/or resisted by various audiences. Recently, there have been greater efforts to represent the diversity of Muslim communities in North America. One example is the sitcom, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (Nawaz 2007), produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In general, however, research shows that Muslim women and their roles in society tend to be interpreted in a limited number of ways through mainstream visual mediums such film, television, and the news media (Awan et al. 2010; Falah 2005; Jhally 2007; Jiwani 2005; Kassam 2008; Sensoy 2010a, 2010b; Shaheen 2003; Watt 2008a, 2011a, 2011b). Images of terrorists and burqa-clad women remain primary markers of the so-called Muslim world.

Representations of covered women as oppressed, exotic, and threatening are widespread, especially in the news media. Stories about terror, war, and the oppression of women in far off lands are frequently accompanied by photos of silent, anonymous, covered women who are often not directly connected to the content of the articles (Jiwani 2005; Fallah 2005; Kassam 2008; MacDonald 2006; Watt 2008b, 2011b). Seldom are details of a pictured woman's life provided – not even a name or where she is from. It is also doubtful that

permission to use the women's images in these ways was ever sought, raising further ethical questions that can be discussed in the classroom.

Images of women from one part of the world are routinely placed with a story from another. This means that a photo of a Shia'a Palestinian refugee in Southern Lebanon could accompany a story about the activities of Sunni males in Afghanistan – even though the religious, gender, class, cultural, historical, and political differences between two such groups may be vast. When the "Muslim world" is seen as a single homogenous entity particularities don't matter and are often erased in media representations and in our minds. Who a woman is as an individual is of little interest to those who deploy these images. Her experiences, beliefs, and social context are secondary to what she "stands for" as a covered woman in the particular historical, cultural, and political contexts of the day. Falah (2005) describes how photos of Muslim women are used to draw attention to an article and to catch the reader's eye. Visuals silently contextualize the content of the text because we don't think very much about them. Classroom discussions can focus on why editors might choose to use images in these ways, including questions about who has the power to represent whom and with what possible effects.

This is certainly not to deny there are Muslim women living in difficult conditions or who may have negative attitudes towards the so-called west. As Falah (2005) explains, the problem is that the constant repetition of a limited number of images, along with very little contextualization narrows our understandings of Muslim women's lives, so we only come to "know" them via a few stereotypes. If we uncritically rely on Hollywood and the news media's messages for our knowledge about Muslims, our understandings of the realities of their lives may be limited. Few are aware of the power the media have to influence our attitudes toward people we have never met, and places we have never traveled to. At home in our own communities our social relationships are also influenced by what we learn in the mass media. Meanings related to unknown women in far off places that are constructed in the media risk becoming attached to the bodies of North American Muslim females (Watt 2011b).

To provide historical context related to practices of othering, I also introduce postcolonial theory to teacher candidates. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1994) analyzes how the west creates knowledge about its oriental "other." He demonstrates colonial discourse

was not just about constructing the colonized other. The orient helped to define the west as its “contrasting image, idea, personality, [and] experience”(1). Colonial discourse was ultimately “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (43). The binary logic of Orientalism demonstrates the tendency of western thought to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance. Rizvi (2005), who writes about representations of Islam and educating for social justice, observes that in the North American context, when clear differentiations are drawn between an “us” and a “them,” those who are not “us,” do not belong “here.” Binary thinking may provide justification for the othering of all members of a group due to the actions or beliefs of a few.

An intercultural approach to media literacy fosters the notion that each new meeting we have with difference – whether in the form of an image or an actual person – should be considered a real-time negotiation we enter into with the other. This requires cultivating a willingness to avoid making judgments before the actual encounter. Just as becoming media literate is a never-ending process, so are efforts to remain open to difference in whatever form it might take, now or in the future. This is a life-long struggle we must all grapple with in our attempt to take seriously our responsibilities as citizens living in diverse, democratic societies in a globalized world. There are obviously no guarantees the world will somehow be better a better place if we manage to adopt such a stance towards our self and others, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make the effort.

### Three Pedagogical Strategies

The vision of the National Association of Media Literacy Education (2011a) is to help people develop habits of critical inquiry as well as the ability to communicate their ideas and opinions, so they can be active citizens in today’s world. With this in mind, I propose three pedagogical strategies for using media images of Muslim women in teacher education programs to link intercultural education, media literacy, and social justice issues:

1. Inquiry into images of Muslim women and how they construct meanings;
2. Making intertextual links to other cultural sites; and,
3. Examination of our own cultural assumptions.

If we expect teachers to initiate complicated intercultural conversations with their students, they need to be given opportunities to participate in such conversations themselves as part of their teacher education or professional development. These strategies are not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, I offer some ideas and resources that individual educators might adapt to suit their own pedagogical contexts.

The first classroom strategy examines how meanings are constructed at the site of production through image, captions, and headlines, and whose interests they serve. This includes examining the content and composition of an image, as well as looking into the mandate and intended audience of the publication in which an image appears. The second pedagogical activity is to have student teachers make intertextual connections. My own research focuses mainly on images from the print news media, but there are endless cultural sites teachers and students can examine to learn how meanings are constructed visually across texts and the possible impact. I provide examples of readings of depictions of Muslims in film, comic books, and cartoons that can serve as models when teachers are developing their own course materials. The third classroom strategy is to have students reflect on the assumptions they bring to their reading of a text or image through a form of memory writing known as autoethnography. This involves examining our own social and cultural positions, and mapping out where and how we learned what we think we know about others. I focus on the example of Muslims in my own practice, but the same activities could be used with any cultural or social group.

Intercultural education questions the modernist notion of identities and cultures as homogenous and static, a view that continues to dominate in mainstream discourse. Recent understandings of identities and cultures as dynamic, contradictory, and relational offer a less colonizing, more complicating lens to consider intercultural relations at home and abroad. Postcolonial pedagogies go beyond multicultural education’s exclusive focus on learning about the other, and bring the self into the conversation. This is an ongoing decentering process that asks us to account for our own readings of otherness. Questions raised as part of this process include: *From what social locations am I reading? How did I come to know what I think I know? What is my relationship to the bodies I am reading face to face and in the media? How do my personal readings intersect with broader cultural, historic, and political*

*meanings circulating in society?* This is not an easy project. However, if we can begin to make cracks in our own assumptions perhaps our habits of othering will be displaced by a desire to – at the very least – engage difference rather than view it as strange or threatening. The issue of what it means to “other” needs to be more fully engaged in education, and this in part involves turning a more critical lens on ourselves.

Teacher candidates often express concern that they don’t know enough about other peoples and cultures to work effectively with students from backgrounds different from their own. Asma Barlas (2007) writes that even though undergraduate students in her introductory course on Islam tell her they know little about Islam, they actually know a great deal from what they have learned in the mass media. Teachers need to be cognizant of the ways we have all been educated about otherness. Although I personally have first-hand experience living in the predominantly Muslim countries of Iran, Syria, and Pakistan, I still find it difficult to engage students in conversations related to Muslims, schooling, and the mass media in Canada. Especially after 9/11, these are difficult spaces, and part of being able to raise sensitive issues is accepting that tension is an inevitable part of the teaching and learning process. Schools should be places where our teachers and young people learn to feel comfortable with discomfort. True democratic debate necessarily involves disagreement and even conflict as differing perspectives and worldviews are engaged. For too long we have tended to avoid difficult conversations in our classrooms, which does not serve our democracies well.

### **Activity #1: Inquiring into Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media**

Most of the student teachers I work with do not have a Media Studies or Communications background, so I assume they have little or no knowledge about how to analyze media images to examine questions related to identities and cultures. It is important to stress teachers do not need to be experts to deconstruct images with their students. There is no one right way to do it and teacher and students can learn together.

After a review and discussion of the main research findings on representations of Muslims in the mass media, I lead a class inquiry into an image to model how an analysis might proceed. As Mihailidis (2009) explains, students need to be “taught the critical skills to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce media [so] they will better understand media’s roles and

responsibilities in civic life” (53). In preparation for the analysis, we go over Project Look Sharp’s (2011) handout, *Tips for Decoding Media Documents*. Since the key to decoding media documents of any kind is the use of questions, I try to aim for making questions 80% of what I say during the session. Some of my questions ask students to respond to the image on a personal level, and others are formulated to help them make links to the research and course concepts related to social identity, schooling, and media literacy.

For the analysis I often use the following image of covered Muslim women on the cover of *Maclean’s Magazine* (2007, Oct.). This cover draws attention to the feature article written by Mark Steyn entitled, *Why the Future Belongs to Islam*. This issue caught my eye as I was strolling through a shopping mall and saw it on display at a newsstand. At the time, I was taking a course on racism in education and we were encouraged by the professor to be on the look out for examples of exclusionary practices in our everyday lives. When I saw the image on this cover I decided to find out more about it and ended up publishing an academic article based on my inquiry (Watt 2008a). An image such as this can be analyzed from numerous perspectives, depending upon the educational context and objectives. For example, poststructuralist critique shifts the interest towards the reader of the text, to questions of identity and subjectivity. In addition, as Rose (2007) outlines in *Visual Methodologies*, an image can be read through the lens of semiotics, psychoanalysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, or by mixing methods, which is my preference.



Copyright permission obtained from *Maclean's Magazine*.

This issue of *Maclean's* provoked a great deal of controversy in Canada. Critics charged that it was a case of “media-propagated Islamophobia” (Awan et al. 2010). A complaint was filed to the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal, but the author of the article was not found guilty. The Ontario Human Rights Commission stated that the article “promotes prejudice towards Muslims,” but could not initiate a hearing into the case because magazines are not covered under the Human Rights Code. What struck me in this storm of controversy was the fact that nobody paid much attention to, or commented on, the image of covered Muslim women on the cover of the magazine. This was an excellent example of the silent power of images to create meanings about otherness in ways we barely seem to notice.

With this image projected onto a large screen, I first ask the class to think about and share their first impressions with a partner or in a small group. As Erickson (2010) points out, photographs operate on a number of levels and it is worthwhile to consider our personal and emotional connections to them. I then have a few volunteers share their impressions. Next, students describe what they see in writing. They name only what is visible in the image, which is difficult to do. Erickson suggests that by working in small groups on this task students may question and challenge one another. He explains:

[S]imple description of a visual form is quite difficult: all kinds of assumptions trouble the visual evidence photographs seem to hold. Identifying and distinguishing what students can determine as fact versus what they are making as assumptions can be a very useful way to start critical interpretations of images. The brief prompt “how do you know (that this is a fact and not an assumption)?” directs students toward greater self-reflexivity, particularly when treated as a mantra, and repeated with every apparent claim to certainty with photographs. (2)

All photographs are part reality and part construction. Although we may instinctively look for “the meaning” of a photo, there is no singular meaning. As Erickson asserts, “nothing can be closed with photography or language” (1). In terms of intercultural education, it is important to consider why we might be reading texts in the ways that we do.

Before proceeding with a more formal analysis, students are then asked to come up with a list of questions they have about the image. This is intended to get them

into the habit of questioning what they see. The next set of questions relate more directly to the core principles of media literacy education, including an examination of audience, messages and meanings, and representations and reality (See: NAMLE 2009a, 2009b; Project Look Sharp 2011). It is also worthwhile at this stage to track down the original photograph if possible, so students gain a sense of how photos are worked on by editors to present the message(s) they wish to convey. Here is the original image, taken by Yoray Liberman (2007):



Copyright permission obtained from Getty Images.

Depending upon my pedagogical goals, I sometimes present excerpts from my own inquiry into these images to the class (see Watt 2008b), stressing again that multiple interpretations are possible depending upon who is doing the looking and the reading. Perhaps what students find most interesting from my piece is the fact that these are Turkish Shia women observing Ashura, which is an Islamic holy day of mourning. In general, mourners are expected to wear black. In light of this information, the women's attire makes more sense to those who might otherwise have automatically assumed it to be a sign of female oppression. In addition, students don't always realize Islamic covering for women in Turkey has been banned in public spaces since the days of Attaturk, so this photo was likely taken at a mosque rather than out on the streets in public.

Students then discuss how the *Maclean's* cover image conforms to, or is different from, the research literature on representations of Muslims. For example, the women in this particular image have no connection to the content of the Steyn (2007) article accompanying the image and readers aren't given any information about them or why they are dressed in this manner. To wrap up this activity, students write a short reflection on what they learned from pedagogical and personal perspectives, with a focus on how images act

as a curriculum on otherness. These reflections may be shared in a future class if students wish to do so.

### Activity #2: Making Intertextual Connections

The second pedagogical approach I use with teacher educators to link media literacy and intercultural education is to have them make connections between visual texts to see what patterns of representation exist, if any. The power of the visual in the construction of identities is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a much larger system of intertextual meanings about Muslim women. Images do not gain meaning on their own, but accumulate meanings, or “play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media” (Hall 1997, 232). Even though each visual representation carries its own particular meanings, at the broader level of how “otherness” is being represented in a particular culture at any one moment we can see similar representational practices being repeated, with variations, from one site of representation to another. We are born into a particular cultural milieu where such meanings become part of the taken for granted world we inhabit, and it can be difficult to learn to see our selves and others from other perspectives.

With teacher candidates, we first look at and critique images of Muslim women from the print news media and then branch out to other cultural sites. Rather than viewing a given portrayal as “accurate” or “inaccurate” I encourage teachers to provide students with the means to ask critical questions and carry out their own inquiries based on their personal interests, keeping in mind there is no essentialized Muslim “out there” that we can measure representations against to determine their “accuracy.” Following are some resources educators can adapt for use in their own courses.

#### *Representations in Film: Reel Bad Arabs*

In *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Shaheen (2001) analyzes more than 900 Hollywood films featuring Arab characters. He describes a dozen of these portrayals as “positive” and 50 as “balanced,” concluding that Arabs look different and threatening through Hollywood’s distorted lens. In 2007, the Media Education Foundation produced a documentary based on Shaheen’s work (Jhally 2007). This organization’s web site offers this description of the documentary:

*Reel Bad Arabs* takes a devastating tour of the American cinematic landscape, moving from the earliest days of silent film to today’s biggest Hollywood blockbusters to reveal an astonishing pattern of slanderous Arab stereotyping.

When I present this documentary to teacher candidates I find it has a powerful impact on the class. Students are genuinely surprised to see Arabs depicted in similar, limited ways, across so many films, over such a long period of time. The fact they are familiar with many of the films presented in the documentary makes them take notice of representational practices they had not thought about before.

It is also an opportunity to point out that although Muslims are most commonly represented as Arabs in North America, this is actually a diverse group. As Abukhattala (2004) observes:

Western writers and news anchors use the terms *Arab* and *Muslim* interchangeably, although they are not necessarily the same: not every Muslim is Arab, nor is every Arab Muslim. In fact, Arabs comprise less than 15 per cent of the whole population of the Islamic world, and considerable numbers of Arabs are Jews or Christians. The largest Muslim country in the world is Indonesia, with around 95 million non-Arab Muslims. Furthermore, Iran is not, as commonly thought in the West, an Arabic country. Iranians are Persians, and they speak Farsi, an Indo-European tongue closely related to several European languages. (160)

The clips presented in this documentary are from films many are familiar with, and they challenge us to reflect on how representations we see in the mass media provide powerful messages on otherness.

#### *Holy Islamaphobia, Batman! (Dar 2010)*

Comic books are another cultural site educators can draw on to have students make intertextual links. Dar (2010) analyzes what he refers to as “the demonization of Muslims and Arabs” in mainstream American comic books. He asks: “Where are the positive images? Where are the everyday Muslims?” and calls for more “accurate” representations. Again, I question the existence of an “ideal” Muslim that we can measure representations against to determine their “accuracy,” but Dar’s readings are valuable in the way they demonstrate how meanings about Muslims are constructed in everyday texts such as comic books. He critiques familiar comics such as *Batman*, and also

introduces Naif Al-Mutawa's new comic book series, *The 99*, which "presents Muslim women and men as three-dimensional characters and heroes" (109). Dar writes that these characters "have stories, families, and character flaws, and their identities are not limited to the context of terrorism and misogyny" (109). The characters are also "from multiple racial and religious backgrounds, which promotes Al-Mutawa's aspirations for dialogue and coexistence" (109).

#### *Bugs Bunny Pedagogy (Sensoy 2010a)*

Sensoy's (2010a) readings of representations of Muslims in *Bugs Bunny* provides an example of how Muslims are "othered" in children's television programs. She describes *Bugs Bunny* as one of the "key tutors" (113) in her own education about Muslims, and situates this cartoon in mainstream western discourses about Muslims and people of the Middle East. Sensoy calls for a recognition in educational contexts that identities are shifting and relational and argues that "to understand one's own, and other's identity, we must help students see, talk about, and understand this complex relational aspect of group identities and identifications" (127). She also suggests a need for educators and students to understand how representation works to produce meanings, for as Kellner and Share (2005) point out, they may not be aware of how sexism, racism, ethnocentrism and other forms of othering are reproduced through media representations.

#### *Muslimah Media Watch:*

*"Sisters are doin' it for themselves"*

Until recently, it was difficult to find Muslim female perspectives on representations in the mass media, but *Muslimah Media Watch* (MMW) has changed that. It is a rich online resource that can be used by both teachers and students carrying out inquiries into media representations. Abura (2010) explains that *Muslimah Media Watch* started off as a one-woman blog by Fatemah Fakhraie, in 2007. It has recently been re-launched as a web site featuring 21 bloggers from around the world. The group's mandate is described on the website:

*Muslimah Media Watch* is a forum where we, as Muslim women, can critique how our images appear in the media and popular culture. Although we are of different nationalities, sects, races, etc., we have something important in common: we're tired of seeing ourselves portrayed by the media in ways that are one-

dimensional and misleading. This is a space where, from a Muslim feminist perspective, we can speak up for ourselves.

Abura observes that a few years ago "if anybody wrote about Muslim women in the down-and-depressed, stereotypical manner then it would be left to some sensitive Muslim man to reply. Or more than likely, it would just be left." Much has changed with the advent of the Internet, "due to a new generation of media-savvy Muslim women who are fighting back with articles, blogs and witty comebacks quicker than you can say 'oppressed housewife.'" As Fakhraie (June 28, 2010) declares on her blog, "Sisters are doin' it for themselves."

Fakhraie is a young American Muslim who was uncomfortable with the mainstream media's tendency to portray Muslim women as, "exotic sex slave, oppressed woman, or dangerous terrorist" and so decided to set up the blog. MMW critiques "one-dimensional and misleading" representations of Muslim women in cultural sites, from small-town newspapers to major news channels and women's magazines. These insightful women blog on everything from Burqa Barbie (Dec. 3, 2008), to profiles of Muslim female comedians (April 3, 2008), to the two French web-activists who protest the burqa ban in France with their performance of "NiqqBitch" (October 5, 2010). The perspectives of Muslim women need to be brought into the media literacy classroom as well as into mainstream discourse on Muslims and *Muslimah Media Watch* makes that much easier for educators to do.

#### **Activity #3: Autoethnographic Inquiries to Disrupt Assumptions About Self and Other**

The third classroom strategy educators might consider using in teacher education programs to link media literacy and intercultural education is to have students write an autoethnography. Writing is deployed as a means to examine our assumptions about our selves and others, and inquire into to formation of our own subjectivities. In my classes, I encourage students to use the writing process to stimulate thinking about where and how they learned what they know about Muslims. As they go back into memory, students make connections between their personal experiences, popular cultural representations, and their face-to-face encounters with otherness.

Postcolonial curriculum theorist Nina Asher (2002) calls on educators to decolonize our thinking and our relation to others by revisiting our encounters with



difference. She incites teachers to deconstruct processes of othering in relation to curriculum and teaching, and I would extend this to include our encounters with difference in the mass media. Asher (2002) critiques multicultural education for its exclusive focus on the marginalized other with little examination of the self (82). Western, Eurocentric knowledge and perspectives are therefore privileged and the binary split between self and other, margins and center, are normalized. Asher suggests a need to understand the other in relation to – rather than apart from – oneself. She describes a “hybrid consciousness” as “the awareness that emerges out of the struggle to situate oneself in relation to multiple borders at the dynamic intersections of race, culture, gender/sexuality, class, and nationality, in specific historical and geographic contexts” (p. 85).

Autoethnography (cf: Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010; Holman-Jones 2005; Morawski and Palulis 2009; Reed-Danahay 1997; Russell 1998) is a response to ethnography’s processes of othering. It is a form of reflective memory writing we can work with to make links between our personal stories and the broader cultural, political, and historical contexts in which we live. Autoethnography can be used in the media literacy classroom to examine our social locations, and to begin to map out our encounters with otherness, both face-to-face and via media texts and images. As we work to disrupt the self, we may begin to see identities and cultures as complex and fluid, rather than homogenous and fixed.

### Conclusion

The importance of visual media literacy is increasingly recognized (Lipschultz and Hilt 2007), and should be considered a necessary component in any media studies curriculum. Drawing on the example of visual representations of Muslim women in the print news media as well as in other sites, I have offered suggestions for how links might be made between visual media literacy and intercultural education. Visual literacy as it relates to media studies is defined as “the ability to understand and interpret the representation and symbolism of a static or moving visual image -- how the meanings of the images are organized and constructed to make meaning – and to understand their impact on viewers” (Media Awareness Network 2007, 3). Yenawine (2005) contends that “learning to look”

is a process similar to learning to read and write. Just as the teaching and learning of other literacies requires sustained pedagogical efforts, becoming visually literate should not be left to chance.

Block (2010) insists that education should “lead students out and away from home...and not draw them back to that familiar address” (9). His assertion presents both opportunities and challenges for those who take seriously education’s promise to prepare students for democratic citizenship in a diverse society continuously bombarded with the mass media’s curriculum on otherness. Rather than think only in terms of preparing students for an imaginary future, what if educators could more fully engage them in what is happening in the here-and-now, in-between local and global contexts? And what if we could trouble and unsettle the sedimented layers of what we think we know about others? Denzin and Lincoln (2003) argue we “cannot afford the stubborn refusal we sometimes encounter from students who prefer their own comfortable worlds to confrontation with other, startlingly different worldviews” (274). The work of challenging assumptions is fraught with tensions and difficulties that many prefer to avoid. And yet, working towards more complicated readings of our selves and others via media literacy education seems urgent in the post 9/11 world we struggle to inhabit together.

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