Handout #5
Race, Racism, and Racialization

As the writers and activists we quote below make clear, there is no generic Muslim American or Arab American history or experience. Drawing primarily from the words of individuals from these communities, we have developed brief handouts (#5-#8) on race, racism, and racialization in relation to U.S. Muslims from Middle Eastern and South Asian Immigrant Communities; Arab Americans; and Black American Muslims.

The Racial Diversity of Muslim Americans: According to the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study: 38% of Muslim Americans identify as white, 28% as Black, 28% as Asian, 4% as Latino, and 3% as "mixed/other."

Defining "Racialization": In "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia," Steve Garner and Saher Selod outline one way for us to think about racialization:

- The process of racialization entails ascribing sets of characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits. These are not limited to skin tone or pigmentation, but include a myriad of attributes including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices. The characteristics thus emerge as "racial" as an outcome of the process. Racialization provides the language needed to discuss newer forms of racism that are not only based on skin colour, as well as older forms.

- Muslims have historically been one of these groups that experience racism, as have other faith-based groups, most obviously Jews. Their racialization is accomplished not only by reference to religion but other aspects of culture such as physical appearance (including but not limited to dress).

- Muslims can be racialized, and the ways in which this occurs can be understood as constituting Islamophobia.

- Islamophobia is therefore a specific form of racism targeting Muslims, and racialization is a concept that helps capture and understand how this works, in different ways at different times, and in different places.

As Angela Davis writes, "Differently racialized populations in the United States—First Nations, Mexican, Asian, and more recently people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, have been targets of different modes of racial subjugation. Islamophobia draws on and complicates what we know as racism."

Handout #6
Cultural Racism and U.S. Muslims from Middle Eastern and South Asian Immigrant Communities

What Is Cultural Racism?

For "newer immigrant populations, Muslim signifiers and symbols have become riddled with essentialized racial meanings such as foreign, violent, aggressive, and misogyny. Taken together, these stereotypes result in the belief that a Muslim body is incapable of upholding democratic or Western ideals and values." - Saher Selod and David G. Embrick

Scholars and activists focusing on Middle Eastern/South Asian immigrant groups explain this complication in various ways:

- "The basic argument," says Junaid Rana, "is about connecting Islamophobia to racism. Islamophobia is often seen as religious discrimination. And racism is usually thought of in terms of the body and particular kinds of genetic traits and phenotypic difference–that is, skin color, hair, eyes, etc. But as the scholarship on racism has shown, such biological determinism is almost always tied to culture."

- Such analysis challenges assumptions that skin color and other phenotypic differences determine race and, thereby, identify the targets of racism. But, for many Muslims, the process by which they become "racialized" is quite different: "For example, ethno-racism . . . is a concept that incorporates cultural markers, such as clothing, language, and beliefs, as the basis for racism. Thus, cultural racism has become more prominent in understanding the complexity of racism for newer immigrant populations both in the United States and Europe . . . ."

Writing about such "cultural racism," Nadine Naber expands on the construction of an "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" category and on the different ways in which Muslim women and men are racialized:

- . . . the arbitrary, open-ended scope of the domestic "war on terror" emerged through the association between a wide range of signifiers such as particular names (e.g., Mohammed), dark skin, particular forms of dress (e.g., a headscarf or a beard) and particular nations of origin (e.g., Iraq or Pakistan) as signifiers of an imagined "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" enemy.

- In this sense, the category "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" operated as a constructed category that lumps together several incongruous subcategories (such as Arabs and Iranians, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and all Muslims from Muslim-majority countries, as well as persons who are perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim, such as South Asians, including Sikhs and Hindus).

- Persons perceived to be "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" were targeted by harassment or violence based on the assumption "they" embody a potential for terrorism and are thus threats to U.S. national security and deserving of discipline and punishment.

- [Numerous](#) [observers](#) have noted how Muslim women (regardless of race or ethnicity) who wear hijab—a visible symbol of Islam—are targeted in public spaces for verbal harassment, physical threats, and assaults. Muslim men, however, especially [working-class men](#), are more likely to be perceived by individuals and public officials as real or potential "terrorists." In this gendered context, Muslim women are "[the terrorist's daughter](#)" or sister—not the "terrorist," but a person (female) without agency.

What Is the impact of Cultural Racism on Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrant communities?

Targeted by individuals: Cultural racism leads to a growing number of anti-Muslim acts and hate crimes that affect people who are simply going about their daily lives: children being bullied in school because they "look Muslim" or have a traditionally Muslim name or speak Arabic at home; a young man harassed on his way to the supermarket by someone loudly calling them a "terrorist"; a woman in hijab walking home from work who is threatened by youth wanting to tear off her hijab. Cultural racism provides a rationale for people who commit arson at mosques, Islamic centers, and other Muslim community institutions. At its deadliest, cultural racism took the lives of Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, the three Arab American Muslim university students who were murdered in their North Carolina apartment; and the lives of Imam Alauddin Akonjee and his assistant, Thara Miah, members of the Queens Bangladeshi community, who were gunned down on the street mid-afternoon as they left their New York City mosque after prayers.

Targeted by the State: The government has long targeted Muslims from Middle Eastern and South Asian communities. The [NSEERS](#) (National Security Entry Exit Registration System) Program, for example, begun in 2002, required the registration of male non-citizens over the age of 16 from 24 Muslim-majority countries plus North Korea to register and be interrogated, photographed, and fingerprinted. Of these countries, about three-quarters were from Middle Eastern or South Asian countries. (The program was suspended in 2011 and eliminated in 2016. Although no terrorism-related [convictions](#) resulted from NSEERS, the program registered over 80,000 men, placed about 13,000 in deportation hearings, and detained many others.) Also in the post-9/11 years, the NYPD identified as a particular concern people with 27 "[Ancestries of Interest](#)," mostly South Asian and Middle Eastern people from majority-Muslim countries (plus those of American Black Muslim "ancestry"). For the NYPD, the use of some languages, especially Arabic and Urdu, was also enough to "[trigger surveillance](#)."

Based on the assumption that Muslim religious beliefs and behavior can cause and be correlated with terrorism, for instance, the FBI and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) developed a post-9/11 "theory of radicalization" that, though [thoroughly](#) [discredited](#), continues to be widely used by law enforcement across the country. This reductionist theory, which reflects cultural racism, encourages those engaged in local, state, and federal policing to view as signs of

increasing radicalization a number of individual changes that might relate to increased observance of Islam: giving up cigarettes, drinking, and gambling; starting to wear traditional Islamic clothing; growing a beard.

The influential FBI/NYPD theory of radicalization and assumptions about allegedly threatening "ancestries" contribute to government use of: profiling based on religion and national origin; infiltration and other pervasive surveillance of mosques, college Muslim groups, and other community sites and organizations; use of informants; photo and video surveillance; agent provocateurs and undercover officers; entrapment; monitoring of social media; creation of "no-fly" lists; and other means of targeting Muslims.

Such government actions cause Muslim and other targeted communities to experience stigma and fear; suppression of their religion; chilled speech and freedom of association; detention and deportation; and suspicion and mistrust within their own communities.

Handout #7
Race, Racism, Racialization, and Arab Americans

Despite the common conflation of Arab Americans with Muslims, Arab Americans have always been overwhelmingly Christian (more than 60%), with about one-fourth being Muslim, and smaller numbers belonging to Jewish and other religious groups.

"Since the first immigrant waves from the region came to the United States in the mid-Nineteenth Century, Christians have always been a considerable majority of the Arab American population. Arab Muslims, on the other hand, began to migrate to the United States in large numbers after 1965, and perpetually held the position of a minority within the Arab American population." Khaled A. Beydoun

Arab Americans have long been, as Louise Cainkar writes, a racialized ethnic group:

- Arabs had a unique experience with social construction in America. In their one hundred plus year history in the United States, their social status has changed from marginal white to a more subordinate status that shares many features common to the experiences of people of color.
- Just as one can document and measure the process of becoming white, a downgrading of the social status of Arabs in America through processes identified as racial formation is measurable: in public policies; mainstream representations; social patterns of discrimination, separation, and exclusion; and in self-identification.
- While the early Arab American experience (1880-1930) was largely similar to that of white ethnics as measured by residential, employment, and marital patterns as well as land ownership, voting, and naturalization rights (although there are some localized exceptions), the Arab American experience since the late 1960s has been decidedly different. After that moment in time, dominant themes of the Arab American experience have been exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and selective policy enforcement...

As with the racism that generally targets Muslims, we can best understand anti-Arab racism today in historical context. In her introduction to Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11, Nadine Naber writes:

- I would argue that anti-Arab racism represents a recurring process of the construction of the Other within U.S. liberal politics in which long-term trends of racial exclusion become intensified within moments of crisis in the body politic, as in the contexts of World War II and the aftermath of September 11, 2001.
- Anti-Arab racism after World War II emerged as an interplay of U.S. military, political, and economic expansion in the Middle East, anti-Arab media representations, and the institutionalization of government policies that specifically target Arabs and Arab Americans in the United States.
- Since World War II, the proliferation of anti-Arab government policies and perceptions of "the Arab" as nonwhite Other within U.S. popular culture has coincided with the

increasing significance of oil as a commodity to the global economy and the United States' expanding interests in military and economic intervention in the Middle East.

In recent years, attitudes toward and policies that target Muslim Arab Americans, as well as Muslims generally and those conflated with them, have been shaped by the "global war on terror." As Cainkar explains:

- The most noted features of Arab exclusion in the United States are tactical: persistent, negative media representations, denial of political voice, governmental and non-governmental policies targeting their activism, and distortions of Arab and Muslim values, ways of life, and homelands (civilizational distortions). All of these actions are tied to the delegitimation of Arab claims and disenfranchisement of dissenting voices in order to assert an informational hegemony.

Handout #8
Islamophobia, Racism, and Black American Muslims

Black American Muslims constitute an estimated 28% to one-third of Muslim Americans. This handout focuses on non-immigrant Black American Muslims. Prior to the Civil War, about 15-30% of enslaved Africans—60,000 to 1.2 million people—were Muslims.

The existence and history of Black American Muslims challenge a range of misperceptions and falsehoods:

- that "Muslim American" is synonymous with "Middle Eastern/South Asian"
- that Muslims Americans are all immigrants
- that Muslim Americans are "foreign" to this country and incapable of understanding "our" values
- that Islamophobia began after or shortly before 9/11
- and that Muslims do not have a long history of experiencing—and challenging— Islamophobia and anti-Black racism

"Scholars and experts on Islam in America have drawn upon the analytical framework of critical race theory to explore the 'othering' and racialization of Muslims since 9/11. The 'us versus them' binary that posits Muslims as the foreign 'other' ignores the long history of Muslim[s] in North America, which predates the Declaration of Independence. This binary erases Black American Muslims whose Muslim identity is homegrown, with few ties to transnational ethnic networks." - Margari Hill of the Muslim ARC (Anti-Racist Collective)

Enslaved African Muslims
In "Islamophobia Did Not Start at Ground Zero," historian Zaheer Ali writes that the first attacks on Islam in the Western Hemisphere had little to do with religion and more to do with suppressing Africans during slavery.
- As early as the 1500s, European colonial powers began passing anti-Muslim legislation as a way to prevent the importation of African Muslims, who were often involved in slave rebellions in the New World.
- African Muslims led some of the earliest slave revolts in the Spanish colonies, played a role in the Haitian Revolution against France and led several major revolts against the Portuguese in Bahia, Brazil.
- From these early encounters, Islam came to signify a challenge to the authority of white slave owners and the state-sanctioned subjugation of African people.
- While neither the American colonies nor the United States experienced the same kind of slave revolts seen in the rest of the New World, the presence of enslaved African Muslims in America who possessed their own religion and culture challenged white attempts to portray Africans as a people in need of the 'civilizing' effects of slavery.

Religion and Politics
In "For American Muslims, Everything Did Not Change after 9/11," Edward E. Curtis IV addresses the recurring theme of African American Muslims who were, from the point of view of federal authorities, the public and potentially dangerous face of American Islam.

- After World War II, federal agencies experimented with different approaches to neutralizing the political power of African American Islam, culminating in extensive counter-intelligence operations against the Nation of Islam and other Muslim groups.
- One strategy was the denial of First Amendment protections to Muslim prisoners. The Justice Department argued that since the NOI was not an authentic religious movement—but rather a "cult" that operated as political organization—its followers in prison did not have the right to meet or conduct religious services.
- The NOI and African American Islam more generally also became a symbol of black American resistance to U.S. foreign policy in the developing world, especially in Vietnam.
- In the second half of the 1960s, at the height of U.S. troop commitment in Vietnam and with the rise of Black Power groups like the Panthers, the federal government adopted even more aggressive techniques to either destroy or at least transform the Nation of Islam. Its weapon of choice was the Counterintelligence Program, better known as COINTELPRO.
- Though the FBI had long run surveillance on the Nation, COINTELPRO represented an escalation of government interference, a high water mark of pre-9/11 fears about the Muslim threat to the United States.

Current Moment

As Donna A. Auston writes in [Mapping the Intersection of Islamophobia & #BlackLivesMatter](#), "Black Muslims exist right at the intersection of these two forms of racism," Islamophobia and anti-Black racism:

- In public discourse, we easily link anti-Muslim and anti-Arab discrimination as being nearly one and the same. Yet, in spite of the fact that a full one-third of the U.S. Muslim population are black, we rarely tend to think of issues of anti-black racism, poverty, mass incarceration, or police brutality as legitimate "Muslim" issues. This is because we rarely consider black Muslims.
- Just as much of the activism around police brutality has centered the experiences of black men while ignoring the deadly perils that black women also face from law enforcement, assumptions about who "American Muslims" are, and flattened representations of who constitutes the "black community" place black American Muslim experiences and challenges out of perceptual range.
- Dominant narratives—in both media and scholarly literature tend to doubly efface the existence and voices of black American Muslims—even in this moment when black bodies are at the very center of the unrest. Black Muslims do not come to this issue as bystanders or allies—even well meaning ones. Yet we are often erased—even from the narrative of our own struggle. That erasure renders our communities even more vulnerable—to Islamophobia, to anti-black racism (including from WITHIN the Muslim community), and to all of the attendant perils that accompany them.