

The inferior white: Politics and practices of racialization of people from the Middle East in the US

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journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Hadi Khoshnevis**

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that racialization, as a process whose initiation and preservation requires collaboration between state institutions, elites, and citizens, can be better understood in relation to colonial histories and in the current context of colonial situation, and by transcending the corporeal conception of racialization. By looking specifically into the case of people from the Middle East in the US, an ethnically and racially diverse population which historically has been conflated with Muslims due to Orientalist notions of the region, this paper surveys the historical racialization of the categorical figure of Muslim as the ultimate civilizational ‘other.’ Considering that according to the US Census Bureau, people from the Middle East are racially white, this paper also examines how a legally white population in white America is pushed to the margins of civility and center of attack. I conclude that racialization processes in the US rely on a historical politico-legal and socio-cultural repertoire of old modes of othering upon which the foundations of the structurally racist system rest. This socio-cultural repertoire which started from the Spanish Inquisitions against Muslims and Jews, later was transformed and applied to indigenous populations in Americas and enslaved Africans. The current Global War on Terror is a return to that initial start.

Keywords

Whiteness, Muslim, the Middle East, racialization, orientalism, colonialism, the US

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Introduction

Although Western depictions of the Middle East (ME) as an exotic place and representation of people from the ME as barbaric and historyless predates September 11, 2001 (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009; Cainkar, 2009; Grosfoguel, 2010, 2012; Naber, 2008; Rana, 2007; Said, 1979, 1981), three main reasons can be enumerated to highlight the urgency and necessity of reconsidering the topic in the post-9/11 era. First, people from the ME in the US have been historically understudied in the field of ethnic and racial studies (Selod and Embrick, 2013). Indeed, before 9/11, their plight was overshadowed by concerns about other minority groups (Disha et al., 2011). The reason for this lack of attention, Marvasti and McKinney (2004) maintain, is the conflict between the US and countries in the ME that has cast immigrants from this region as disloyal guests unworthy of equal attention in ethno-racial studies in the US. The second reason is that, 9/11 and its aftermath has intensified and exacerbated discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward people from the ME, both within the US and abroad in the Global War on Terror (Cainkar, 2006, 2009; Jamal and Naber, 2008; Selby and Beaman, 2016). And third, considering that according to the US Census Bureau people from the ME are legally white, looking at why and how a white population in white America, situated in-between an attributed legal status and its denial, is reified, targeted, and vilified can shed light on the limits of whiteness and its modes of preservation.

In this paper, I argue that throughout US history, consistent policies and practices have been at the core of racialization of minorities in the US, a legacy brought to the country by the Spanish colonials from Jewish and Muslim inquisitions in Europe (Grosfoguel, 2010; Hannaford, 1996; Harrison, 1995; Hirschman, 2004; Rana, 2007) and applied, before any other group, to indigenous populations in the Americas (Glenn, 2015; Grosfoguel, 2012; Rana, 2007; Steinman, 2016). I reveal these long-lasting trends and show how current racialization of people from the ME relies on a historical political and social repertoire of old modes of 'racial formation' (Omi and Winant, 2015) within a systematically racialized establishment (Feagin, 2006). That said, this paper does not explore where people from the ME should be located on the ethno-racial hierarchy of the US. It does not study either if people from the ME in the US are, or should be, categorized as white. Instead, the paper looks into the historical racialization of people from the ME in the US, which despite their linguistic, religious, cultural, and corporeal diversity (Naber, 2008; Read, 2008), are reified as a monolith category or 'type' (Maghbouleh, 2017).

The structure of this paper is as follows: After defining what the ME is and discussing the marginal position of Middle Eastern populations within the racial hierarchy of the US, under 'The Historical Roots of Religious Racialization,' I discuss the ideological basis of othering in general. Through a historical analysis, I show how racialization is nurtured by religious discourses which helped whites to define themselves through negation, meaning mainly through differentiation and

dissociation from non-Christians. This discussion will pave the way for demonstrating, under the rubric of ‘Everyday Racism and Accountability,’ how similar processes have been employed in the US history to engage citizens in the othering processes. Deputization of gate-keeping by the state to citizens was a common practice in lynching of blacks as well as people of color (Brundage, 1993), mass arrest and deportation of Irish, German, and Russian citizens in Palmer Raids (Hoyt, 1969; Schmidt, 2000), Japanese Internment after Pearl Harbor (Takaki, 1989), as well as recent racialization of people from the ME. And last, in the section ‘From Phenotypical to Cultural Racialization,’ I offer a definition of racialization which, by bringing the sociology of immigration and sociology of race together both physical and cultural modes of othering.

What is the Middle East?

The ME is a modern colonial construct. Dale F. Eickelman (2000: 5) in his book, titled *The Middle East and Central Asia*, maintains, ‘the region’s inhabitants did not coin the term “Middle East.” Like older, geographically restricted labels such as “the Near East” and “the Levant,” it originated with nineteenth-century European strategies and is unabashedly Eurocentric.’ Being a colonial imposition, the map of the ME has consistently shifted as the relationships of colonies with the colonizers changes. This shifting map sometimes included some African countries by erasure of Asian countries or vice versa. Due to the inherent ambiguities of this construction, according to Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009: 66), ‘there is no consensus on which countries make up the Middle East.’ Yet more often than not, when the term ME is used its meanings are presumed and unquestioned.

The term ‘Middle East’ was coined by the British and later expanded by Americans to refer to a region between Arabia and India, with the Persian Gulf at its center. The name was suggested by the British War minister, Lord Kitchener (1850–1916), who proposed indirect colonial hegemony by relying on and enthroning regional indigenous kings (Pagden, 2009). Alongside its geographical boundaries, political use of the term also has oscillated considerably. In his General Assembly on 13 August 1958, Eisenhower defined the ME to merely include Arab countries:

WASHINGTON, Aug. 13 – [...] It regards the Near (or Middle) East as embracing the United Arab Republic, consisting of Egypt and Syria, and Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, including Kuwait, Bahrein and Qatar. (*New York Times*, 1958)

During the second George W. Bush administration, the term ‘the Greater Middle East’ was coined to include North Africa, making the map of Islam as the predominant religion of the region overlap with the colonial construct of the ME (Ottaway and Carothers, 2004) as the target of the Global War on Terror. This ideological labor to synonymize a colonial construct with the religion of the ‘enemy’ further minimized the vast variety of religions, culture, and languages that

exist in the region. Now the ME includes 22 members of the Arab League plus Iran, Turkey, and Israel.

Liminality of the inferior white

Whiteness is perceived to be the default mode of racial existence and hence needless of examination for ills (Best, 2003; Brekhus, 1998; Feagin, 2006; Hyde, 1995; Jacobson, 1998; McDermott and Samson, 2005; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Whiteness, instead of being defined by and for itself, is constructed through negation with the 'impure,' 'pervert,' and 'inferior' (Collins, 1986; Du Bois [1920] 2007; Golash-Boza, 2016; James, 2008; Jordan, 1974). It is viewed as the opposite of the 'other' who is characterized as 'effeminate, caste-ridden, and degraded' (Haney López, 2006: 3). Within this white racial category there is a fraction, an *inferior white* which is perceived as barbaric, backward, and history-less. A racialized ethnicity (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil, 2004; Grosfoguel, 2004) that in the racial hierarchy of the US fits neither in Hollinger's ethno-racial pentagon of African Americans, Asian Americans, Whites, Native Americans and Latinos (Hollinger, 1995), nor in Bonilla-Silva's (2004) proposed 'trichotomy' of whites, honorary whites, and the 'collective black' (also see O'Brien, 2007). People from the ME are white, but not the right kind of white (Gualtieri, 2009) to be granted complete inclusion; they are perceived as unfit and hence, extraneous.

People from the ME are de-historicized and reified to serve a 'colonial situation' (Grosfoguel, 2004), where in the absence of colonial institutions, coloniality is exercised through colonial relations. In a colonial situation, racialization is principally pursued through development discourses, material dispossession, ideological means, and waging wars to position the 'other' on the hinterlands of civilization. People from the ME in the US are deprived of the privileges that come with their legal white category; they are at the intersection of privilege and misery, deprived of the former and thrown in the latter (Jamal and Naber, 2008; Majaj, 2000). They are socio-legally situated at a precarious juncture of several fields. They are the obscure population in the prestigious space of 'selected' whiteness and hence, seen as adjacent damnation. They are socio-legally liminal, they are 'betwixt and between,' they are neither and nor. Unlike bell hooks (1984: 29) who claims the either/or mode of thinking is the pivotal 'ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society,' I hold that neither/nor resides at the heart of domination: a logic which is based on obliteration, differentiation, negation, and finally extermination (Bauman, 1995).

Angela James (2008: 33), in her piece *Making Sense of Race and Racial Classification*, argues that 'It was important, if incalculably so, that English discovery of Black Africans came at a time when the accepted English standard of beauty was a fair complexion of rose and White. Negroes seemed the very picture of perverse negation,' and continues, 'The role of this "perverse negation" in the subsequent history of race in America cannot be overstated.' A history nurtured by naturalized binary oppositions (also see Eze, 1997; Hall, 1997; Haney López, 2006;

Haraway, 1988). As Patricia Hill Collins (1986: 520) holds these binaries gain their meaning ‘in relation to their difference from their oppositional counterparts.’ Dichotomization as a relational process, despite its ostensible simplicity, results in intricate relations of exclusion and oppression. It creates two opposite extremes with exclusively opposite characteristics, it coerces the ‘other’ into the farthest extreme. The other’s end becomes, as a corollary, an obscure category replete with contradictions to make free associations possible. It is based on this dichotomizing rationale that in the late 19th century, the testimony of police officer George Shishim, a Lebanese officer in California, against a white person was nullified due to Mr. Shishim’s non-white status. This case is reminiscent of an 1854 case in which the testimony of a Chinese witness against a white murderer was invalidated. Based on an 1850 statute, stating ‘no Black, or Mulatto person, or Indian shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a white man,’ the court ruled that black is ‘a generic term encompassing all nonwhites and that is thus included Chinese persons’ (Gualtieri, 2009, 58).

The in-between populations, the liminal groups, based on their ‘eligibility’ and their strategic utility, are lumped into one side or other. While, for instance, ‘At the turn of the century, Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants were considered neither white nor black,’ ‘Historians have traced the many paths by which Irish, Italians, Jews, etc., have become whites’ (McDermott and Samson, 2005: 251; also see Ngai, 2004; Roediger, 1991). These liminal categories, ‘racial middles’ (Hartigan, 2010; O’Brien, 2008) or ‘in-between people’ (Hirschman, 2004), cannot remain in that in-between space to cast doubt on the ‘natural occurrence’ of these extreme dichotomies (Haney López, 2006), on the ‘natural superiority of the dominant’ (Blumer, 1958). Either based on visible phenotypic features or ideological associations, they will be reified and pushed to the opposite corner.

Through reification, a process which involves lumping different groups into essentialized categories (Brubaker, 2002), people from the ME and Muslims become the same, white becomes equal to Christian, and Christianity becomes secular (Friedland, 2001; Jordan, 1968). To reify, the ethno-political entrepreneurs propagate an image of Middle Eastern culture whose backbone is Islam and whose birthplace is the ME. The reification of an ethnicity as monolith, as commonsensically quasi-natural, using Hirschfeld (1996) words, essentializes the attributed features to people from the ME. This ethno-racial reification of ‘others’ in the US is what I examine in the next section. I will argue that while racialization in the US has been based on different justifications and needs, at the heart of it rests the dominant idea of the US as a Protestant country; a nation of ‘selected’ people, predestined to be saved and responsible to save others.

Historical roots of religious racialization

Although classification of different groups of people can be traced back to old documents like the Bible (Goffman, 1963; Omi and Winant, 2015), its modern imperial usage did not happen until the modern rise of European powers (Golash-Boza, 2016), and the contribution of three ‘institutions of race-making,’

namely social Darwinism, European imperialism, and Western slavery (Hirschman, 2004). Science played a key role in naturalizing the myth of the superiority of one type of culture and/or skin color over others. The so-called scientific explanations, like social Darwinism and eugenics, aimed to essentialize and de-historicize the relations of power to introduce and preserve the status quo as the 'natural' order of affairs (see Hirschman, 2004; Zuberi, 2008; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). As Omi and Winant (2015: 115) put it eloquently,

The invocation of scientific criteria to demonstrate the "natural" basis of racial hierarchy was both a logical consequence of the rise of this form of knowledge, and an attempt to provide more subtle and nuanced account of human complexity in the new, "enlightened" age.

Over time this so-called scientific explanation, allegedly impartial and objective, became the 'dogma' (Gilroy, 1991; Grosfoguel, 2010): part of a collective and subjective benchmark with negative material consequences for those categorized as 'others' and benefits for its upholders.

Contrary to Omi and Winant's claim that the justification of racial formation as a means of oppression has shifted 'from religion to science to politics' (2015: 114), historical evidence shows that Christianity in particular has never ceased to be used in these political projects of othering. Even though the enslavement of Africans provided labor for economic prosperity, the basis upon which the historically 'unjust enrichment of whites' and 'unjust impoverishment of blacks' occurred (Feagin, 2006; also see Glenn, 2002), has always been a socio-politically ideologized Christianity (Grosfoguel, 2012; Rana, 2007).

Regarding the role of religion in creating the stigmatized others, Goffman (1963: 1) maintains that in the early years of Christianity,

two layers of metaphor were added to the term [stigma]: the first referred to bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin; the second, a medical allusion to this religious allusion, referred to bodily signs of physical disorder. (Goffman, 1963: 1)

Stigmatization of people in these times was not and did not remain confined within one specific community. Actual links between skin color and cultural lineage with hierarchical order were made both within and among different communities. For instance, in the colonial era, 'European colonists mostly distinguished themselves as "Christians" in counterpoint to "Negroes" and "Indians." By about 1680, they began contrasting themselves as "whites" with "Negroes;" and soon with "blacks" (or "Africans")' (Jordan, 1968: 95; also see Hannaford, 1996). According to Joe Feagin (2006: 10), the early Puritans 'were intolerant of others' religious views and saw themselves as a "chosen" people with the right to kill and displace indigenous populations whom they demonized as uncivilized, savage, and non-Christian' (also see Grinde, 2004). These religious justifications

were utilized to legitimize fierce measures for conquering new lands and creating the myth of taking over a ‘vacant land.’ Feagin (2006: 10–11) continues, ‘Referring to Native Americans, the Puritan minister and influential pamphleteer Cotton Mather argued that the New England “woods were almost cleared of those pernicious creatures, to make room for a better growth”’ (also see Steinman, 2016). Although, the target of othering has expanded to include other populations, racial formation in the US today is still using mechanisms and objectives used before: religion, more specifically Protestantism, is still at the core of processes of racialization.

After the collapse of the USSR and the rampant use of the ‘clash of civilization’ discourse, people from the ME started to be singled out as the main racial other (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009; Gržinić and Tatlić, 2014). D’Souza, a conservative commentator, writes:

America is a new kind of society that produces a new kind of human being. That human being – confident, self-reliant, tolerant, generous, future-oriented – is a vast improvement over the wretched, servile, fatalistic and intolerant human being that traditional societies have always produced, and that Islamic societies produce now. (cited in Marvasti and McKinney, 2004: 75)

This civilizing mission soaked in religious discourse and justified by the western civilizational thinking (Moallem, 2005), can also explain the Global War on Terror. As Haque (2010) argues, in the post 9/11 era, the references to Islam as the civilizational other, as opposed to Western liberal democracy, has increased. This mode of ideological racialization not only shares the colonial language but also utilizes similar mechanisms of othering. The racialization of people from the ME is based on the invention of inferiority of a legally white population that culturally is not sufficiently white. It is the white man’s burden, to humanize this civilizational other through dehumanizing techniques: ‘democracy’ at home and colonization and war abroad. This logic emboldens the Western ego constituted through a deep desire to know/impose ‘truth,’ to use its enlightened subjectivity for liberating the Oriental (Asad, 2003; Fanon, 2004; Yeğenoğlu, 1998) and obliterating its perceived threat.

Muslims as a threat category

Blumer (1958) writes that racial prejudice is based on ‘a fear or apprehension that the subordinate racial group is threatening, or will threaten, the position of the dominant group’ (to read about racial threat perspective see Blalock, 1967; Stewart et al., 2015); a phenomenon that rests at the heart of American nationalism (Friedland, 2001; Gerteis and Goolsby, 2005; Marx, 2003; Verdery, 1993), a paranoid nationalism which yearns nostalgically for the days when ‘these others “knew their place”’ (Glenn, 2002). American nationalism breathes through the debris of a romanticized nostalgia for the time of slavery and the days when the slaves were

faithful and loyal (see Katzman, 1978). White nationalism sees immigrants as problems, as others who jeopardize white supremacy by gradually taking over. This fear is not new. Gomberg-Muñoz (2012) holds that fears about the racial makeup of the country have been central to its immigration and citizenship policies from the very beginning.

Although before September 11, 2001, for the most part, the plight of the people from the ME was overshadowed by concerns about other minority groups (Disha et al., 2011), the terrorist attacks brought Muslims, interchangeably used with the ME and associated with targets of the global war on terror, to the center of attention. They started to be seen, more intensely than before, as the main problem who would not succumb to western domination (Asad, 2003; Werbner, 2005): disloyal and unreliable enemies within and abroad (Cainkar, 2009; Jamal, 2008a, 2008b; Naber, 2008). Islam, after September 11th, was framed as 'synonymous with terrorism, patriarchy, misogyny, and anti-American sentiments' (Selod, 2015: 77). People from the ME vilified as problems, as threats to the democratic order (Amir-Moazami, 2011; Mamdani, 2002; Mahmood, 2006; Said, 1979, 1981), became further reified as the category of threat.

To analyze these reificatory practices, Meer and Modood (2010) by comparing racialization with Islamophobia, hold that racialization is a more appropriate term since instead of investigating how Islam as a religion is vilified, it makes the examination of the impact of anti-Muslim sentiments on people possible. Studying racialization, defined as 'The extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group' (Omi and Winant, 2015: 111), thus allows us to see how exclusionary classifications are created and extended and how they affect the lives of categorically reified people (Murji and Solomos, 2005; Selod, 2015). Racialization happens through collective naming and unnameing, recognition and erasure, affirmation and denial, and through an iterative process of association and dissociation of meanings which turns individuals and groups into categorical figures. These iterative processes of categorization, according to Brubaker (2002: 169–170), can be studied both from below and above. By studying othering processes from both directions one can study both everyday affairs and institutional impositions. Regarding people from the ME in the US, it means studying how they are reified, constructed, and treated as a racial other, historically and in daily encounters with US institutions, its citizens, and its policies and practices. Examination of othering processes from above and below, makes it possible to see how the interaction between micro, meso, and macro factors shape daily experiences of minorities in the US and how they navigate through these interconnected domains. Processual aspect of racialization, therefore, make it fluid and porous, and shows that it is both exercised and performed. It creates a hierarchy in which one party is eligible to inquire and the 'other' is required to provide answers. Exchanging accounts are the daily practice of people from the ME and White Americans, meaning that people from the ME are expected to provide accounts and white Americans are constantly soliciting accounts (see Khoshnevis, 2017). Providing accounts by people from the ME as a liminal

population is pursued through the process of deputization by which legal authorities expect white citizens to constantly police the racial other. In the next section, I look at these interactions between law and accountability and explain how the macro and micro interact daily to influence the lives of people from the ME in the US.

Everyday racism and accountability

Barth (1967) argues that ethnic distinctions are not the outcome of isolation and absence of interaction. On the contrary, these distinctions are constructed through interaction. ‘Making up people,’ using Althusser’s (1971) famous phrase, happens through imposing our perspective through interactions on others, and also in the interaction within and among the macro and micro levels, including legal procedures which surprisingly is an understudied field in the racialization literature (Haney López, 2006; Mezey, 2003). Contribution of law in constructing categories of others and reifying them is a historically persistent element in the ethno-racial history of the US. Prerequisite cases of people from the ME, cases of applications for citizenship in early 20th-century US and later (Abdulrahim, 2008; Gualtieri, 2009; Majaj, 2000), for instance, show how law gives legal definition to the construction of race. Haney López (2006: 7) writes,

the prerequisite cases make clear that law does more than simply codify race in the limited sense of merely giving legal definition to pre-existing social categories. Instead, legislatures and courts have served not only to fix the boundaries of race in the forms we recognize today, but also to define the content of racial identities and to specify their relative privilege or disadvantage in U.S. society.

Court decisions in the prerequisite cases, thus, defined the boundaries of whiteness through exclusion of the ‘other.’ As the quote below from court hearing in a petition submitted by an Arab applicant for US citizenship shows, in prerequisite cases, while courts deemed whiteness needless of definition, as detectable by an ‘average man,’ they did not hesitate to ‘distinctly’ define non-whites as a visibly collective other.

Without being able to define a white person, the average man in the street understands distinctly what it means, and would find no difficulty in assigning to the yellow race a Turk or Syrian with as much ease as he would bestow that designation on a Chinaman or a Korean. (James Farrel, Assistant US Attorney, *In re Halladjian 1909*)

The common knowledge of the abstract average citizen, besides scientific evidence and constitutional intent, served as reference for inclusion or exclusion in courts (Gualtieri, 2009). As judges faced inconsistency and indeterminacy in the definitions of whiteness, in a fight between viewing race as a natural occurrence or social construction, they decided to increasingly draw on common knowledge, which

reveals convincingly that ‘racial categorization finds its origins in social practices’ (Haney López, 2006: 5). After decades, the same mechanisms are at play for defining suspicious behaviors of the Muslim other. Selod (2015: 91) maintains that since suspicious behavior is not clearly defined the public engages in making judgments based on their own assumption and fears. This mechanism, called deputization, invites citizens to become gatekeepers who by policing the suspicious people or behaviors confirm their loyalty and interrogate others’ eligibility for inclusion. Through these practices, racial boundaries are guarded and solidified. Acts like The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative (NSI), is an example of a these collaborative efforts between an allegedly multicultural state and its faithful and accountable citizens. This act is intended to provide a nationwide capacity for collaborative knowledge sharing to protect, prevent, or deter terrorist attacks (see Selod, 2015; for examples of suspicious activity see Nationwide SAR Initiative, which involves entities from medical facilities to gardening companies).

The Western secular states, by claiming their autonomy from cultural and religious responsibilities, present culture as a domain free from state intervention, therefore depoliticized (see Brown, 2006). Consequently, civil society becomes the oppressive entity; as it happened during the Jim Crow era when all whites were deputized to interpret and enforce segregation laws (Glenn, 2002) or in 1919 and 1920, during Palmer Raids, when citizens reported suspicious behavior of communists and anarchists (Finan, 2007). Under such conditions, ‘true’ citizens become account solicitors and those deemed as ‘other’ become account-givers (to read about accounts and accountability see Lyman and Scott, 1989; West and Fenstermaker, 1995). It is through these account exchanges that superiority and interiority are framed, delineated, and maintained. In the next section, I explain how racialization as a useful concept needs definitional expansion. I argue that while our visual practices contribute significantly to the estrangement of the other, racism and racialization does not necessarily start or remain limited to corporeal features.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to discuss the development of a racial frame and understanding among early waves of immigrants from the ME to the US. Although immigrants from the ME were not initially familiar with the modern notion of race as it is perceived in the West, they started to adopt a racial language during early years of the 20th-century upon arrival to the US. The first wave of immigrants from the ME to the United States were primarily Christian peasants from the Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Occupied Territories). These immigrants in the post 1909 context of nativism in the US and through interactions with the legal system in the US which limited citizenship to free white man and of African nativity or descent, developed a racial language which shifted from religion and civilization to anti-Black and anti-Asian definitions of race which brought together culture and skin color together (Abdulrahim, 2008; Majaj, 2000). In their newly established notion of race, Muslims and darker skin immigrants were othered (Gualtieri, 2009). A comparison of naturalization cases submitted to US courts by Costa George Najour,

a Christian Lebanese, in 1909 and Ahmad Hassan, a Yemeni Muslim, in 1942 shows the stark differences in the court debates (Gualtieri, 2009; Haney López, 2006; Majaj, 2000). Although Najour's case was approved by the presiding Judge Newman in Georgia in 1909, Hassan's petition, submitted in Michigan in 1942 was rejected due to Islamic background and geographical distance of Yemen from Europe/the West. Interesting enough, the case of Mohamed Mohriez, a Muslim from Saudi Arabia, brought to court in 1944 in Massachusetts, was approved due to the reliance of the United States on the newly discovered oil resources in the Saudi kingdom. These different rulings reveals the contingent boundaries of whiteness and, as it will be discussed, the close entanglement of race and ethnicity with geopolitics.

From phenotypical to cultural racialization

The significance of vision among other senses and therefore, visibility, is the outcome of the 'Enlightenment' tradition which replaced divine sources of knowledge with human reasoning and sensuous experience. This tradition emphasized and looked for *observable* facts (see Mellor and Shilling, 1997; Stoller, 1997; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Omi and Winant (2015: 111) second this idea that there is a 'non-reducible *visual dimension* to the definition and understanding of racial categories.' In racialization processes the body turns into a text, using Hall's (1997) words: a signifier that reveals or approves some 'facts' about the nature of one's soul (James, 2008); it reveals somebody's cultural and developmental inferiority or testifies to their cultural abnormality. Body, in the modern era turns into the main terrain of contestation and the primary target of material and symbolic violence (Foucault, 1995; Haraway, 1988; Martin, 2004). The question, however, is whether racialization starts from and remains confined to phenotypical features?

While I agree with Omi and Winant (2015) that physical features are involved in racialization processes, I find their definition of race limiting and ahistorical. Omi and Winant see race as 'a representation of or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to these practices' (2015: 111). This definition assumes that corporeal features are used to racialize others, and hence, concludes that corporeal precedes cultural othering. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), however, claim that racialization may operate on grounds other than bodily stigmatization by adding other aspects like immigration and religion. They write about 'the functioning of the category of immigration as a substitute for the notion of race' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 20). By placing immigration at the center of analysis, the authors regard race as a transnational phenomenon constructed through colonial projects. By borrowing from P. A. Taguieff, they introduce the notion of differentialist racism, as the new racism in the decolonization era,

whose dominant theme is not biological and or hereditary but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but “only” the harmless abolishing of frontiers, the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions. (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 21)

Balibar and Wallerstein’s articulation is important because it enables us to analyze racialization beyond the body, while at the same time allows us to investigate cases in which phenotypical othering is also at play. By doing so, they displace the problematic:

We now move from the theory of races or the struggle between the races in human history, whether based on biological or psychological principles, to a theory of “race relations” within society, which naturalizes not racial belonging but racist conduct. (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 22–23)

The frame proposed by Balibar and Wallerstein while encompassing, creates a break between the analytical frames and tools needed for the colonial era and de-colonial era. Historical evidence shows that both modes of racialization, namely racialization based on bodily features and cultural differences, have existed in both eras, applied to Muslims and Jews in Europe (Grosfoguel, 1999; Hannaford, 1996; Hirschman, 2004; Rana, 2007). This temporal break and its resulting theoretical discontinuity may erase some section of the larger picture: while on the one hand, it provides us a more comprehensive definition of racism and racialization, it, on the other hand, takes away some of our currently useful concepts and tools.

Ramón Grosfoguel in his paper, *Race and ethnicity or Racialized Ethnicities? Identities within Global Coloniality*, attempts to make up for this shortcoming. He writes, scholars ‘have underestimated the continuities between the colonial past and the present racial/ethnic hierarchies’ (2004: 321). For instance, he faults Omi and Winant’s racial formation approach for falling short of considering ‘the historical continuities between colonial and the so-called “post-colonial” projects’ (2004: 325), and therefore suggests replacing it with colonial/racial formation (2004: 326). For Grosfoguel the power of classification of different populations in the US within ‘an unequal field of power relations within symbolic, economic, and political structures,’ is linked to ‘the history of the racial/ethnic construction of groups within a white supremacist/colonial systems of domination’ (2004: 323).

By drawing on Aníbal Quijano’s work, Grosfoguel endeavors to show how ‘shifting meanings about race have a historical continuity that can only be understood in relation to the colonial histories of empires’ (2004: 326; also see Go, 2013). A history in which, ‘groups with a long history of colonial relations with an imperial state are particularly more vulnerable to negative representation of their identities’ (2004: 328), and countries ‘that have “broken” the neocolonial linkages with the United States and are treated by American foreign policy as enemies’

(Grosfoguel, 2004: 317; Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002; Mbembe, 2001). Furthermore, to overcome the limited analytical approach which sees every type of othering as color-based, namely based on biological differences, Grosfoguel (2004) suggests using the composite term of 'racial/ethnic' identity in order to grasp contemporary modes of othering that traverse phenotype and culture; mechanisms that create 'ethnicized races' and 'racialized ethnicities' (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil, 2004). That said, he offers a more comprehensive definition of racialization. For Grosfoguel, racialization which transpires on a global stage and in the pursuit of colonial projects, is 'the process through which groups (frequently the dominant ones) use cultural and/or biological features/criteria to construct a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority among collective social actors' (Grosfoguel, 2004: 326–327).

People from the ME in general, and Muslims in particular, are the example par excellence of a racialized ethnicity: their visible features herald terror due to their attributed cultural inferiority. To avoid their 'cultural intrusion,' their bodies need to be scrutinized and policed. And this is the case more often when it comes to Muslim women's bodies (Cainkar, 2009; Naber, 2008; Puar, 2007). While Muslim men are perceived as security threats, Muslim women, especially those who due to headscarves are incapable of passing as non-Muslim, are deemed as cultural threats. Muslim women's bodies, therefore, are the primary battlegrounds which 'demarcate the line between the civilized secular modern nation and premodern religious fundamentalisms' (Haque, 2010, 79).

The case of people from the ME, however, is ironic. They are a legally white population whose essentialized cultural inferiority holds them distant from the 'good kind of white' (Gualtieri, 2009). This is not a new phenomenon in the US. The people from the ME and Muslims have been stigmatized in the Western minds for centuries, all the way back to writings of Martin Luther who depicted Islam as the religion of 'murder, adultery, unchastity, the destruction of marriage and other shameful abominations and deceptions' (Faris and Hitti, 1944), and political philosophers like Montesquieu (Montesquieu, 1952) who claimed that Islam is the suitable religion for hot climates of the ME, where despotism is the norm and civil slavery the default. But the events of 9/11 changed the nature of the stigma. It changed the direction of the definition of the people from the ME from a backward ethnic group in the exotic orient to an agile enemy, who are Western educated, dress like 'us' and live among 'us.'

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I showed how people from the ME have been othered. I defined them as a liminal population, on the margins of the white category and attacked at by the white center. I highlighted three parallels which have been employed in America to historically racialize minorities. In three sections, I argued that similar dynamics are at work in racialization of the people from the ME. In the section of the role of religion, I claimed that although racism has served different functions, it

has always been relied on religion. Then, I held that deputization, as a form of collaborative mode of social control and governmentality, aiming at guarding the symbolic and social boundaries, has always been employed in racialization processes. And finally, I argued that definition of racialization should expand to include and explain both bodily and cultural modes of othering.

The practical role that racist ideologies play is defining whiteness through negation, and this function is what aligns white supremacy with modes of knowledge production, governmentality, state policies, and legal procedures. As Althusser (1971: 139) states ‘what unifies their diversity [meaning diversity of ideological state apparatuses] is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, beneath the ruling ideology.’ Cooperation of different social entities, from individual to institutional, both synchronically and diachronically, results in the accumulation of a historical repertoire from which actions and ideations, practices and narratives are extracted and employed. This reservoir is also used to naturalize the status quo, to create a vast realm of discourses and practices upon which different levels of oppression work together to secure the myth of the superiority of white people over the constructed inferiority of the others.

Future studies could look into the possible practical and analytical limitations and advantages of categories such as the Middle East in minorities’ fight for equality and progressive change. The current MENA campaign, pioneered by major advocacy groups of Middle Eastern and North African background, which endeavors to create an ethnic MENA category on the US Census, shows how colonial/imperial categories, while restraining, can turn into the language of minorities’ struggle for justice. This campaign also shows that mere legal categorization and recognition as white, does not translate into privilege. The relationship between law and lived experience is another aspect of immigrants’ lives that future studies could delve into. Such an inquiry will expand our understanding of the interactions between law and life. It also shows that law is not merely a social fact. Law is a living fact (Khoshnevis, 2017), interpreted, practiced, and performed, which can conform or oppose one’s social status.

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