

Unpaving the Road to Hell: Disrupting Good Intentions and Bad Science About Islam and the Middle East

Özlem Sensoy

Simon Fraser University

Carolyne Ali-Khan

University of North Florida

Teachers across all subject areas engage students, in some way, in the study of *otherness*—other societies, other cultures, other practices. Often teachers and teacher educators attend to teaching about others with strong desires toward social justice as they seek to make a difference and do good. However, with insufficient tools to interrogate their practices and beliefs to think critically what good actually entails, they can unwittingly pave the road to hell. When good intentions are additionally coupled with the bad science of incomplete knowledge, misinformation, and weak arguments, the road can get treacherous. In this article, we examine the road to hell as it winds through teaching about a specific *other*, Muslims. We examine how good intentions and bad science about Muslims and Islam have worked to cement stereotypes, promote intolerance, shut down learning, and in doing so thwart education for social justice. Peering closely, we examine commonly voiced student conceptions of Muslims/Islam/The East and highlight the good intentions and bad science behind many of the popular discourses that students advance. We then offer strategies for building a different path, by problematizing good intentions and repairing bad science.

THE BADNESS OF GOOD INTENTIONS

I met a Danish journalist in New York a month after the attacks. “I am sorry I didn’t have a chance to read the Koran before I came to see you,” she said, “but you know it was sold out in Copenhagen.” I failed to see the reason for her rather strange apology. “I wanted to read it to understand,” she immediately explained, which led me to ask her what exactly it was that she wanted to understand. “Islam,” she said ruefully. “I wanted to understand Islam before I came to New York to interview you about the events of September.” This was the first time it had been explicitly suggested to me that my comments about 9/11 would be illuminated not by whether they made sense but by whether or not my questioner had read Islam’s holy book. (Said, 2002, p. 69)

Everyone knows the saying that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” but we believe that few stories can prove it as thoroughly as this vignette from Edward Said. The Danish journal-

Correspondence should be sent to Özlem Sensoy, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. E-mail: ozlem@sfu.ca

ist interviewing Said had good intentions; the kind of good intentions that led her to some rather peculiar conclusions. She assumed that Said's responses to a world event would be predicated on some meta-Islamic logic, and (should such a thing exist) that she could access this logic by reading the Qur'an.

This type of problematic logic is strangely commonplace when it comes to popular thinking about Islam and Muslims. As teacher educators who regularly teach and conduct workshops about Islamophobia, we have become accustomed to hearing a combination of good intentions ("I want to understand...") and odd scientific thinking ("...but Muslims are inherently different and thus defy logic" or "Muslims are easy to understand; just read the Qur'an"). It is our assertion that such thinking, left unexamined, can lead teachers and students down some pretty bad (i.e., logically incoherent and morally questionable) intellectual paths.

In what follows, we offer our analysis of bad good intentions and equally bad science that we repeatedly encounter in our classrooms. We contextualize the arguments we are often presented with and attempt to peek behind the curtain of their logic to examine and understand how these discourses work to perpetuate Islamophobia, particularly in teacher education. First we lay out what we mean by *good intentions* and *bad science*. Next we discuss the way that these work in the specific context of Islamophobia. In conclusion, we offer some pedagogical strategies that might be helpful to educators who, like us, struggle with the issues we have encountered. It is our hope that by shedding light on what is happening, we can begin to illuminate some possibilities for pedagogical alternatives so that good intentions in our classrooms can be uncoupled from the kind of bad logic that Edward Said encountered in the opening vignette.

DOING UNTO "OTHERS"

Good intentions have long been all the rage, especially in the context of Settler Colonial (or so-called *Western, Occidental, or First World*) understandings about the Global South (the so-called *Eastern, Oriental, or Third World*). Indeed, the idea of *doing good* is such a familiar aspect of neocolonial discourse that it often goes unnoticed, much less questioned. The earliest European colonizers believed they were, among other things, saving the savage peoples of discovered lands from their own savagery (Césaire, 1972; Said, 1979). Given this history, it is hardly surprising that contemporary humanitarian campaigns continue to be popular and predicated on the idea of a civilized/modern First World being called to help and even save social others in the ravaged/backward Third World (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Grewal, 2003; Narayan, 1995). Socialized into these familiar binary logics, it is not uncommon for us (as teacher educators) to hear our students speak of wanting to "help children in Haiti" (or Afghanistan, or India, or *insert Third World nation here*) by sending them food (or school supplies, clothing...), often with a missionary zeal (and sometimes via not-well-disclosed Christian-themed charity projects in school, such as the Samaritan's Purse¹ Christmas Shoebox program, and the Breaking Bread Dinners² for women and girls in Afghanistan program). Although students may come to these projects with good intentions, the bad logic of an underlying foundation of Western superiority set the landscape within which these good works are organized, while remaining fundamentally unquestioned.

Many of our students have been socialized in a media-saturated environment that supports and promotes ongoing global campaigns such as The Girl Effect (tied to the Nike Foundation), and learning projects like Little Women for Little Women in Afghanistan, which encourage Western girls to participate in aid and helping activities toward their Third-World sisters (Sensoy

& Marshall, 2010). These, along with endless social media campaigns and other forms of pop-up hashtag activism, ensure that there are particular characters and a particular story about the Third World that reaches our students' ears time and again. This story is one of a backward, monolithic place, wholly in crisis, and in need of saving by Western subjects who are presented as agents, saviors, and actors; who have the capacity and a moral imperative to help. This has become so familiar a story that even Barbie's in on the joke of the White Savior as the Barbie Savior Instagram account shows Barbie helping poor orphaned children in Africa (Blay, 2016).

As educators who work with preservice and in-service teachers, it is not uncommon for us to hear student teachers (most of whom are White, middle-class, and young women) express the desire to help students, families, and communities, as a central motivation for choosing the profession. It is hard for us to tread lightly as we try to unpack and dig into the politics of *help* and *doing good* but there is ample reason to do so. Campaigns for humanitarian do-goodism have been deftly critiqued by transnational feminist scholars, including Uma Narayan (1995), who argues that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is sustained via a "colonialist care discourse" (p. 135). This care discourse focuses on a paternalistic framework of care, which sustains rather than problematizes relations of domination. Thus the colonial power of domination and the humanitarian *right to rescue* further normalize contemporary modes of power (Grewal, 2003; Narayan, 1995; Sensoy & Marshall, 2010). In addition, much like the journalist interviewing Edward Said, teachers who position themselves as wanting to help (especially if the object is their own students and their families) begin from the premise not just that their help is warranted, and indeed helpful, but also that the conditions requiring help were created out of bad luck (*Their government and warring factions ...*), traditional/hyperreligious family values (*Her parents don't value education for girls ...*), and as such are completely disconnected from Western entanglements in the first place. Help is thus constructed as a universal and pure human feeling and action (i.e., good), and as such, is depoliticized and made neutral while it stands in opposition to highly politicized (i.e., bad) values assigned to the other.

WHEN THE HALO BECOMES A NOOSE

In the context of teaching, good intentions are more than simply benign hopes, but, rather, can actively block the development of more complex understandings of the social world and thereby firmly cement the proverbial road to hell—this particular path, as we see it, works to narrow, rather than expand, social justice (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). We have found that when the metaphorical halos of saving others appear in our classrooms, they can quickly slip down to become intellectual nooses and knots that actively constrain and impede social justice practice. This is because it is hard for our students to see beyond "only trying to do good" and grasp the power dynamics that the helping relation (in the context of White Settler history) entails.

The valorizing of (good) intent actively blocks more complicated conversations about injustice and complicity. Our interactions with students have confirmed for us that an emotion-heavy desire to help is common, but insufficient, if not altogether problematic, in the context of social justice practices (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Sheets, 2003). As McGee Banks and Banks (1995) explain, "[Equity pedagogy] requires more than good will and good intentions. It requires multicultural, pedagogical, and subject area knowledge" (p. 156). In fact, it is a common occurrence that social justice practice can quickly slide away from the pedagogical and into a quagmire of the emotional. Struggling to "do the right thing," "come to terms with injustice,"

and “care enough to care for all students” can overwhelm discussions and turn social science and (in our case) education classes into feel good/feel bad fests (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010). Such moments are not only pedagogically difficult to pull away from, but they are also politically disempowering in that they psychologize, individualize, and reduce broad social and political issues to nothing more than an argument over how everyone deserves to feel good.

GOOD INTENTIONS MEETS BAD SCIENCE

As we try to navigate through notions of help and good, we have noticed that the standpoint of good intentions is difficult to interrupt for at least three reasons: First, how can anyone but the most heartless, find fault with the desire to be and do good? It seems an inherent instinct in human nature that is worth nurturing, and thus to challenge it as an ideal is to challenge this deeply held instinct; Second, good intentions and their corollary worthy causes have been normalized. The rise of social networks as easily accessible sites of education about the world have facilitated an onslaught of celebrity-endorsed/branded causes, hashtag activism, and corporate philanthropy, all of which result in normalizing the goodness of good intentions. Third, good intentions are commonly perceived to be a necessary starting point for social justice work. It is as if without good intentions, social justice and antioppressive work cannot occur.

Although intentions to do good can be important as motivational entry points into action, this “optimism without criticality is blind” (Ali-Khan, 2013, p. 7). The stance of good intentions alone reflects a ubiquitous, neoliberal logic of individual agency and salvation, so although normalizing this stance seems like the most logical and constructive response to instances of social inequity in schools and wider society, it is a blind move. In our experiences, intention-based narratives are, at best, wishful thinking, and at worst they lead to actions that perpetuate, rather than ameliorate, injustices and oppressions experienced by minoritized students.

Hand-in-hand with our struggles against good intentions and the tendency to translate social justice practices as mostly and necessarily emotional, are our struggles over the bad science of mainstreamed social justice understandings. One example of this is a common student insistence that, “We are all the same because we are each unique.” Students who hold on to this idea generally have difficulty understanding that social justice practices involve more than expressing the desire to love everyone equally. Similarly, “I am in a position to help and so I must” narratives, are common with our students. Students holding on to these ideas can fall into the trap of deficit thinking (Lund & Lee, 2015) wherein those people who don’t share or express the same desires are presumed to not value social justice. The effects of these discourses are that they elevate the *emotional* work of social justice (i.e., good will) and minimize if not altogether sideline the work of “science” i.e., the *intellectual* work of understanding content, context, and developing the critical vocabulary to talk about them (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE MUSLIM: A CASE STUDY OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

In the next section we map out examples of how bad science and good intentions can come together in the context of Islam and reinforce problematic discourses that stand in the way of achieving social justice in education. In what follows, we undo the logic of specific good

intentions discourses and analyze examples of familiar discursive threads that emerge in relation to discussion of Islam or the Middle East. We begin with a brief definition of Islamophobia and then move on to discuss the exact types of well-intentioned and bad science arguments that we frequently encounter.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a form of religious and cultural intolerance of Islam and Muslims (Sensoy, 2014). Some scholars have argued that the phenomenon the term tries to capture is less a *phobia* (or fear) and more a *cultural intolerance*, a rejection that is rooted in race and ethnicity, more so than religion (Modood, 2003). Despite popularized parlance since 2001, the term is not new. As Fernando López (2011) explains, it emerging in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries and described an emerging attitude in Europe at the time, wherein Islam (and Muslims) were perceived to be the image of the enemy. As López describes it, Islamophobia was “a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as an enemy, as a threat to ‘our’ well-being and even to ‘our’ survival.” (p. 569). In other words, Islam and Muslims are the face of all that is a threat to “our” way of life and being, and the word *Islamophobia* is the name given to this threat. There are several distinct strands of good intentions that we often encounter in our classes, which lead to furthering Islamophobia. Students’ misunderstandings and furthering of bad science related to Islam and Muslims often serves to increase Islamophobic discourse. We focus now on bad science and the particular (and peculiar) relationship of bad science to good intentions in our teaching about Islamophobia.

In our experience, the most common forms of bad science related to Islam include the following two clusters: first, a binary framework that positions Islam as a backwards/Eastern/uncivilized culture standing in opposition to a Judeo-Christian modern/Western/civilized culture. This is despite the fact that religious scholars consider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to be the three Abrahamic faiths, sharing much in common including faith stories and practices (Corrigan, Denny, Eire, & Jaffee, 1998). The second cluster is a tendency to simplify the diversity within Islam to a single monolithic entity, or group-think. This form of bad science is historically presented in examples such as school textbooks wherein there is an *Islamic* or *Muslim* world (but no parallel *Catholic World*, etc.). Given that there is no centralized authority in Islam, and that a myriad of cultural interpretations exist, it is reasonable to question why this particular form of bad science persists.

The discourses that follow are related in some capacity to these two central clusters of bad thinking. Because they are so common in teacher education, we name and explore each in detail as we illustrate examples of phrases are common in our classrooms.

“Why Focus on Difference? ~ They’re SO Different ...”

“Aren’t we all really just the same inside?”

“They’re just not like us.”

This sameness/difference narrative (epitomized in these quotes) is predicated on the notion that human experiences are universal and, as such, one does not need to problematize (or even to

recognize) their own, culturally-shaped framework. If there is no need to name a cultural view, the underlying assumptions of that worldview are that it is beyond the need for scrutiny.

Student refusal to name and recognize difference often presents as an intent to encourage love and unity between all peoples (a good intention), however it is predicated on the assumption that there is a single social reality and on obliviousness to diverse experiences and histories based on the absence of that common social reality (bad science). Any information that suggests otherwise is often interpreted as divisive, destabilizing, restrictive, politically correct, and working against a common good. Adherence to this line of reasoning makes it difficult for students to examine their own assumptions and the mechanisms of power that have erased a multitude of social realities in human history. A case study conducted by Mills and Keddie (2012) showed that students used a narrative of sameness to justify deficit discourses, which in turn supported an accompanying sense of cultural imperialism that framed their othering of Muslim cultures. The unquestionable goodness of their position also places such students above question in their role as spokesperson for “all” of us.

The emotionally feel-good rhetoric of sameness has the potential consequence of valorizing intellectual stubbornness and preserving power inequities (Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012). When students believe that “we have come a long way” toward getting along, in perfectly secular schools in a perfectly secular society, they become invested in preserving this presumed state of progress. Therefore, addressing Islamophobia can seem unnecessary and is perceived as giving special treatment to one religious group in a presumed-neutral school context. Students in our classes frequently resist such special treatments and express this in views such as “I don’t want to teach about differences.” To these students, the narrative of *social progress through a minimizing of difference* is sacred and emotionally good; therefore any science/evidence that gets in the way of it runs the risk of being treated with open hostility.

“Let Me Help! ~ I Can’t Comment”

“Those of us lucky enough to have been born here (in this culture), have to use our power to help the less fortunate children.”

“It’s better for me to not get involved.”

Students who construct this binary discourse, to get involved or to stay out of it, are often also vocal about powerful and joyful missionary or church-based or other community service (often in communities of racialized, non-White others). This is a type of paternalistic care discourse (Narayan, 1995) that is part and parcel of a civilized/savage framework for understanding colonized and racialized others. Conversely, the discourse to stay out of it on issues related to Islamophobia or issues in Muslim communities can also further Islamophobic, civilized/savage discourses. Whereas in the *help* discourse it is a paternalism that drives the need to help the innocent/ignorant savage, in the latter *stay away* discourse it is a fear of the violent/unpredictable savage. The underlying logic of both is tied to an “imperialist mindset of dividing the world through which we racialize, essentialize, compress the lives of others and assume superiority” (McQuaid, 2009, p. 21). This discourse has its roots in the earliest histories of 15th-century European colonial expansions into Islamic empires, most notably Indonesia and the former Ottoman Empire (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006).

The *I can't comment* reasoning is grounded in an essentialist logic that equates personal identity with broader social knowledge. Through this logic, the only people who can learn about and understand Islam are Muslims (or in Edward Said's interviewer's case, people who have read the Qur'an). Students are afraid of miseducating or offending others (a good intention), so instead they become part of the silent and complicit majority (a bad outcome).

As we teach in our (respective) colleges of education, it is not uncommon for us to hear in-service teachers express that they do not wish to overstep their professional expertise (a good intention) and to, therefore, reclude themselves from participating in any action or pedagogy against Islamophobia. So although they may feel comfortable teaching about or addressing sexism (a topic that they are accustomed to hearing about and discussing and may well have experienced in their own lives), for example, they shy away from opportunities to teach about or address Islamophobia. These students believe that they don't know enough about Islam/Muslims to comment on the dynamics around the inequitable treatment. Their lack of comfort/knowledge thereby operates as a circular argument as it reinforces not being uncomfortable (not engaging) and not needing to learn more.

That said, it is the case that there is both an embodied knowledge that members of particular communities have because of their lived histories and experiences. And there is also the reality that without active engagement with existing knowledge, one can't simply know and teach about complex social issues such as Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and oppression in society. However, it is possible for anyone to become more educated on these issues both historically and in the current social world.

"I Believe in Being Fair ~ Telling 'Both Sides' of the Story"

We should always teach both sides of the story.

In this discourse, simplistic conceptions of fairness override deeper questions about social justice. Students who hold on to this discursive logic express that they also believe that teaching about Islamophobia is teaching about Islam and, therefore, requires an equal amount of teaching about Christianity or other religions. The idea of *fairness*, although often a good intention, is bad science because it operates in classrooms that are disconnected from broader social spaces and the understanding of those spaces as nonneutral. The fact that mainstream schools and society already and relentlessly teach about Christianity becomes invisible to students (Blumenfeld, 2006; Sensoy, 2009, 2010). In a different version of the same problematic logic, some students express that they believe teachers should teach about both "moderate Islam" and "Islam that is connected to terrorism" in the well-intentioned aim of fairness (not surprisingly, these students do not also consider teaching about *moderate Christianity* and *Christianity that is connected to imperialism*).

The ideas of fairness as *equal time* can lead students to a place from which political neutrality (as an ideal and disconnected from broader power dynamics) is assumed, and attempts to point out injustice are "unfair." A recent example of this occurred when one of us received an e-mail from a student who had been in her class 2 years earlier. The student claimed that he had found the in-class discussions of diversity unfair and had at the time too little courage to argue his opinions against the professor. Fairness in this student's thinking was predicated on all forms of knowledge being equal and (ironically) all analysis of knowledge being removed from any context that would result in wrestling with the connections between specific knowledge and understandings

and broader questions. In this case, scholarship about Islamophobia is the same as an opinion about it, and any questioning of this logic is understood as unfair.

“I BELIEVE IN PRESERVING CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE”

Children aren't ready to hear about/talk about this kind of stuff.

Students who are invested in preserving the positive emotional climate that they believe is universal to childhood shy away from addressing Islamophobia. These students want to preserve what they believe is a harmonious world of childhood innocence. Cultural knowledge (good science) is replaced by knowledge of fairly commonplace cultural artifacts (a superficial, additive diversity), which substitute for more complex knowledge of the people who produce these artifacts.

The belief that children are innocent and too young to understand injustice assumes that children and their families do not experience injustice in their own lives. This logic is predicated on the idea that all childhoods are lived in an ideal and harmonious space, one free from the ugliness of racism and structural violence. Though this may be true for many teacher education students (who are often White and middle class), it does not necessarily hold for the lives of Muslim students. For teachers to use their own lives as the referent for the lives of their students is a form of bad science that encourages them to remain ignorant and keep students from sharing or having access to a more complex reality (in this case, the valorization of ignorance is both a good intention and more bad science).

In contrast to a childhood that should not be disturbed by the idea of injustice, the reality of Muslim students lives may well provide evidence that not only does everyone (child or adult) not live in a world of racial harmony, but the narrative of innocence may have fully bypassed Muslim children. An example of this that caught media attention involved a Muslim child who was arrested for bringing a homemade clock to school. Clearly, in this case, childhood innocence is not an idea that is equally bestowed. Henry Giroux (2000) notes, “Historically poor kids and children of color have been considered to be beyond the boundaries of both childhood and innocence” (p. 9). The idea of preserving childhood innocence may, in fact, have more to do with preserving the comfort of the students/student teachers than with responding to the lived realities of many Muslim, racialized, and otherwise marginalized children.

NOW WHAT?: A SAMPLE OF STRATEGIES TO COUNTER THESE DISCOURSES

Pitt and Britzman (2003) argue that it is important for educators to acknowledge that knowledge in classrooms can be emotionally and socially challenging, as well as intellectually challenging. They note that some knowledge is “difficult knowledge in teaching and learning” and therefore needs to be “worked through” (p. 386). Numerous educators working within an antioppression framework have similarly noted that students must be guided to gain comfort with ambiguity, dissonance, and contradiction (Apple, 2004; Boler, 1999; Kumashiro, 2002, 2004). In recognition of this and of the difficulty of teaching against good intentions and bad science, we now offer a

few pedagogical moves related to teaching against Islamophobia. These are organized into two aspects: problematizing good intentions and repairing bad science.

Problematize Good Intentions By: Fostering Transparency

We have that found that offering students our own transparency can help facilitate new levels of honesty in them and our willingness to share discomfort can facilitate in them a willingness to move beyond their own comfort levels. As we allow students to peek behind the curtain of our own evolutions and struggles with difficult knowledge, we encourage them to not fear losing face as they evolve and change in their beliefs. When we have shared our stories that confirmed how difficult it is to do the right thing in classrooms and told students our own social justice journeys of both success and failure, we have found that students have been more open to us and to each other. Validating the difficulty of their experiences by sharing the difficulty of our own seems to encourage deeper levels of dialogue. This strategy is in line with Freire's call for educators to acknowledge the whole person in the classroom and "engag(e) our students as integral human beings" (Darder, 2002, p. 94). In this case, our pedagogy is also based on the idea that sharing of ourselves as vulnerable, offering our stories of intellectual growth and being in-progress can encourage students to engage in deeper reflection of their own lives and positions (Ali-Khan, forthcoming). As we offer our transparency (our missteps, our struggles and the places where we have got things wrong) to students, we encourage them to engage likewise. Connected to this are strategies for memory work.

Problematize Good Intentions By: Centering Historical/Memory Work

Asking students to reflect on and reinterpret past experiences collectively can push them to move beyond intentions and into more analytical frameworks. One such moment was evident in the story of a student, named Jayne,³ who (in one of our classes) was beginning her own journey into understanding a critical stance. In an *aha moment*, she suddenly interrupted a lecture. Her outburst went something like this:

I learned in a comparative religion class that Muslim women were oppressed and covered. Thinking back on the teaching that I got about Afghan women, I agreed with my professor then. But I don't now. I think it was wrong! [Pause] I mean it really was wrong. I've got it, that's what you are talking about! That was just plain wrong!

At this moment, the class discussions had facilitated Jayne remembering what she had been taught and how she had interpreted that and then shifting her analytical lenses to reinterpret the event. James Banks (1993) notes that it is the interpretation of an experience that shapes knowledge and values. As Jayne reinterpreted her experience, she was able to bring forth and reexamine her assumptions and values. Claudia Mitchell (2011) argues that remembering or "memory work" can engage one in individual and collective understandings (pp. 44–45). This type of critical memory work is also aligned with Henry Giroux's (2011) notion of "counter memory" that is "wedded to justice and suggests a form of memory work in which the past is more open to public debate" (para. 2). What all this scholarship in critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education

teaches us is that a historical view can reveal patterns in our own education that have shaped and normalized particular ways of looking and understanding.

Problematize Good Intentions By: Giving Up Comfort

As scholars in antioppression approaches to education urge, educators must assist teachers and students in becoming comfortable with conflict, discomfort, and hybrid spaces (Apple, 2004; Asher, 2005; Boler, 1999; Gordon, 2006; Kumashiro, 2002, 2004). We believe that the narrative of good intentions presents sincere challenges getting to this space of comfort with discomfort. Often the norm of student socialization and education about difficult conversations is to avoid them. That rather than being fruitful moments, *tension* and *discomfort* are to be avoided as awkward and unstable to learning where, among student teachers especially, certainty and confidence are preferred. With these powerful discourses at play, how can we expect teachers to model the ideals of an antioppressive critical pedagogy, when their fears potentially influence how and which conversations they are prepared to lead? Our students in education are primarily women, and the desire to be sensitive, to preserve comfort, and to avoid disrespect is potentially rooted in these women's socialization as women, who are encouraged to be nice, nurturing, and kind (Britzman, 2012). It is these types of internalized discourses of oppression that establish the contexts within which these women are asked to engage in conversations of difference. Beyond particular knowledge/content about group issues and conflicts, there is a general perception: So long as our students perceive race-related conversations as a set up for failure, they will most likely avoid them, associating anxiety and fear with engagement in uncomfortable dialogues and experiences with group differences.

Repair Bad Science By: Understanding *Middle East Versus Islam*

To constructively respond to Islamophobia in the classroom, educators must understand the various issues involved in shaping what it means to think about Islam, the Middle East, and being of Middle Eastern (Arab, Persian, Turkish) or colonial (English, US, Canadian) Muslim background. One of the key ways that students of all backgrounds learn about themselves and others is via the formal school curriculum. Unfortunately, there is a history of misrepresentation of peoples from predominantly Islamic societies (mostly thought of as the Middle East) in the school curriculum. For students of Middle Eastern or Muslim heritage, the ways in which they see themselves reflected in schools is primarily in the context of religion (as Islam) and ethnicity (presumed as Arab). Therefore, it is important that teachers understand that diversity for students of Muslim heritage is no less complex than it is for themselves. Like students of European heritage, students of Middle Eastern heritage are very diverse population situated in various national cultural contexts: Some are immigrants, others native-born; some first generation, bi-/multilingual, others monolingual or English as Additional Language; some Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim, others atheist; some religious, others secular; some White, others of Color; some a member of traditional families, others members of bi-/multiracial and nontraditional families; and so on. Additionally, to be responsive to dynamics of Islamophobia manifesting in the classroom, teachers can work to make visible the historical discourses (such as civilized/savage) that underlie many of the popular political discourses (such as *clash of civilizations*) that circulate.

Repair Bad Science By: Foregrounding Heterogeneity

One of the most common misunderstandings we encounter is that all people of Middle Eastern heritage are Arabs, and that all Arabs are Muslims. Sometimes, *Arab* is used interchangeably with *Middle Eastern* or *Muslim*, and thus can influence how teachers identify students of Middle Eastern heritage (e.g., presuming that all students who look Middle Eastern, i.e., Brown, are in fact Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim). Some students and families of Middle Eastern heritage may be of Arab heritage and Muslim. Yet in reality, many North Americans of Arab ancestry are Christian. In fact, some of the most famous Arab Americans (e.g., Edward Said, Danny Thomas, Khalil Gibran) are of Christian heritage. Similarly, many (though not all) students with Middle Eastern heritage will be Muslim and similar to their Jewish or Christian classmates who will learn Hebrew or study scripture as part of their religious education, some Muslim students might be learning Arabic as part of their religious education.

There are not stable numbers for predicting the population of Middle Eastern Americans. The US Census has historically considered Arabs to be White, and although it does collect demographic information on religious identification, many Middle Eastern Americans will not identify religiously. Arab Americans are estimated to be approximately 7 million of the US population, and according to the 2008 Census adult Americans who identified as Muslim make up less than 1.4 million of the total US population. For comparison, Christian Americans are 173 million, Jewish Americans are 2.7 million, and 34 million people reported that they did not identify in religious terms. Given these relatively small demographics, there is still a great deal of media focus on the Middle East, due in large part to the political interests of the United States. The presence of Arabs and Muslims in the school curriculum and on the news is often in response to a political, terrorist, or military event (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Said, 1979; Shaheen, 1997). Further, the school curriculum reinforces rather than eliminates simplistic rhetoric (such as good vs. evil, clash of civilizations, or with us vs. against us).

It is important for teachers to understand how many religious and relatively benign discourses are taken up and merged with political and militaristic discourses in ways that perpetuate the presumed fundamental cultural, ideological, and spiritual unity and incompatibility between Muslims/Middle Easterners/Arabs, and the Judeo-Christian Western world. To counter this form of Islamophobia in the classroom and foster a learning environment that combats Islamophobia, teachers can treat students from nations associated with the Middle East with as much cultural specificity as possible, remembering that students may be of Middle East background and also be White, of Color, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, bilingual, multilingual, middle class, working class, more secular than orthodox, veiled or not, and so on.

Repair Bad Science By: Giving Attention to *Genies and Camels* Stereotypes in Media

Although popular culture is not an educational space per se, it does influence how and what we teach and how students learn about Islam and the Middle East. Because of this, many of the things that we find our students believe they know about people of Middle Eastern and Muslim heritage is knowledge that has been shaped by media stories. For example, ideas about jihad, war, the presumed backwardness of the region, the oppression of women, deserts, camels, and villainous Sheikhs are all dominant elements of the pop culture curriculum.

In what is likely to be the most extensive study of Arabs and Muslims in film, Jack Shaheen (2003) reviewed over 900 Hollywood movie depictions of Arabs and Muslims. He found that virtually all Hollywood depictions of Arabs and Muslims were negative. Common themes included: terrorists, cheating vendors, holy wars, and sleazy Arabs drooling over White maidens. The perceived backwardness of the Middle Eastern or Arab is part of a long history that did not begin in, nor is it limited to, Hollywood. Linda Steet (2000) and Shirley Steinberg (2004) have also written about the prevalence of the sleazy Arab, dancing harem girl, and terrorist stereotypes in popular culture representations. Although students in K–12 settings, and our students who will teach them, might not be watching old Hollywood films, they are interacting with a new generation of pop culture Middle Easterners like the Bratz Genie Magic dolls; they're reading Deborah Ellis' (2000) *The Breadwinner* about a girl in Afghanistan; they're wearing belly dancer costumes at Halloween, watching news coverage of the ongoing War on Terror, playing Middle-Eastern-themed video games like *The Mummy*, and *Prince of Persia*, and hearing adults around them (who grew up on a steady diet of stories built on themes from Hollywood's *tits and sand* movies) express a range of ideas about "those Arabs." Representations in pop culture continue to matter because the iconic fictional texts from the past have influenced the most popular character-types, story elements, and plots of today related to the Middle East, serving as a type of shorthand. Want an evil villain? A violent and backwards society? Cast the Arabs. Let's go to the Middle East.

To be responsive to these dynamics, teachers can engage in ongoing media literacy activities that help to examine media messages (Sensoy, 2010). They can also engage with, rather than avoid, the popular culture that students consume. Most students find pop culture pleasurable, and, as such, it holds great pedagogical potential. Are your students excited about *THE 99*, a comic series based on Islamic superheroes? Or, do they love listening to music by Akon or Mos Def? Do they play with Bratz Genie Magic dolls? Bringing in the popular culture that young people love can be a productive way to enter them into complex discussion pertaining to religion, politics, and social diversity.

Repair Bad Science By: Addressing Head-On Common Fears

A final area where bad science about Islam circulates and tends to fester Islamophobia is the realm of common fears and assumptions. Fear that addressing Islamophobia may take time away from the standard curriculum (*The school shouldn't be a catch-all for every problem*); fear that "our values" are disappearing (*It's Christmas that's under attack*); fear of a scary religion with backward practices (*If I get it wrong they'll put a fatwa on me*), each of these fears are shaped by Islamophobic rhetoric that is not supported by evidence (Sensoy, 2014).

Islamophobia is present whether teachers are explicitly teaching about religion or not. It is in the structure of the school calendar, the holidays marked, and assumptions made about which families have what kinds of lives. Just as addressing misogyny and sexism can occur without teaching about women" or addressing homophobia and heterosexism can occur without a unit on homosexuality, educators can address Islamophobia without teaching about Islam. More importantly, Islamophobia affects people who may not even be Muslim; in fact, many people who are not Muslims are victims of Islamophobia. The 2012 shootings of six worshippers at the Wisconsin Sikh gurdwara, and the 2011 massacre of 77 mostly teen youth in Norway were

both motivated by ideologies of White supremacy, antiimmigration sentiments, *and* Islamophobia (Fekete, 2012; Thobani, 2012), even though the victims were not Muslims.

Repair Bad Science By: Asking Challenging Questions

One way to encourage student teachers to think about how they can manage their fears about Islam or respond to Islamophobia is to ask them to consider the following questions:

- To what extent are my assumptions about what Islam is, and fears related to those assumptions, shaped by my own racial socialization? What are my earliest memories learning about Islam or Muslims? What avenues of education (in addition to individual Muslim friendships I may have) have I explored?
- If I get something wrong in other subjects I teach about, or when speaking to people of other groups that are different from me, do I have the same worries and fears as I do in the context of Islam? How do I overcome those fears, and can I transfer any of those strategies to this case?
- What would it mean if teaching in an aspiring democratic nation-state, I ignored Islamophobia and did not teach students about attributes (such as fair mindedness and tolerance for ambiguity) and skills (such as stamina for challenging ideas, engagement with gathering new information, critical thinking, and perspective taking) that are necessary to fostering and furthering that democracy?

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have laid out how the parallel discourses of good intentions and bad science have played out in our teaching experiences in ways that perpetuate, rather than interrupt, social injustice in schooling. We have specifically examined how familiar discourses about Islamophobia in teacher education spaces reproduce the twin elements central to holding Islamophobia in place: the binary of a backward and savage East in opposition to a modern and free West and the collapsing of the diversity within Islamic cultural practices into a monolithic.

As we challenge our students toward an understanding that all of our referents (personal and institutional) are bound in cultural ideas and values, we continue to develop broad strategies to problematize facile good intentions and unravel bad science. We also continue to wrestle with how to create educational spaces for our students to grow, as we deliberately trouble their often deeply held (and institutionally reinforced) beliefs about themselves in relation to “others.” Our struggle lies in creating pedagogical moments that challenge these discourses without encouraging defensiveness; in pushing students beyond their comfort levels while also supporting them on this journey.

Teachers across all subject areas engage students, in some way, in the study of otherness—other societies, other cultures, other practices. Yet often attempts at this happen with incomplete understanding or insufficient tools, particularly in the case of Islam, wherein additional challenges include a heightened visibility in representation in the political and religious landscape of foreign affairs news and popular culture media. For these reasons, it is even more important that teachers of these students remain vigilant about the complexities of their experiences in school-

ing. As educators who want to respond in constructive ways to Islamophobia in our classrooms and with our teacher education students, the work is difficult, complicated, and in many ways a political minefield. The classroom is not now, nor has it ever been, a neutral space. School has always been a site of ideological struggle: The end of legal segregation and residential schooling, the inclusion of greater diversity and voices of absent histories and missing contributions of marginalized communities are all examples of how political and value-driven public schooling is. But just as schools are places where social injustices are reinforced and normalized, they are also places where the seeds of social transformation are planted and nurtured. As such, teachers have a central role to play in the struggle to not simply address but to eradicate Islamophobia.

NOTES

1. <http://samaritanspurse.ca/what-is-samaritans-purse/>
2. <http://www.cw4wafghan.ca/support/breaking-bread>
3. pseudonym

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