COERCIVE CONCERN

NATIONALISM, LIBERALISM, AND THE SCHOOLING OF MUSLIM YOUTH

REVA JAFFE-WALTER

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Anthropology of Policy

Cris Shore and Susan Wright, editors

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Reva Jaffe-Walter

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This book is for my teachers. As a young person on the move growing up across communities and schools (a total of ten in my K–12 years), I was fortunate to be supported by teachers whose vision of concern changed my life. To Steve Jenkins, my high school teacher who created a space of inquiry that grounded me, where we sat talking for hours about Plato and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. *Then to the important teachers that followed: Ayala Gabriel, Stacey Lee, and Michelle Fine, strong women scholars who kindled a commitment to social justice and ethnography, in ways that brought me more fully into the world, with all of its complexity, heartbreak, and beauty.*

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Coercive Concern

Introduction

Ethnographic Journeys through Concern

ALIYAH,[1] a fifteen-year-old student who was born in Denmark and identifies as a Somali from Ethiopia, mimics the voice of a newscaster and shakes her head, seemingly tired of the discursive figure of the oppressed immigrant girl that swirls around her:

> In Denmark, when you watch television and the news, every day they have something new about what the immigrants are doing. They say immigrant girls don't get to decide who they get married to. 'Immigrant girls have to have an operation to make sure their parents don't find out if they have had sex.' Immigrant girls are always in the news. If we weren't here, who would they talk about?

At the end of a long focus-group discussion, Aliyah explains, "The problem is not with the teachers, it's up here [she outlined a circle with her index finger in the air]—it's everywhere, in the newspapers and on the streets."

Following the circle that Aliyah traces, I examine here how young people experience the contradictory discourses surrounding Muslim immigration in schools in Western liberal democracies. Like Aliyah, Muslim youth are increasingly growing up on the front lines of globalization and nationalism, negotiating their identities in the midst of contentious nationalist politics and rising anti-Muslim discourses. They intimately know what it feels like, in the words of Dubois, "to be a problem"; they are both overlooked and subjected to continual surveillance (Bhabha 2005; Sirin and Fine 2008).

In this book I explore the mechanisms through which the multiple discursive narratives and stereotypes of Muslim immigrants in Western liberal societies flow into the public schools, insinuating themselves into everyday interactions, informing how Muslim youth are perceived by teachers and peers. Beyond identifying the presence of racialized discourses in schools, I examine the work that they do—illuminating Muslim bodies as a site of cultural and national intervention.

Much has been written about the global spread of neo-racist discourses and policies that seek to protect democratic societies from the perceived threat of Islam by invoking a "clash of civilizations" between "enlightened" Western societies and "barbaric" Muslim societies, perpetuating the racialized stereotypes of "oppressed" Muslim women and "terrorist" men (Balibar 1991; Said 1993; Razack 2008). However, adequate attention has not been paid to how Muslim youth experience these narratives in putatively liberal democratic schools. Examining the blind spots of liberal educational discourses, I explore how nationalist and liberal politics become blurred in the schooling of Muslim immigrant students. Drawing on fieldwork in a Danish high school and comparative insights from elsewhere in Europe as well as the United States, I examine how everyday practices of coercive assimilation are cloaked in benevolent discourses of care and concern.

Analyzing Immigration across Sites

In 2007–2008, I moved with my family from the United States to Copenhagen, Denmark, where I was a visiting scholar at the Department of Educational Anthropology at the Danish Pedagogical University. At the time, I was finishing my analyses and writing up a study on recently arrived immigrant youth in schools in New York City and I was interested in learning more about the dynamics surrounding immigration and schooling. I observed several schools with significant populations of immigrant students. In Denmark, the public municipal school, or *folkeskole*, is a comprehensive school that educates students from preschool through the ninth grade. About 87 percent of school-age children in Denmark attend public *folkeskole*, and the remaining 13 percent attend publicly supported private schools (Danish Ministry of Education n.d.). In 2009 there were sixty-four schools in Denmark with a population of more than 40 percent immigrant students, all located near urban areas where housing was built for immigrant guest workers. At Engby School,[2] one such school where I ultimately did fieldwork for *Coercive Concern*, the student body numbered three hundred, of which 45 percent were predominantly Muslim first- and second-generation immigrants from countries such as Turkey, Somalia, Croatia, Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon. At Engby School, there were frequent discussions among teachers, students, and the outside community about the school's image as a "ghetto school" because of its high percentage of immigrant students.

Through a series of breakdown moments (Agar 1986) or classroom interactions that I had trouble understanding because of my lack of knowledge at the time of the narratives surrounding Muslim immigration in Denmark, my initial observations in the Danish schools led me to the research that constitutes the foundations for this book. In one of my first observations in a Danish English class, a teacher asked a Palestinian student about her choice of marriage partner. I watched as a student-centered discussion subtly shifted into a personal critique. The teacher repeatedly questioned the student, who grew more and more uncomfortable. This moment catalyzed my ethnographic journey, which extended beyond the classroom and the school as I sought to understand the social processes in Denmark related to the integration of immigrants and how broader discourses shaped moments like these.

The Muslim youth in my study described how they were regularly confronted with social stereotypes or figured identities of Muslim immigrants. After my first few months of fieldwork in Engby School, I began to hear these narratives repeated. On my morning commute to the school, I bicycled past a public housing project that was being demolished as a result of de-ghettoization policies intended to foster the integration of Muslim immigrants and their children. I read the newspaper headlines on the growing problems of criminal Muslim boys, immigrant ghettos, and Muslim girls forced into marriage. As I analyzed data from multiple sources—media representations, educational policies, interviews with policymakers, and ethnographic data on everyday interactions within the school—I heard the repetition of narratives of "concern" for immigrants that reflected desires to support the integration of immigrants into Danish society as well as anxieties about the impact of Muslim immigration on Danish society.

Public Policies and the Figuring of Identities

Following Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) conceptualization of "figured worlds," my work considers how stereotypes of Muslim identities that are prefigured in policies and discourses are enacted in the day-to-day life of schools. Figured identities are abstracted and distilled notions of identity—cultural stereotypes—that carry with them a set of specific narratives, expectations of behavior, and charters for action. A "figured world" is defined as "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued above others" (Holland et al. 1998: 52). A tension arises between socially scripted identities, captured in local discourses, and individuals' agentive acts of self-authoring within figured worlds. It is at the heart of this tension that my research is centered.

Policies are instruments that classify and govern subjects, in the case of Danish immigration producing specific notions of "citizens," "immigrants," and "the nation" that make up a figured world (Chavez 2013). My work examines how Muslim identities are figured in policies, produced as emblems of broader social problems that require immediate public attention and action. The teachers, administrators, and students in my study participated in a figured world where the narratives, discourses, and figured identities surrounding Muslim immigration informed understandings of how schools should shape and change Muslim youth and where these youth fit into the social hierarchy. In my fieldwork, I observed how figured identities of Muslims were taken up in classroom interactions, in which Muslim students were recognized in terms of the abstract figure, rather than in terms of the fullness of their identities and experiences. However, I also witnessed encounters in which the figure seemed to evaporate and Muslim students had more flexibility to define themselves. Figured identities are not simply downloaded into minds; they are actively negotiated and changed by individual actors who produce their own visions of the world within the social categories set forth by discourse (Bakhtin 1981). While all students must negotiate processes of stereotyping, some identities can be more easily adopted or rejected while others are more encapsulating and rigid.

Figured identities reflect the local figured worlds in which they are reproduced as well as broader social categories of racial, ethnic, and religious difference and durable historical narratives. Notions of "barbaric" Muslims and "enlightened" Western liberals have deep historical significance, drawing on orientalist and postcolonial discourses (Said 1993). They gain additional resonance at particular historical moments, for example, following the events of 9/11 and following other attacks by extremist groups when images of Muslim terrorists dominated the public imagination (Rana 2011).

Although figured identities become ossified over time, they also remain flexible as they stretch to encompass new groups. For example, immediately following 9/11, there was an increase in violence in the West not only against Muslims but also against individuals considered racially ambiguous, including Sikhs, Hindus, and even Latinos or others who appeared in the perceptions of some to be "Muslim-like" (Rana 2011). In 2012 in New York City, an Indian immigrant was pushed onto the subway tracks and was struck and killed by an oncoming train. A 31-year-old woman confessed to the crime, expressing hatred of Muslims following the events of 9/11. The victim was not Muslim but was targeted in this hate crime as a dark-skinned foreigner. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported a 50 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims in 2012 (Southern Poverty Law Center 2012). The report attributes this to a rise in anti-Muslim propaganda and policy campaigns, thus connecting the ways these campaigns figure Muslim identities in ways that echo through communities, unleashing violence toward Muslims. Even though the Muslims in my study were from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds, they all reported that these differences were routinely homogenized by individuals who understood them in light of the figure of the Muslim "Other."

The Anthropology of Policy: A Window into Coercive Policies

There is currently a global proliferation of policies and antiterrorism measures addressing the perceived threat posed to Western nations by Muslim and immigrant communities (Maira 2009; Nussbaum 2012; Rana 2011). Shore and Wright's (1997) framework of the anthropology of policy provides a window into how these forms of governmental regulation operate, how policies simultaneously produce notions of the perceived social problems produced by Muslim immigration while calling for idealized policy solutions. As Shore and Wright explain, "A policy finds expression through a sequence of events; it creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning" (2011: 1). Ethnography is well suited for exploring the complex ways that figured identities and policy technologies are "appropriated" in everyday life, that is, how they are taken up, resisted, and adapted by various actors in public schools (see also Sutton and Levinson 2001).

Drawing on Foucault's (1977) and on Ball's (2006) framing of policy technologies, I examine here the normalizing work of policies targeted at disciplining Muslim immigrants and liberalizing their putative intolerant ideologies and oppressive gender roles (Abu El-Haj 2010; Melamed 2006). Ball argues that "within each of the policy technologies of reform there are embedded and required new identities, new forms of interaction, and new values [as figured worlds]. What it means to teach and what it means to be a teacher are subtly but decisively changed in the process of reform" (2006: 216).

Policies work through public institutions like schools, producing ideas about the kinds of identities schools should foster and the role of teachers in encouraging the development of those identities (Ball 2006; Shore and Wright 1997). This book contributes to the anthropology of policy by tracing how nationalist discourses and policies that reflect the contested place of immigrants in Western liberal societies are enacted in the everyday practices of public schools. My analysis reveals how Muslim immigration challenges deep emotional attachments to and nostalgia for an imagined national community that once was; it also reveals how anxiety inspires the figuring of Muslim identities in policies and in schools. The problems of Muslim immigration are publicly broadcast through "figured identities" that call for processes of coercive assimilation cloaked in and discursively justified through tropes of liberalism.

I theorize that we are witnessing a proliferation of "technologies of concern" for and about immigrant communities—that is, policies and practices directed at transforming immigrants into disciplined subjects of the nation-state (Ong 1996; Foucault 1977; Behrent 2013). Unlike overt forms of state power, technologies of concern conceal their own operations within the language of science or universal values. As Foucault asserts, they are "anonymous, multiple, pale, colorless" (2008: 22). These technologies are "productive," normalizing bodies through subtle manipulations of behavior while also inspiring individuals to reform themselves in light of the norms imposed on them. While technologies are localized through policies and practices in institutions like schools, they also echo broader discourses and regimes of truth. As Dreyfus and Rabinow explain, normalizing technologies "operate by establishing a common definition of goals and procedures, which take the form of manifestos, and even more forceful, agreed-upon examples of how a well-ordered society should be organized" (1982: 198). Schools are institutions of state power that engage these technologies to produce particular types of citizens.

I explore *concern* primarily because it encompasses the multiple dimensions and emotions of the relationships between the nation and the immigrant, those who are concerned and those who are the object of this concern. *Concern* connotes interest and advocacy in its most common usage and, less often, fear, anxiety, and dread on the part of those who are concerned. Technologies of concern emerge in the context of public consensus that "something must be done" about the contemporary "problems" of Muslim immigration. They mark particular bodies as objects of state power that require particular kinds of intervention (Puwar 2004). I draw attention to the ways technologies of concern conceal their own operations through the use of universalized ideas of what is right and good, cloaking national processes of normalization within neoliberal discourses of freedom, democracy, and equality (Rose 1999). Building on Rose's (1999) analysis of how freedom acts as an instrument of government control, my analyses of technologies of concern reveal how practices of coercive assimilation are enacted in the benevolent language of concern, especially, the language of "helping" oppressed Muslim girls to enjoy the benefits of freedom and equality. Finally, I address technologies of concern as they produce particular kinds of knowledge about who Muslim immigrants are and what they require. They simultaneously co-construct notions of Muslims as unassimilable Others and regard notions of liberal societies as enlightened; both figured constructions are deployed to justify increased coercion and intervention (Abu El-Haj 2010; Brown 2006).

Through the thick description of ethnography in this book, I focus on the ways technologies of concern are enacted in schools: how Muslim students' cultural and religious differences become amplified in classrooms, invoking an extra glance or a stare inspired by an array of emotions, including desire, anger, and nostalgia (Benei 2008). Concern is mapped onto the bodies and experiences of young people, influencing their processes of identification and social incorporation. As Comaroff argues, overt state power is less instrumental "than it is 'capillary,' which is to say that it stretches, autonomically and unseen, into the very construction of its subject" (1998: 193). I argue, however, that it is critical to consider as well the complex ways Muslim youth construct their own identities, drawing on their hybrid experiences in homelands, hostlands, and digital territories. While I examine how Muslim youth lay claim to transnational forms of identity that allow them to mobilize various rights and resources (Ong 1996), I also argue that it is critical to consider the material and psychological consequences when young people are forced up against the rigid cultural borders of national belonging. Moving beyond a romanticization of young people's hybrid identities, this book reveals the psychic and material costs of living in the shadow of social scrutiny as well as the ways technologies of concern can distance young people from the resources they require for social mobility in host societies.

The Study

The primary site for my fieldwork is Engby School, mentioned above, outside of Copenhagen, with a large population of Muslim immigrant students, where I conducted a yearlong ethnographic study.[3] My analysis is also informed by