

Adult education responses to the ‘othering’ of Muslim identity: Perspectives from Ireland

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Abstract

This article explores the ‘othering’ of an erroneous fixed Muslim identity with an emphasis on its impacts within adult and community education. It examines the geopolitical circumstances that contribute to this othering and argues for the creation of counter-hegemonic, intercultural learning spaces.

Keywords

Anti-Muslim racism, othering, adult educator responses, interculturalism, imperialism, the war on terror

Introduction

On 28 January 2017, United States (US) President Donald Trump signed an executive order to suspend America’s Syrian refugee programme, to offer priority treatment for refugees based on religious identity and to bar all citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. Quickly coined the *Muslim Ban*, spontaneous protests erupted in major American airports and in cities across the globe. Legal challenges soon followed as constitutional experts successfully challenged the legitimacy of Trump’s ban. Although vowing to fight the court-ordered suspensions of his vision, Trump’s first attempt at selective prohibition, was initially short-lived.

Since taking office in January 2017, there have been many public denouncements of Trump’s autocratic tendencies and his far-right political ideology.

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Global condemnations of his *Muslim Ban* as well as other anti-democratic actions are a welcome development for those of us who seek social justice. However, it is important not to isolate Trump's politics as the actions of one man, but as an embodiment of a range of policy actions and cultural influencers that have contributed to a sense of division in contemporary society. On one side of this divide is a righteous 'us' who act as custodians of the world's social morality. On the other side, is a sinister and implacable 'them' that are viewed as both regressive and as a threat to so-called Western values.

This 'us' versus 'them' perspective is sometimes referred to as *othering*; in this instance through historically grounded perceptions of a dominant and superior *West*; or the social and cultural norms of the capitalist economies of Western Europe and nations of Western European heritage; and an 'othered' and inferior *Orient*, or the Middle-East and Far East, a manifestation that is socially constructed by scholars and imperialists (Said, 1978). For Said (1978: 49), the West is seen as 'rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values without natural suspicion', whilst 'the Orient' is seen as 'none of these things'. Today's most prevalent othering has narrowed somewhat towards an erroneous, homogenised Muslim/Arab identity where simply being Muslim, in some way links a person to so-called Islamic extremism. This, Kundnandi (2015) argues, is the dominant lens through which the West views Muslim populations and is the justification for counterterrorist policies that undermine the human rights of tens of millions of people worldwide. Trump's ban on all citizens from Somalia, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Sudan, despite no record of any citizens from these countries being involved in terrorist attacks against the US, didn't create this perspective, but sought to legitimise an existing anti-Muslim discourse that is evident within popular culture (Boyer, 2014; Dodds, 2008; Froula, 2010; Simmering, 2006; Sisler, 2008), through print media (Morey & Yaqin, 2003) and, perhaps most significantly, through political commentary and actions. It isn't surprising therefore that, increasingly, the daily lives of many Muslims, and those presumed to be Muslim, involves negotiating negative attitudes, discrimination, hate speech and even physical assaults (Alam & Husband, 2013; Ali, 2014; Allen, 2010; Carr, 2015, 2016; Lynch, 2013; Shyrlock, 2010). This is despite the fact that, of the estimated 1.2 billion people of Muslim faith across the globe, there are varying degrees of religiosity, many nationalities and ethnicities, a range of languages, any number of political affiliations and as many interests as you can imagine.

If you are wondering what any of this has to do with adult and community education, I believe that, rather than exist somewhere 'out there', the othering of Muslim identity is often evident within education settings. In support of this standpoint, a recent Immigrant Council of Ireland study on the lives of Muslims in Dublin makes for uncomfortable reading when it uncovers,

Young Muslims...recalled their experiences of being excluded and indeed abused through discriminatory practices visited upon them by teachers, lecturers and classmates. These manifested as experiences of verbal abuse from classmates and staff;

exclusionary practices in relation to the ability of female students to wear the hijab if they so choose; and a failure on the part of staff to address anti-Muslim racism in the classroom context. The policy to not have a policy vis-à-vis the ability for young Muslim women to manifest their faith in the school context allows for exclusionary practices to manifest, leaving young Irish Muslim women feeling stunned, disappointed and frustrated. (Carr, 2016, p. 7)

These phenomena are likely to exist in adult education as, unless interrupted, the dominant cultural norms that exist outside an adult learning group also shape what happens inside an adult learning group (Heron, 1999). Reports have been shared in adult education contexts of open racism in staff rooms, of educators ignoring students rather than integrate them into learning communities and of exclusionary assessment and teaching methodologies (O'Connor, 2010). Personally, I have heard some of my peers make disparaging comments about gender dimensions of power amongst couples presumed to be Muslim whilst completely disregarding sexism across society more broadly.

Amongst students, I have witnessed open disdain for Muslims; something that usually happens when the perpetrator(s) presume there are only non-Muslims in the room. Adult learners can also discriminate by avoiding intercultural group work (Moore & Hampton, 2015), can circumvent integration at break-times and can exclude Muslim and Arab classmates from social get-togethers. Adult educators should feel equipped to deal with racist hate speech and other forms of discrimination and this contribution hopes to provide some strategies for doing this. To give an example, where racist comments are expressed, the educator can invite alternative perspectives from other group members as an attempt to silence bigotry and intolerance. Educators can also deliberately organise multi-cultural peer learning in the hope that working together will reduce prejudice. Amongst colleagues, an alternative perspective can be posed that encourages people to reflect on their presumptions. Addressing racism can be difficult though, especially when working in precarious circumstances and where educators feel unsupported by organisational structures shaped by institutional racism, therefore, under-appreciating the social weight of 'race' on the racialised (Carr, 2015, p. 28; O'Connor, 2010).

Managing racism as isolated incidents and as a product of individual prejudice also does little to address the culturally embedded nature of Islamophobia¹ where negativity towards Muslims is perpetuated through popular culture and political rhetoric in ways that remove racism from its public contexts. The key argument I will make is that if adult educators want to create integrated, democratic learning spaces, they have to consider their work amidst socio-political circumstances. This involves accepting Western society's long and bloody history of imperialism in the Middle East, including cultural imperialism (Alam & Husband, 2013; Said, 1978), where State terrorism has become so normalised; it is almost invisible to its own citizens (Chomsky, 2009).

I want to suggest four ways that adult educators can combat the othering of those presumed to personify a false and fixed Muslim identity. Firstly, each of us

must reflect on our own cultural identity, however, we describe this; secondly, we should interrogate our own prejudicial assumptions and thirdly we should use intercultural teaching methodologies. Fourthly, adult educators must revise curricula to reflect diversity as the norm. Before exploring these suggestions, I want to deepen geopolitical discussion and consider how structural racism shapes our world.

The racialisation of Muslims and Arabs

When conceptualising a so-called Muslim identity, many presumptions begin by imagining a homogenised Middle East, a relatively new geographical development that was created by European colonisers after World War One. In reality, each nation in this region encapsulates many cultural, legislative, religious and democratic differences. Compare, for example, the theocracy of the Saudi Arabian regime, a so-called ally of the West and a country not included in Trump's *Muslim Ban*, to the less autocratic and secular democracies of The Lebanon and Bangladesh. What about the many Arabs who identify with no religion or with other religions including Christianity?

Many millions of Muslims are also born outside of the Middle East. In the UK, Brotton (2016) cites Muslims living in 16th century Elizabethan England whilst, in America, Curtis (2009) dates a Muslim presence to the early 1700s therefore many years before the foundation of what we now call the United States.² A Muslim presence in Ireland is recorded around the same time (Carr & Haynes, 2015, p. 21). More recently, the Islamic Foundation of Ireland cites Muslims living in Ireland in the 1950s with the first Islamic Society of Ireland established in 1959. Common misconceptions about a distinct Muslim ethnicity can also be interrupted. Around 40% of all US Muslims are African American (Ahmed, 2011) whilst Armstrong (2014) identifies Islam as Ireland's fastest growing religion claiming up to 500 Irish people, many of whom were born into Catholicism, convert to Islam each year.

According to the US Centre for Race and Gender, *Islamophobia* (a term that usually refers to anti-Muslim racism by non-Muslims) first emerged in 1991 and in the context of rising xenophobia in the UK and Europe.³ This is somewhat disputed by Allen (2010, p. 17) who records examples of anti-Muslim racism as early as 1925 therefore in the period following the First World War. As with all racism, Islamophobia involves a *process of racialisation*. This is where a set of socially constructed traits are assigned to a homogenised group in a way that disregards socio-political contexts in determining how each of us make sense of the world (Carr, 2015; Lentin, 2004). Assumptions used to justify racialisation are frequently biological. To give an example, when many Irish migrated to England during the famine of the 1800s, many English presumed inferiority believing Anglo-Saxon blood heritage was superior to Celtic blood (Curtis, 1984, cited in O'Conner, 2010). In the case of anti-Muslim racism, racialisation also includes the assertion of cultural features such as presumed religious performance and identities

(Carr & Hayes, 2015). This perhaps most resembles anti-Semitic racism, where prejudicial attitudes are held towards a homogenised Jewish population.

In his satirically named *The Muslims are Coming!*, a title designed to poke fun at anti-Muslim hysteria, Kundnandi (2015) offers two foundational ideas that further contribute to the racialisation of Muslims both of which view Islam through the lens of extremism. The first of these is a *culturalist* perspective or *culturalism*. This is where there is a false presumption of a distinct Islamic culture that is viewed as incompatible with Western modernity because of a union between the Church and State. Belief in a distinctly Muslim way of life in tension with the West resonates with an earlier *Clash of Civilisations* theory first advanced by the US political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996). This theory argues that cultural and religious incompatibility is so pronounced, it will inevitably lead to global conflicts.

Historically, concerns about theocracies were not solely directed at Islam. In the run-up to the US election of John F Kennedy, one pre-election inference expressed was that a Catholic president would ultimately lead to papal rule (Lean, 2012, p. 29). A more recent hypocrisy has also emerged where Christian theocratic governance is somewhat accepted through the US neo-conservative movement, a movement exemplified through the Republican presidency of George W. Bush. In the context of today's debate on Islamophobia, culturalist approaches to Muslim racialisation are the arguments behind the actions of right-wing mobilisations against the building of Mosques or objections to the freedom to dress as one chooses, claiming these actions undermine what are presented as majority cultural values.⁴

Alongside culturalism, the second approach to the racialisation of Muslims is a *reformist* perspective (Kundnandi, 2015). This rejects incompatibility between Islamic culture and Western society but focuses on a politicised misinterpretation of the teachings of Islam amongst an extremist minority; an 'illiberal ideological content' (Kundnandi, 2015: 68) that ultimately leads to violent Islamist terrorism. This viewpoint commonly presents young Muslim men as particularly susceptible to political radicalisation. It also presents all Muslim communities (a contested concept in its own right) as potential harbourers of dangerous extremists despite no evidence that Muslim youth or Muslim communities in general have a greater propensity for political violence (Ali, 2014). This *suspectification* of whole communities, although often initiated by the authorities, is reproduced in the media, the general public and even by members of the communities under suspicion (Ali, 2014; Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011). Striking similarities have been drawn out between the suspectification of Muslim communities and the historical experience of Irish communities in the UK during the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombing campaign of the 1980s/1990s. Hickman and colleagues (2011, p. 6) note,

The two eras of political violence are frequently described as very different. Public perceptions of 'Muslim terrorists' are different in that they are seen as a global ideologically-motivated threat in a way that the IRA and Republicanism were not.

Yet, our research shows that both counter-terrorism policies and the process of representing both sets of communities, in the press and political debate, are remarkably similar. This has produced negative effects across four decades for Irish communities and Muslim communities.

Despite this similarity, suspectification theory has gained currency in Ireland where opening borders to refugees is frequently interpreted as an action that invites terrorism to our shores. In one poll (The Irish Independent, 10 January 2016) 59% of those surveyed were unhappy about Ireland's refugee resettlement programme fearing it would allow terrorists to enter the country. This is despite the fact the European Union's Policing Agency Europol, cite most European terrorist cells as domestic and/or locally based (Europol, 2016, p. 7). Claims of an uncontrollable tsunami of refugees into Europe are also problematic as this perspective ignores media rituals surrounding migration debates where some patterns are illuminated and other patterns are ignored (Tittley, 2012).

The racialisation of Muslims also has a gender dimension. For men, this is through a problematic, often media fuelled, discourse around women's safety. Despite German authorities discrediting the 2016 New Years Eve reports of mass sexual assaults by recently arrived refugees to the city of Cologne (The Guardian, 8 January 2016),⁵ this perspective gained much currency and was offered with no reference to ongoing gender-based violence within the dominant culture where, everyday, women are beaten, raped and trapped by intimate male partners (Women's Aid, 2015). For women, much racialisation is through attitudes towards the attire of some Muslims, with the hijab arguably the most talked about piece of women's clothing ever. Misconceptions about the hijab as a symbol of Arabic oppression fails to appreciate an identity-based choice many Westernised Muslim women make (Winter, 2009) and how, for some, the decision to wear hijab is less about faith and more about a newly emerging social justice model of Islam (Ahmed, 2011). Additionally, Scharf (2011) argues some non-Muslim women other, presumed to be disempowered, counterparts with insufficient analysis of their own patriarchal oppression. That is not to say that debates about the hijab are not needed and some Muslim feminists argue theologically grounded choices about women's clothing are often violated by masculine theocracies and by many Western Mosques (Nomani & Arafa, 2015). These same voices support self-determination for Muslim women encouraging allies to take their lead from those at the centre of the experience.

Islam, imperialism and the war on terror

Thus far, the racialisation of Muslims and those presumed to be Muslim has been drawn out through false presumptions about the nature of Islam. For many Muslims and Arabs across the globe, the prejudicial attitudes this perpetuates, negatively impacts their daily lives. It would be disingenuous to suggest that there aren't terrorist factions within the Middle Eastern political landscape that are driven by anti-Western sentiment. However, this should be considered amidst a

wider analysis of Middle Eastern relationships with dominant Western forces, particularly the US but also the UK and other European powers.

One place to start exploring these relationships is to look into largely unproblematic migration patterns following the Second World War and up to the 1960s.⁶ Britain actively promoted inward migration from Commonwealth and former Commonwealth Muslim majority countries where citizens were enticed to travel to bolster employment in both high and low paid sectors (Hayter, 2000, pp. 15–16). Although some right-wing politicians attempted to galvanise opposition to migrant populations (such as Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' address in 1968), this inward flow was largely seen as unproblematic and domestic policy on immigration emphasised national economic welfare, human rights and protection for refugees (Fekete, 2009). Allen (2010: 17) believes a distinct anti-Muslim prejudice began to emerge in the 1980s. This, he argues, was amidst the politics of the wider anti-racism movement that emerged from Black communities as well as a newly emerging assertion of a distinct 'British Muslim' identity that differed from the previous generation's affiliation with their countries of origin.

A resilient feature of capitalism is how, during economic downturns, those most affected, and not the structures of power, are often blamed for the symptoms of the recession (Fine, Weis, & Addelson, 1998; Linke & Smith, 2009). It is therefore no surprise that rising racial tensions coincided with the European recession of the late 1980s and 1990s; a period characterised by high inflation, a depressed housing market, and a doubling of unemployment (Jenkins, 2010). Again far-right politicians as well as organised neo-Nazi parties exploited this in the political arena by successfully pitching anti-immigration electoral slogans at working-class and vulnerable communities. Fekete (2009, p. 4) believes the right's exaggerated warnings about the dangers of foreign criminals influenced domestic policing policies and social policies on migration; influences that were greatly aided by media reporting from the 1980s onwards. Together these factors painted a picture of Europe under threat from dangerous immigrant populations.

To isolate populist political rhetoric, media-fuelled prejudicial attitudes and far-right politicians and their supporters as perpetrators of anti-Muslim racism once again fail to incorporate the impact of globalisation and geopolitics more broadly. A more influential trajectory relates to activities in the Middle East from the 1950s onwards when a US-led process of industrialisation and targeted investment sought to strengthen economic and political relationships. Sometimes, this investment destabilised indigenous industry, a process that also contributed to an outward flow of people who sought to forge new ways to earn a living overseas (Hayter, 2000). Again migration patterns from the Middle East to the US weren't perceived of as particularly problematic. After all, the US was embroiled in a Cold War where the alleged dangers of Soviet communism dominated the cultural and political landscape. Not dissimilar to contemporary depictions of a fixed Muslim identity, popular culture championed the notion of a menacing Soviet *other* repeatedly portrayed as dangerous invaders that could infiltrate the heartland of America and threaten its way of life (Boyer, 2014; Froula, 2010). Successive American

governments of the time promised protection through a comprehensive US civil defence agenda which included such things as an education ‘duck and cover’ programme, evacuation plans and robust policies to ensure continuity of government in the event of an attack. These programmes inculcated fear into the heart of citizens creating a Cold War psychology of America under the constant threat of attack where nation-building and security became reliant on unprecedented militarism in everyday life (Spencer, 2014).

A full account of relationships between the US and the Middle East are too vast to chronicle here. What is important to comprehend is that, although couched in the need to fortify the region against Soviet ideology, commercial interests in the Middle East focused on access and control of these oil rich lands including power over the region’s policy making (Chomsky, 2009; Fisk, 2005; Harms, 2010; Jacobs, 2011). Jacobs (2011) details how, from the 1950s onwards, American policy-makers largely conceived of this vastly heterogeneous region as one entity. In seeking an ‘operational understanding of the religion’, repeated external studies of Islam were carried out by the US (Jacobs, 2011, p. 57). Given the positivist nature of research at the time, it seems unlikely these studies thought to ask Muslims across the Middle East to give us their own account of their religion. As well as impose a homogenised view of Islam, American actions have consistently worked to preserve the political status quo in the Middle East and, in doing so, have deliberately thwarted independent self-determination (Fisk, 2005; Harms, 2010; Jacobs, 2011; Yaqub, 2004). In the book *Containing Arab Nationalism*, Yaqub (2004) chronicles US actions since the 1950s that suppressed national insurgence, strengthened dictatorial rule, re-enforced the pro-Western sentiments and supported conservative counter-insurgency measures.

On 11 September 2001, the consequences of this US involvement in the Middle East were devastatingly brought home through the terrorist attack on the New York Twin Towers and Pentagon buildings that resulted in the deaths of nearly 3000 civilians. Nine days later, in an address to the joint session of Congress and to the nation US President George W Bush legitimately enquired, ‘Americans are asking why do they hate us?’.⁷ Rather than reflect on the consequences of US involvement in the region he answered,

They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

An alternative answer that would have more truthfully engaged with the conditions that enabled anti-Western terrorism to be born might well have involved reflection on such actions as US support and armament of Israel’s near 50 year occupation of Palestine, US-backed sanctions against Iraq during the 1990s, the bombing of Libya in the 1980s killing Gaddafi’s infant daughter or the impact of military presence in Saudi Arabia following the first Gulf War. Instead, neoliberal politicians and a corporate media controlled by a small number of individuals

(Bagdikian, 2004) exploited the populist othering of Muslims where, despite only a small number of terrorists being responsible, the most frequent analysis was to draw from clash of civilisations ideology and point the finger at an externally homogenised Islamic world. George W Bush's much repeated 'with us or against us' mantra, curtailed any analysis beyond an othered evil enemy mind-set and galvanised public opinion for a war on terror that was allegedly undertaken to protect Western values. The task for the 9/11 Western patriot was to go shopping, an action explicitly encouraged by the Bush regime (Boyer, 2014, p. 1143) and a message that rooted Western values in the pro-business individualisation of neo-liberal society where our personal, social and economic wellbeing are placed in the hands of the deregulated market. Meanwhile, Ahmed (2011, p. 194) explains the consequences for ordinary Muslims sharing,

In the United States, initially, that is in the days and weeks following 9/11 at the level of the citizenry, there were eruptions of violence against Muslims, including several acts of murder committed against men presumed to be Muslim. There was a rash of attacks too, some of them quite savage, against women in hijab.

For the Middle East, the post 9/11 military and political actions of the US and its allies (such as the British Labour Party led by Tony Blair) were little more than the continuation of capitalism's longstanding imperialist policies, where State terrorism doesn't count as terrorism (Alam & Husband, 2013; Chomsky, 2009; Giroux, 2006; Kundnandi, 2015). Since 9/11, the US allied forces invasion of Iraq has resulted in the death of almost half a million Iraqis many of whom were civilians (Hagopian et al., 2013). Imperialist action in the Middle East isn't only historical. During Barak Obama's presidential reign of 2008-2016, the US heavily bombed seven Muslim-majority countries, mostly Iraq and Syria dropping over 26,000 bombs, an estimate the US Council on Foreign Relations present as conservative (Zenko & Wilson, 2017). There have also been clear violations of the human rights of some Muslims such as the humiliating torture of detainees in Abu Ghraib in 2003 (Fisk, 2005, pp. 1254-1255), the detention of suspects without trial at Guantanamo Bay and the US support for Israeli air and ground assaults on Gaza in 2014 which killed an estimated 2000 civilians (Blumenthal, 2015). For Arabs who live in the capitalist economies of Western Europe and other nations of Western European heritage, such violations and ongoing assaults on their ancestral and familial homes must make unquestioned support for US policies abroad extremely difficult.

A Westernised culture of fear. Although focusing attention on imperialist actions in the Middle-East helps understand anti-Western sentiment, it doesn't take away the hardship caused by terrorism outside of the region. In May 2017, 22 mostly young people were murdered by a suicide bomber when leaving a pop-concert in Manchester, England. The British-born perpetrator was part of an organised extremist group; the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Two weeks later, 7 people were killed in a coordinated attack on London Bridge. One of the 3 terrorists, each of

whom police linked to Islamic State (IS), carried an Irish identity card. However, a media-led double-standards approach fuels us versus them divisions through limited reporting of terrorist attacks on civilians in the Middle East. To give an example, on the day before the horrific Parisian terrorist attacks in November 2015, the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the bombing of a market in Beirut killing dozens of shoppers. Where European and US media outlets strongly supported #*JesuisParis* social movements, #*JesuisBeirut* was considerably less emphasised. More recently, between the UK attacks on Manchester and London, two car-bombs exploded in Iraq, both of which were claimed by IS. Happening within hours of each other, the combined death-toll of over 30 people were families breakfasting in an ice-cream parlour or shoppers including some queuing for their state pension (The Guardian, 30th May 2017). Newspaper coverage of these atrocities was noticeably sparse. Current media reporting also suggests a more dangerous world than before. This ignores how terrorist attacks in Europe were more common during the 1970s and 1980s when The Spanish Basque separatist movement, IRA, and the Red Army Faction were all active. According to Europol (2016) most terrorist attacks in Europe remain separatist and have more recently been joined by an increase in right-wing terrorist attacks often aimed at European Muslims and often less likely to be described as terrorism. This is despite the fact that lone-act terrorism from right-wing anti-Muslim extremists is more prevalent than from lone-act Islamic terrorists (Ellis et al., 2016).

As a growing culture of fear shapes our lives, critics argue this fear redirects public discourse away from concerns with growing inequality and the structures of powers and towards domestic fortification through militarisation, pre-emptive overseas war and the defence of our borders (Giroux, 2006; Kundnandi, 2015; Linke & Smith, 2009; Žižek, 2009). This, in turn, fuels a *culture of surveillance* where the dominant us polices and monitors the othered them (Linke & Smith, 2009). Again this attitude is reinforced through a political rhetoric that normalises the threat of terrorist violence in every aspect of our lives and ensures that racist and xenophobic ideas are no longer reserved for the margins. Never has this been more pronounced than during the US Presidential election of 2016. As well as Republican nominee Donald Trump's well-documented anti-Muslim rhetoric, Democrats, a political party equally responsible for US policy in the Middle East (Harms, 2010), also contributed to the racialisation of Muslims. In a 2016 convention speech,⁸ ex-President Bill Clinton othered Muslims when he stated, 'if you are Muslim and you love America and freedom and you hate terror, stay here and help us win and make a future, we want you'. Did he not know that the Global Terrorism Index cites Muslim populated countries as those most affected by terrorism therefore most likely to 'hate terror'?⁹ Equally, his suggestion that Muslims 'stay here' presented Islam as foreign despite a Muslim presence in the US since its inception. As both Republican and Democratic candidates argued over foreign policy in the Middle East to secure votes, neither incorporated any analysis of the relentless imperialist assault on the region. Following a televised debate of the two leading presidential candidates, Beirut-based investigative journalist Robert Fisk denounced,

It's a pity . . . that they [Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton] didn't outline 'plans' for justice, freedom and dignity in the Middle East and an end to the policy of bombing, bombing, bombing and more bombing that now seems to equal political initiative in the Arab world. (The Independent, 27 September 2016)

Adult education responses

Many adult and community educators believe that their work goes some way in creating dialogic, counter-hegemonic spaces where common sense logic can be problematised, lived experiences can be legitimised and critical citizenship can be nurtured. Where adult educators are serious about pursuing these ambitions, the othering of a fixed Muslim identity must be addressed so that everyday experiences and not global hegemonic logic shapes attitudes. I suggest four ways to do this. Adult educators must firstly reflect on their own socio-cultural and racialised identity including how these interpretations are constructed. Secondly, each of us must examine the prejudices we hold and consider how these contribute to the othered discourse I have presented. A third action educators' should undertake is to deliberately nurture intercultural relationships in adult learning environments. Finally, our curricula must reflect the normality of diversity. Although interconnected, each suggestion will now be discussed in isolation.

Reflect on our own cultural identity. To some extent, asking adult educators to reflect on their socio-cultural and racialised identity is asking the impossible. For instance, there are multiple meanings given to the much-contested expression 'culture'. Where definitions are attempted, culture is usually explained as the way of life of a particular people, at a certain point in time. This incorporates how people communicate with each other, what established sources of knowledge are, what customs and habits, including religious practices, are normal and usual and what creative components exist. One set of ideas which have gathered some traction is those of former US military psychologist Edgar Schein. Schein (1999) describes a visible cultural dimension sometimes emphasised through symbols such as flags and emblems but also the conscious enactment of customs and rituals. For Schein, the visible is accompanied by a larger, invisible dimension where culture is unconsciously re-enacted through human interactions that determine how to behave in society. Where tensions emerge, it can help to think about the relationship between cultural practices and the contexts, or 'cultural fields' (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, pp. 21–22) within which these practices occur. These cultural fields include the institutions, rituals, and conventions that construct the social hierarchies which authorise certain discourses and actions. If there is a disconnect between a person's cultural norms and the cultural field they occupy, this creates oppression for the minority culture and privilege for those who hold the dominant cultural norm (Gaston, Anderson, & Su, 2009).

As each of us reflects on our own culture and the racialised construction of our ethnicity, the fallibility of these concepts is immediately apparent. Using myself as

an example, as I identify as white-Irish, this immediately conflates being Irish with commonly held presumptions of religious and nationalistic influences (Carr & Haynes, 2015; McVeigh, 2010; O'Connor, 2010). Such perspectives fail to appreciate the complexity of such historical influences and miss how a person can hold multiple national identities particularly where one or more are based on ancestral heritage (Allen, 2010, p. 8; Lynch, 2013). My identity as European is also one where 'whiteness' is seen as the norm with 'non-whites' othered as something 'over there' and not of concern to white, individualised lives (Lentin, 2004, p. 26; Linke and Smith, 2009).

Recognise the prejudices we carry. Given the hegemonic weight of structural racism, many people are often blind to how their own behaviours contribute to the status quo and much anti-Muslim racism is under the surface and not really talked about. As each reader critically examines their own cultural and ethnic history, each should also consider how socially constructed cultural differences determine how we relate to others (Atwater, 2008; Gist, 2014). When highlighting the dominance of white educators, Gist (2014) notes this group's socialisation towards deficit perceptions of diversity, an observation shared by Acquah and Commins (2016, p. 2). With the 'othered' perceived as less-than, these authors identify failures in largely instructional and depoliticised teacher education programmes that focus on individualised support (such as language supports) for seemingly diverse students.

As prevailing socio-political discourses construct an othered Muslim population, non-othered educators must examine their own beliefs and attitudes thus taking the spotlight off the racialised and shining it on the actions of dominant cultural groups. For white educators (of which I am one) this includes acknowledging white-privilege and understanding the potential prejudices this brings. This isn't always a popular perspective. Drawing from her experiences as educator of school teachers, Landsman (2011, p. 13) shares resistance noting,

Teachers are often willing to examine curriculum in their classrooms honestly; they are even willing to talk about relationships and biases regarding students and parents but only if this occurs in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Yet, many of these same teachers balk when it comes to examining their own advantages as White people in the world.

Landsman (2011) directs us to the seminal writings of Peggy Macintosh, a white writer who lists 50 specific privileges that are often invisible to those who benefit. These include the privilege of mostly being in the company of people of one's own ethnicity, of being able to rent or purchase a home you can afford without difficulty, of the absence of racial harassment, of the dominance of white history and of the freedom not to be expected to speak for all people of a racialised group.

Creating intercultural educational environments. Sometimes, during discussions on race and inequality, rapid student exchanges can reveal previously un-named prejudices

(Gillespie, 2003). Unless adult educators feel equipped to manage this, dominant beliefs and assumptions often go un-challenged and those in the room who are racialised, remain un-supported. Rather than waiting for issues to emerge which adult educators then try to respond to as best they can, another course of action is to deliberately create discursive, inclusionary learning communities. One way to do this is to consider the ideas of Clark (1996) who encourages educators to create learning communities where people experience core feelings of *significance*, that I matter, of *solidarity*, that I belong, and of *safety*, that I won't be harmed either physically or psychologically. These feelings should be nurtured in a way that doesn't weaken each person's own sense of identity or destroy the identity of others (Clark, 1996, p. 48). Creating the learning communities Clark encourages means embracing *interculturalism* where cross-cultural interaction, collaboration and exchange are deliberately encouraged and where there is an acknowledgment that racism exists (Barrett et al., 2003, p. 4). To do this, educators must adopt a 'culture-conscious' over 'culture-blind' approach that validates diversity and makes visible our culturally bound assumptions. This means creating the conditions for meaningful cooperative interactions amongst members of different ethno-cultural groups and encouraging students from ethnic minority and/or migrant backgrounds to create knowledge by sharing their experiences and perspectives. Working interculturally also involves understanding prejudice through the perspectives of those at the receiving end and never dismissing the cumulative effects of racism and discrimination. Institutions can support this perspective by publishing statements in support of integration, offering staff training on the prevention of racism and creating structures where incidences of racism can be reported and dealt with.

Reviewing our curricula. The overarching Irish policy document for adult education, the *White Paper; Learning for Life* (2000) interprets interculturalism as 'the third underpinning principle of Government policy on Adult Education' with all funded programmes required to demonstrate openness to 'Ireland's development as an intercultural society' (DOES, 2000, p. 51). The white paper, now nearly 20 years old, seeks deliberate responses to the varied needs of society including continuous professional development for educators that promote integration and that supports the development of curricula predicated on diversity rather than uniformity (section 1.8). Impacts, if any, from this directive are unclear.

It is true that some supports have been initiated for migrants, much of which has been organised within the Community Sector.¹⁰ Some work has also been done to improve access and retention of migrant students in tertiary education (Lenihan & Hogan, 2008). Although welcome, the dominant perspective remains the integration of an othered outsider with little regard for either the political nature of racialisation or the diversity of Irishness. When ethnic minority and migrant students are asked about their experience of curricula, they identify a white, Eurocentric perspective that consistently fails to draw from literary contributions and commercial practices from a non-Western, non-white perspective (Fitzsimons,

Grummell, & Noone, 2017; Gay, 2001; Hussein-Muharram, 2012; Jessop & Williams, 2009). Hussein-Muharram offers a political analysis claiming the absence of Arabic anthologies and translated Arabic texts conceal the impacts of colonialism on the hearts and minds of those affected and obscures the stories of imperialism that are carried by the oppressed.

Adult educators can challenge this practice by deliberately introducing literature from outside of the Global North and by designing images, case-studies and other scenarios that reflect diversity as the norm. These inclusive learning strategies should be introduced to all educational environments and not simply those where diversity is visible. Unless this is the case, dominant ethnicities will continue to interpret their identity as the norm. Moreover, by incorporating critical media studies and global citizenship studies, inequalities in power and resources can be brought to the fore so erroneous media and popular cultural representations are problematised.

Challenging the curriculum is an important part of addressing anti-Muslim racism but should be done amidst a wider critique of the current discourse on education, where off-the-shelf curricula are increasingly promoted as good practice. This method is congruent with banking approaches to education where the teacher's principal function is to transfer a particular set of knowledge, or contents, to the passive learner. Less countenanced are more radical approaches to adult education where contents are drawn from and not presented to adult learners (Connolly, 2008; Fitzsimons, 2017; Hooks, 1994).

Conclusion

This article set out to challenge the othering of a fixed, Muslim identity; an othering that exists within a global landscape of imperialism where individualisation and marketisation are sacrosanct. As this phenomenon is often unaddressed, the challenge set for adult educators is to create culturally conscious learning communities that celebrate Ireland's ethnic diversity and that welcomes new migrants viewing their presence as an opportunity to co-create new knowledge in discursive, democratic and inclusive ways. This, I have argued involves re-examining our curricula, working interculturally, contemplating our cultural identity and uncovering our prejudices; including an acknowledgment of white-privilege. Where adult educators model an alternative to the ideological us versus them dualisms, the intercultural pedagogy that emerges must incorporate an analysis of imperialism and the impacts this has on the lives of many millions of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim across the globe, often with devastating consequences.

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Notes

1. Islamophobia is a problematic concept for many given its contradictory nature; Islam meaning peace, and phobia meaning afraid being joined into one word. It can also be seen to diminish the racist nature of negativity towards Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim.
2. Curtis (2009) identifies the slave-trade, most notably enslavement from what is now known as West Africa as an important pattern of migration that led to a Muslim population in America.
3. Allen (2010, pp. 5–6) in his publication *Islamophobia* cites use of the expression in France in the 1920s and also of its use in some Muslim countries in the 1970s to describe women who choose not to wear hijab.
4. In 2015, the right wing organisation Pegida Ireland launched a petition against the erection of a mosque in Kerry asking those in support to sign up to the statement ‘Please help keep Ireland free from the cult that wants to destroy our people and culture’.
5. Article by investigative journalist Gaby Hinsliff entitled ‘Let’s not shy away from asking hard questions about the Cologne attacks’.
6. Movement between commonwealth countries was restricted in 1962 through the Common Wealth Act.
7. Full speech can be found at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html (6 August 2016).
8. The full speech is available at <http://time.com/4425599/dnc-bill-clinton-speech-transcript-video/> (6 August 2016).
9. See <http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-global-terrorism-index-countries-most-affected-by-terrorist-attacks.html> (5 April 2017). This cites the Middle East and Africa as most affected by Terrorism.
10. For examples see the work of Partners Training for Transformation or Lourdes Youth and Community Service.

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