Abstract

This article examines the experiences of Muslim men who had attended the secondary schools in Quebec in the post-9/11 context. Employing a critical ethnographic approach stemming from institutional ethnography, this study presents biases/racism these men had experienced in their secondary schools in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks and throughout the period of the War on Terror, and the possible causes for this treatment.

Key Words: Islamophobia, Canada, Quebec, Racism, Ethnography

Introduction

In the decade after the 9/11 terror attacks, there has been a significant increase in racialization, mistrust, and prejudice towards Muslims around the world including in Canada (CAIR-CAN, 2008). Recent polls indicate that 54 per cent of Canadians as a whole have a negative opinion of Islam. This number rises as high as 69 per cent in Quebec (Angus Reid, 2013). In this only French-speaking province of Canada, identity politics combined with secularist discourses have framed Muslims as a threatening ‘Other’ outside the “nationalist space” (Bilge, 2013; Leroux, 2010; Wong, 2011). Since 9/11, a growing body of literature suggests that Muslim youth in North American societies have experienced conflicts in their schools impeding social and academic progress caused by issues relating to identity, integration, racism, and gender (Bakali, 2015 & 2016; Liese, 2004; Maira, 2014; Zine, 2006). This article examines the racialized experiences of six Muslim men who attended Quebec secondary schools in the post 9/11 context between 2006 and 2013. Racialization occurs when a group is conceived of as a race by virtue of certain non-biological qualities, such as one’s religious affiliations, and experience prejudicial treatment as a result. Often these ascribed racial identities result through relationships of power in order to perpetuate and maintain domination and subordination of one group over another (Omni & Winant, 1994). Muslim male experiences in Canadian secondary schools has been distinct from Muslim female treatment (Bakali, 2016; Razai-Rashti, 2005; Zine, 2006). In particular, young immigrant-origin Muslim men in Quebec have lower graduation rates from secondary schools than Muslim immigrant-origin girls (McAndrew, Ledent, & Murdoch, 2011). Furthermore, the case of young Muslim men is of interest, as a growing number of young men have joined or attempted to join the civil conflict in Syria citing concerns over alienation and marginalization in Quebec (Logan, 2015). The findings of this study suggests that anti-Muslim racism experienced by young Muslim men in their secondary schools was influenced by the domestic state policy of secularism and media discourses in Quebec, as well as the clichéd archetypes and tropes of Muslims that have emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 in the North American context. This inquiry contributes to the understanding of anti-Muslim racism in Canada from the perspectives of Muslim males, who attended Quebec secondary schools.
Literature Review

A number of studies have examined the experiences of both Canadian and American Muslims and schooling in the North American context (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009). For example, Zine has examined the experiences of Muslim youth attending secondary schools in the larger Canadian context (2001), focusing primarily on youth from Ontario, as well as the experiences of young Muslim women who wear the head veil (2006). Another study by Maira (2014) described the experiences of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan communities in the US and the discrimination they encountered. Her findings suggest that Muslim youth felt their free speech right was restricted in the context of the War on Terror because they believed they were under constant surveillance. In the Quebec context, studies have examined issues relating to discrimination and racial profiling of racialized youth in Quebec schools (CDPDJ, 2011; McAndrew, Ledent, & Murdoch, 2011). However, there are very few, if any studies focusing on the experiences of Muslim youth in Quebec secondary schools. One study looked specifically at issues relating to racism towards Muslims in Quebec school textbooks (McAndrew, Oueslati, & Helly, 2007). The authors looked at textbooks used in French-language secondary schools across Quebec throughout the 2003-2004 school year to examine how these texts represented Islam and Muslims. They examined 21 French textbooks to see how they presented Islam and Muslim cultures, the Muslim world at an international level (i.e. historical events, events between civilizations, and political situations), as well as Muslims in Quebec and Canada. The findings of this study revealed that stereotypical representations and factual errors relating to Muslims abounded in these texts. In particular, it was found that there were problems in the covering of “historical events that largely legitimize[d] Western actions, a strong tendency towards homogenizing and essentializing Muslim cultures, as well as a near total absence of Muslims as Quebec and Canadian citizens” (p. 173). This study shed light on subtle forms of racism that existed within textbooks used in educational institutions in Quebec. However, it did not describe the real-life experiences of Muslim students who attended these educational institutions. Though this study uncovered misinformation in the materials used by educational institutions in Quebec, it fell short in describing the psychological and sociological impacts that this could have on students, particularly Muslim students.

This study is original as it investigates how Muslim youth experiences in Quebec secondary schools have been impacted by values promoted in Quebec, particularly in relation to the Quebec Education Program (QEP) and discourses of inter-culturalism. This study is of relevance as Muslims are a growing demographic within Quebec and Canadian society. There are approximately 243,000 Muslims in Quebec, which accounts for roughly 3% of the population. After Christianity, Islam is the largest religion in Quebec. Additionally, Muslims are the fastest growing religious community in Canada (Statistics Canada: National Household Survey, 2011). Focusing on Muslim participants and the racializing discourses they have to negotiate, in the context of the societal debates over nationalism, cultural purity and fears of cultural erosion, this study aims to understand the racialized experiences of six Muslim men who attended Quebec secondary schools in the post 9/11 context between 2006 and 2013.

Theorizing anti-Muslim Racism

The theoretical framework which guided this study was informed by a Critical Race perspective (Razack, 2008; Thobani, 2007). From this perspective, “racism is defined as a structure embedded in society that systematically advantages Whites and disadvantages people of color” (Marx, 2008, p. 163). Critical Race Theory provides a framework for theorizing and understanding why and how racism occurs. It elucidates subtle and explicit forms of racism and articulates how they can be prevalent in society, yet disguised and masked in such a way that they continue to exist unimpeded. I have adopted this framework because scholarship from this perspective describes anti-Muslim racism as systemic racism which pervades Western societies. Anti-Muslim racism, from this perspective, is not simply an outgrowth of the 9/11 terror attacks, but rather is symptomatic of a long enduring tradition of racism that has existed and is engrained in Western societies. This manifests through numerous social structures including educational institutions.
A number of critical race feminists have provided useful insights, frameworks, and approaches to examine the phenomenon of Islamophobia (Razack, 2008; Thobani, 2007). They have examined Islamophobia both from Canadian and global perspectives and have greatly informed this study. A common theme in their works addresses the social construction of the Muslim ‘Other’.

Drawing from critiques in post-colonial theory, namely those of Edward Said (1979), ‘Otherness’ is “the condition or quality of being different or ‘other,’ particularly if the differences in question are [deemed] strange, bizarre, or exotic” (Miller, 2008, p. 587). Often the concept of ‘Other’ is represented as a diametrically opposed ‘self’. Hence, designating a group or individuals as ‘Other’ not only defines that group or individuals but also defines the ‘self’ as its antithesis. ‘Other’, as I will be using the term, is a conception designated by a hegemonic subject which mystifies and fetishizes an object (Said, 1979). In other words, ‘Othering’ involves an obscuring and demonization of the ‘Other’. The ‘Othering’ of Muslims as described by Said (1979) in his work Orientalism has informed many of the current day critiques of anti-Muslim racism (Kumar, 2012; Shaheen, 2008; Sheehi, 2011). According to Said (1979), Orientalism is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (p. 2). Said noted the presence of Orientalist thought in the works of European scholars, artists and academics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Analyzing canonical European literary works from this era, Said noted the existence of misrepresentations, over-simplifications and binaries which constructed the West as being diametrically opposed to the East. Said argued that Orientalists viewed the East or the “Orient” as being overly sensual, primitive, and violently opposed to the West. According to Said, these views of the Orient perpetuated a constant ensemble of images and stereotypes that homogenized Arab and Muslim cultures. As Kumar (2012) notes, a number of lingering Orientalist myths continue to endure in dominant Western discourse about Islam. These include the notion that Islam is a monolithic religion that perpetuates gender-based discrimination, that Muslims are incapable of reason and rationality or democracy and self-rule, and that Islam is an inherently violent religion.

Since 9/11, the ‘Othering’ of Muslims, as elucidated by Said, has been inextricably linked to the War on Terror. As Razack (2008) observes, “three allegorical figures have come to dominate the social landscape of the ‘war on terror’ and its ideological underpinning of a clash of civilizations: the dangerous Muslim man, the imperiled Muslim woman, and the civilized European” (p. 5). The ‘dangerous Muslim man’ is possessed of rage and inflicts violence through terrorism and abuse towards women. The ‘imperiled Muslim woman’ is the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman in need of rescue from her backward culture and religion. The ‘civilized European’ represents the antithesis of the archaic Muslim. His/her interventions in Muslim majority nations are legitimized and sanitized through the aforementioned figures. Grounding my analysis of the ‘Othering’ of Muslims through the archetypes of the ‘dangerous Muslim man’ and the ‘imperiled Muslim women’ help explicate comments discussed by the participants. I turn now to elaborate on the methodological processes utilized in this study.

Research Methodology

Based upon a review of the literature, the questions that emerged to guide this study were: (1) did Muslim men attending Quebec secondary schools feel that they were perceived as ‘Other’ in their schools? And (2) If the participants perceived that anti-Muslim racism existed in their Quebec secondary schools, what were its causes and how did this ‘Othering’ manifest? I employed a critical ethnographic approach in this inquiry. Critical ethnography can be understood as a “research methodology through which social, cultural, political, and economic issues can be interpreted and represented to illustrate the processes of oppression and engage people in addressing them” (Cook, 2008, p. 148). Therefore, this methodological approach can be particularly useful when examining oppressed or racialized groups. It is a methodological approach which, is in line with Critical Race Theory, as it listens to the voices of marginalized classes and highlights their agency, challenging oppression and subordination (Cook, 2008). Critical ethnography
involves interviewing subjects and creating a record of observation, collecting field notes, observing participants in social sites, as well as analyzing the social structures with which participants interact with and which impact or influence the social surroundings of participants (Carspecken, 1996). The use of critical ethnography has been taken up in the fields of sociology and cultural studies and it has increasingly been used in educational research (Carspecken, 1996). Certain assumptions undergird critical ethnography when applied in the field of education. These include the beliefs that “inequality exists in society, mainstream practices often reproduce inequalities, oppression occurs in many forms and is most forceful when it involves hegemonic learning, and critical research should engage in social criticism to support efforts for change” (Cook, 2008, p. 148). Therefore, this methodology places emphasis on the real-life experiences and agency of participants because it is through their insights that criticism and social change is possible. As this approach recognizes the authority of the participant in describing their lived realities, critical ethnographers must engage in a reciprocal process in which the researcher and participants work together in constructing their knowledge about an issue. Thus, researchers employing this methodology engage in a reflexive process.

Critical self-reflexivity can be described as the “researchers’ engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project” (Dowling, 2008, p. 747). As I am a Muslim secondary school teacher who has witnessed and experienced anti-Muslim discrimination, and given the nature of this study, it was inevitable that I would encounter moments in which subjectivity would be entangled in my interpretations and analyses. Hence, reflexivity was a useful tool to employ throughout this research project to help avoid overstating participants’ experiences. There are a number of strategies at the disposal of the researcher to engage in self-reflexivity. I used self-reflective diaries, examined my personal assumptions and goals, and attempted to clarify some of my individual belief systems and subjectivities (Ahern, 1999). Self-reflective diaries were written immediately after interviews and before transcription. This process helped me identify my assumptions as well as how I understood and interpreted participants’ comments. I also found referring back to audio-recorded interviews and transcripts upon completing my preliminary data analysis helped me to be more cognizant of my assumptions. Through engaging in a self-reflexive process I wanted to avoid overstating participants’ comments, as well as avoid an over-deterministic analysis.

**Context of the Study**

All participants interviewed in this study resided in Quebec and attended Quebec secondary schools. A unique feature of Quebec society is that it employs an inter-culturalism model for integrating its ethnically diverse populations, as opposed to the rest of Canada, which promotes a multiculturalism approach (Haque, 2012). Inter-culturalism came about in response to Canada’s implementation of its multiculturalism policies and has been promoted and in operation officially in Quebec since the 1970s (Waddington et al., 2011). According to Leroux (2010), the 1990 policy document *Au Québec pour bâtir ensemble: Énoncé de politique en matière d’immigration et d’intégration* best articulates the policy implications of inter-culturalism which has three main principles: “French as the language of public life; a democratic society, where everyone is expected and encouraged to participate and contribute; and an open, pluralist society that respects democratic values and intercommunitarian exchange” (Gouvernement du Québec 1990, p.16). One of the key differences between inter-culturalism and multiculturalism is the notion of a moral contract between newcomers and the Quebec society, which suggests that Quebec’s common public culture is at the forefront (Leroux, 2012). The adoption of inter-culturalism as Quebec’s official stance towards racial diversity instead of multiculturalism is rooted in the notion of self-preservation. As Waddington et al. (2011) state: “Québec’s opposition to multiculturalism is grounded in the belief that the Canadian government’s policy of multiculturalism is a betrayal of Québec’s historical status within the Canadian federation and undermines Québec’s grounds for seeking greater political autonomy” (p. 314). As there have been ongoing tensions over safeguarding language and identity in Quebec, this approach ensured its
preservation as a unique minority in Canada while it also offered “a means of partial or limited integration within Canada, releasing the Québécois from the fear of loss of their linguistic culture…providing a sustainable means of remaining within Canada” (DesRoches, 2013, p. 7). Thus, inter-culturalism takes a more assimilationist approach to integration of racial minorities in order to safeguard traditional Quebecois culture (Talbani, 1993).

Inter-culturalism has been central to the formation of the Quebec Education Program and its courses, particularly the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program in Quebec primary and secondary schools (Waddington et al., 2011). The main objectives of the ERC program are: “the recognition of others” and “the pursuit of the common good” (MELS, 2008, p. 2). The objectives of this program are rooted in a number of principles, which includes fostering living in harmony with others (MELS, 2008). These objectives form the backdrop of the three competencies of the program: reflects on ethical questions, demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion, and engages in dialogue (MELS, 2008). It deserves to be noted that the ERC is the only mandatory religious education program in all of Canada but that the program makes no attempt to disguise the importance and supremacy of Quebec’s religious cultural heritage (Boudreau, 2011).

The Participants and Interview Process

The participants for this study were drawn from the Montreal and the South Shore of Quebec because there is a large concentration of Muslims and I had good contacts with community organizations in these areas. The research was conducted with convenience sampling and included students from both English and French linguistic sectors to facilitate recruiting participants. The research received approval from the McGill Research Ethics Board prior to engagement in interviews of participants. These interviews and analyses were part of a larger study relating to my doctoral research involving the experiences of eighteen former and two current Muslim students and Muslim and non-Muslim teachers in Quebec secondary schools in the post-9/11 context. In examining the experiences of former secondary school students, I relied on retrospective narratives while conducting the interviews. An issue of relying on memories when doing ethnographic research is that responses might be subject to one’s present perspective, therefore they might be malleable and susceptible to inaccuracy or loss, as Davis & Starn (1989) argued. However, as Pignatelli (1998) observed, memory has the potential to enrich a critical ethnography, “[m]emory binds the rich potential of the narrative to fascinate, seduce, and draw us closer to the practical, activist intentions of a critical ethnography” (p. 407). In other words, relying on memory or the use of telling stories is in line with some of the foundational principles of critical ethnography, which is to give voice to socially marginalised members of society. Hence, these narratives are relevant even if they rely on memory. For the purposes of this inquiry, this paper only discusses the experiences of the six Muslim male student/former student participants. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed over a span of six months from May 2013 to October 2013 and were semi-structured, posing open ended questions relating to: (1) how Muslims were perceived in society; (2) if perceptions of Muslims were shaped by media representations; (3) if they had encountered racism against Muslims within educational contexts. Interviews were transcribed verbatim excluding slurs or unclear utterances such as ‘uhm’s’ and ‘ah’s’. Out of six Muslim male participants in this study, only one of which was a high school student at the time of the interview. The five other participants were all recent high school graduates, having completed their high school diploma within three years of the interview. All of the participants attended high school in the Greater Montreal region and came from middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. Two of the participants attended English public schools, three attended French public schools, while one of the participants attended a private French school. All of the participants identified themselves as practicing Muslim men while they were in high school. The pseudonyms of the participants were as follows: Yusuf, Ismail, Ahmad, Adam, Zaid, and Ali. Yusuf, Ismail, and Zaid were of Pakistani origin; Adam and Ali were of Indian origin, and Ahmad was Algerian. All of the male participants were born and raised in Quebec and their parents immigrated to Canada before they
were born. Yusuf and Ismail were interviewed individually, while the other four participants were interviewed together in a group interview. This was done to accommodate the participants as these four men felt more comfortable doing the interviews in a group setting. Yusuf was in his second year at a university preparatory college, referred to as Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP) in Quebec, during the time of the interview. He was the sole participant that had attended a private school throughout his secondary education, which had only a few Muslim students. Ismail was a first year CEGEP student during the time of his interview. He also attended a school where there were very few Muslims; as such he felt he was clearly identifiable as a Muslim in his school. Ahmad was completing his final year of high school during the time of the group interview and he attended a school that had many different racialized groups including a number of Arabs and Muslims. Adam and Ali were both completing their final year of CEGEP and Zaid was an undergraduate student during the time of the group interview. All three of them attended high schools that had a number of Muslim students.

Data Analysis

Transcription of the interviews was done after the interviews were completed. Transcription was done in rounds with various features of talk recorded in each round. First focus was on what was said and then in subsequent rounds gaps in speech and intonation were recorded. As there is no “one standard, ideal, and comprehensive mode of transcription” (Mishler, 1997, p. 271), the interviews were transcribed to accurately purvey the perceptions and responses of the participants. This included using italics to indicate emphasis in participants’ intonations, as well as repeatedly listening to audio files of the interviews and comparing them with transcripts to ensure the meaning of participants’ comments were clearly communicated in the transcripts. Additionally, field notes taken relating to each question asked in the interviews were used to help facilitate any points of confusion while transcribing.

Inductive analysis was employed for coding data (Thomas, 2006) with the intent of constructing an understanding of participants’ experiences of racism and prejudice in schools. This involved detailed readings of the data to derive concepts and themes. Hence, the interviews were coded after the audio-recordings were listened and each transcript was read multiple times. Close readings of the transcripts were helpful to identify meaningful units, which enabled to the creation of categories and emergent themes from the text. Three major relevant themes re-occurred in the data. The category labels for these themes were: (1) experiences/perceptions of racism in society; (2) experiences/perceptions of racism in schools; and (3) experiences/perceptions relating to media representations of Muslims. Identification of these themes through colour coding facilitated data reduction and analysis. As there was not a large number of participants in this inquiry, using the physical transcripts the codes were manually reduced and collapsed. Through continual revision and refinement of the category system, I selected “appropriate quotations that convey[ed] the core theme or essence of a category” (Thomas, 2006, p. 242) for this inquiry. Findings were written upon completion of data analysis.

Discussion of Findings

Experiences in Secondary School

The participants had varying types of experiences in secondary school. Most of the participants generally felt that their overall experience in high school was positive. However, all the participants experienced some levels of racism against Muslims in their secondary schools. Yusuf felt tremendous pressure to represent Islam when he was a secondary student:

Well going to school—I went to a private French high school—I have to say, we weren’t just a minority, there were barely any Muslims in that school. The thing, going to such a French school, people don’t really know a lot about Muslims. So you feel obliged to represent your religion and sometimes it’s kind of hard because you’re at that age where you’re not only trying to find out who you are but you’re trying to fit in as well. So sometimes you leave out some of the things of Islam so that you could just tell people what they want to hear maybe, and not necessarily show the right image
of Islam. But I mean like for the teachers, a lot of times they’re going to show videos and stuff that might not necessarily be for [Islam], but you don’t have any choice but to accept it. Like one of the videos I had seen in my high school, it had to do with Muslim sisters praying behind men, and that was just one mosque that they used in the video but they kind of made a general image of how women are inferior to men in Islam, which isn’t the case. But at that age, like, you don’t really know how to say your thoughts, how to be against it. So you’re better off just keeping your mouth shut.

Yusuf described how being a high school student was a time of self-exploration. This was difficult for him because of certain assumptions associated with Muslims and Islam in his secondary school. Yusuf was cognisant of his ‘Otherness’ in his high school setting as well as the types of understandings people had of Muslims and Islam. Hence, he expressed he was trying to “fit in”, suggesting that being an accepted member of the student body was not a taken-for-granted situation for him. Rather, he needed to make efforts to be accepted even if this meant telling students “what they want to hear” at the expense of misrepresenting his faith. Some studies have shown that within educational institutions, students have been able to assert their Muslim identity through participation with Muslim student groups formed within the school, as these help ease tensions relating to peer pressure and prevent marginalization (Khan, 2009; Zine, 2001). Unfortunately, in Yusuf’s school such an organization did not exist.

The challenges of being a Muslim in a Quebecois school were compounded with further difficulties when teachers would show materials casting Muslims in a negative light. Yusuf’s comments suggested that he would be at odds with the types of media portrayals of Muslims presented by his teacher as he described a video that was shown to his classmates, which presented Muslim women as inferior to men. Such representations of Muslim women in the Canadian context have been documented in depth by Jiwani (2010) as she observes, “[t]he tendency within the news media and current affairs programming has been to project representations of the veiled woman as essentially an abject and victimized Muslim figure” (p. 65). Yusuf felt that in his classroom setting he had no “choice but to accept” this dominant Islamophobia frame, despite the fact that he felt such representations cast his faith in a negative light. Instead of the classroom being a space where Yusuf felt comfortable to express himself, his identity, and his beliefs, he described feelings of alienation, ‘Otherness’, and was forced to accept racialized discourses un-valoring Muslims and Islam. Yusuf described how the archetype of the ‘imperilled Muslim woman’ was perpetuated in his experiences in secondary school through media presented to his class. Despite disagreeing with these portrayals, Yusuf felt the need to regulate his views and beliefs about the issue by remaining silent. Yusuf’s experiences of being exposed to Islamophobic media discourses in his classes were similar to those of other participants.

Participants from the group interview discussion felt that school curricula in Quebec, as well as teachers, in some instances, facilitated anti-Muslim discourses:

Zaid: The only problem that would come up, especially in Ethics class or religion class, where debates would come over different religions and then people had their opinions and what not—we’d compare other religions like Christianity to Islam and all the other religions and then there would be discussions to that. So there would be people who would agree and disagree and that would cause debates and even fights. I remember once we were talking about Islam and comparing it to Judaism and there were a few people who got offended and there was a Muslim and a Jew and they began to fight in class and they started fighting after class as well but it got better afterwards. But it shows that this religion class caused more tension.

Ali: I think they want politically correct answers as well, like a lot of times if you say what you want, what you believe in, you won’t get the full marks, they want you to say what the media says.

Adam: The most secular response.

Ali: yeah, exactly.

Zaid discussed how his ERC class at times would be a source of tension in his high school, particularly when religions were discussed. These tensions involved debates within the classroom and at times even escalated to violent confrontations outside of the class. Zaid did not specifically imply that his teacher was responsible for the confrontation; however, other participants in the group interview felt that teachers facilitated tensions towards Muslims and Islam.
Ali’s comments suggested that teachers wanted students to regurgitate dominant Islamophobic media discourses even if these contradicted their own beliefs and understandings of issues. Therefore, Ali’s understanding of what was, “politically correct”, stemmed from what was being said in the media. Adam added to these comments and stated, “the most secular response” to which Ali agreed. These comments demonstrated how a state-funded institution, like a secondary school, reproduced Quebec media-racialized discourses and state policies relating to secularism, as teachers seemingly wanted students to mimic these if they were to receive “full marks”. Not conforming to state policies and Islamophobic media discourses carried the penalty of not getting “full marks”. These comments suggested that some of the participants perceived their classrooms as apparatuses of state indoctrination, as they felt obliged to give “the most secular response” even if this was at odds with their Islamic beliefs. As was the case with Yusuf, other participants also felt the need to regulate their speech with regards to their beliefs within a classroom setting. A similar pattern has been noted by Maira (2014) in her study of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan communities in the US. In this study it was found that Muslim youth felt their right to free speech was restricted in the context of the War on Terror because they believed they were under constant surveillance. It would appear that in the post-9/11 context Muslim youth in this study as well as in other contexts fear reprisals by state institutions and policies for their beliefs and thus regulate their speech.

In Ahmad’s experiences some teachers not only expected students to accept state and media discourses but also engaged in the process of mis-educating their students about Islam and Muslims.

Ahmad: The school I went to…. it wasn’t the students that had issues; I found it was the teachers. Once in physics class I was balancing a book on my head and the teacher said, Ahmad, stop praying. He thought it was funny and a good joke, but I didn’t appreciate that and the students understood that. Or for example, just because I would pray at school, I’ve never encountered a student—they will ask me questions, but never in a negative way, but the way the teachers view it, when you talk about your religion (in a positive way), they’re against that. It’s like you said before, you won’t get full grades if you’re not ‘with the teacher’. For example, my Ethics teacher, he’s not educating people he’s mis-educating people by not giving information that is precise and neutral. When it comes to Christianity, Judaism it’s fine but with Islam he chooses information against Islam and he presents this to students as if it’s normal but it’s not something that’s normal.

Ahmad described how one of his teachers singled him out as an object of ridicule because of his ‘Muslimness’. Ahmad described how students around him did not bother him when he would observe prayers, and would ask questions, which he did not perceive as demeaning. However, he felt a sense of conflict and tension towards his teachers when he would speak about his religion in a way that contradicted state and media discourses. Ahmad felt a strong bias from his ERC teacher when discussing Islam. He felt that his teacher would pick and choose what to present about Islam creating a distorted picture of his faith. Ahmad described how his ERC course facilitated constructing his Islamic faith as ‘Other’, a process that frequently occurs in Quebec political and media discourses (Bilge, 2013; Wong, 2011; Mahrouse, 2010; Mookerjea, 2009). Ahmad specifically identified his teacher as being the cause of these tensions through presenting the Islamic faith with bias. He felt that his faith was being unfairly presented and if he wanted to get “full grades” he would have to be “with the teacher”. In other words, he was indirectly being forced to accept media and state discourses surrounding Muslims within his ERC class. If he did not do so, he would be penalized.

An important reoccurring theme that came up with participants when recounting their high school experiences was the stereotype of “dangerous Muslim men” (Razack, 2008), which would regularly manifest in different forms within their secondary school settings. As mentioned previously, the participants would sometimes have taunts thrown at them relating to violence and terrorism. Some of these stereotypical views towards Muslim men manifested within the school culture during dress-up days like on Hallowe’en:

Zaid: Well, in high school, especially around secondary four and five, we had two classes one of them was Ethics and we were talking mainly about Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and that stuff and also in our Contemporary World class, we were talking about the war between Palestine and Israel. So the topic of Islam was pretty popular in secondary
four and five. So one Hallowe’en, I guess you can say there was a Hallowe’en party or Hallowe’en day at school, and a few people—a group came dressed up as the so called ‘Muslim’ with the turban and beard and what not. So they came to school like that, and as people saw they also took their gym clothes and made a turban and found, I don’t know paper or what not, and made a beard and that was their costume for the day.

Interviewer: And why would they dress up as Muslims for Hallowe’en, what were they trying to show by wearing the turban?

Zaid: I guess they were trying to be unique but they weren’t. I don’t think they were trying to offend us. I guess mostly the purpose of Hallowe’en costumes is to look scary, so I guess they were trying to show that as being terrorists or Muslims.

Zaid discussed how the topic of Muslims and Islam came up in some of his courses, namely his Contemporary World class and the ERC course, as he attended secondary school during the height of the War on Terror. Though Zaid did not directly indicate that these courses negatively depicted Muslims, his comments did suggest that through these courses students in his school received exposure to Muslims and the Islamic faith. Hence “the topic of Islam was pretty popular” in a number of subjects at the school that Zaid attended. As such, when it was time for Hallowe’en a group of students thought it would be a good idea to come to school dressed up as Muslims. Zaid’s comments link the instruction in his Contemporary World and ERC classes with this incident. One can infer from this that the information that students obtained about Muslims and Islam in these courses reproduced the image of the “dangerous Muslim man”. This archetype employs a number of visual signifiers including the beard and clothing items such as the turban (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008), which is what students wore to embody this archetype.

The presence of the “dangerous Muslim man” archetype was further confirmed when Zaid discussed why he thought non-Muslim students would think that dressing up as Muslims on Hallowe’en would be an appropriate costume, as he stated “the purpose of Halloween costumes is to look scary”. Zaid’s description of this episode was very telling. He stated that a group of students came dressed up as the “so called Muslim”. Zaid did not state that the students came dressed as violent terrorists. The students came dressed as the “Muslim”, at least how the figure of the “Muslim” has come to be known in Western discourse through an Orientalist lens (Mamdani, 2005; Sheehi, 2011). This incident demonstrated the students’ understanding of what it meant to be a “Muslim”. Their understanding of “being Muslim” on Hallowe’en embodied the tropes of violence and intimidation, as the purpose of the attire was to “look scary”. A number of the incidents described by the participants above alluded to how media representations of Muslims impacted how they were perceived in secondary schools.

**Muslim Male Students’ Views on Media**

All of the participants felt they were racialized in how Muslims were represented in popular cultural mediums such as television programs, Hollywood films and the news media. Zaid discussed how biased media representations of Muslims were shown in his class and how non-Muslim students linked these representations to Muslims students that were present:

There was a funny [incident] in class. We were watching a movie and I don’t remember what movie it was but in the first scene there was this white man, he was in jail and he was making a movie. So he starts off, hi my name is this and he stutters and he closes the camera, then he starts again, starts recording again and says, hi my name is... closes again. And he does it three times and he closes. And then at the end he goes in the name of Allah the Most Merciful and the he says my name is, and he says a Muslim name and I’m a terrorist and then the movie starts. And it’s funny because like only two Muslims in the class and everybody looked at us laughing.

Zaid described how a film, which depicted Muslim terrorist stereotypes was shown to his class. Zaid did not recall the name of the film, however what he described resonates with a Hollywood film called *Unthinkable* (2010) directed by Gregor Jordan and starring Samuel L. Jackson and Michael Sheen. In the opening scene of *Unthinkable*, similar to what Zaid described, the viewers are presented with a white male who is making a video tape describing how he has placed three nuclear bombs in US cities and that he will
detonate them if his demands are not met. The opening scene of this film shows a man, Steven Younger, struggling to speak about his terrorist plot. After attempting numerous times to describe his plot unsuccessfully, he finally begins his message by asserting his Muslim identity starting with the common phrase uttered by Muslims whenever beginning an act of worship, “In the name of Allah”. Instead of introducing himself as Steven Younger, as he previously did, he now introduces himself through his Muslim persona of Yusuf Atta Muhammad. Unsurprisingly, the character is now able to discuss his plans without any difficulties as he has openly abandoned his non-Muslim identity, which was the only thing holding him back from describing his violent plot.

Ismail described how he coped with these taunts by telling his peers “that doesn’t really bother me—go ahead”. Luckily for Ismail this behaviour from his peers eventually stopped, however, for other students that is not always the case.

J’Lein Liese (2004) discusses how there are levels of discrimination that occur in educational settings. The first level of discrimination relates to slurs based on stereotypes. Often slurs can be used to “dehumanise” another person or social group to justify a violent act” (p. 67). In other words, racial slurs directed at students can eventually escalate into forms of physical violence. In the context of the War on Terror, racial slurs such as “terrorist” have been employed to “justify retaliatory actions post 9/11” (Liese, 2004, p. 67). This has occurred through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as these nations were described as supporters of terrorism and Iraq was part of the “Axis of Evil”. Hence the term “terrorist” is synonymous with groups of people who are enemies of the state in the War on Terror and warrant violent policing. If students are being labelled as “terrorist” in Quebec secondary schools, it should not simply be taken as a joke and should be seriously addressed by teachers and the school. Ismail did not mention that any teacher or administrator within his school came to his defence when he was ridiculed in this manner; rather he simply treated these incidents as a joke and did not let these taunts get to him. This type of reaction was similar to Zaid, who was also seemingly untroubled by how a film which depicted a Muslim terrorist was immediately linked to him and another Muslim student in his class. In both cases the Muslim students did not feel that the racism they were experiencing was troubling or something that needed to be seriously addressed.

There were a number of common themes and issues that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews. The most obvious of these trends was that majority of participants experienced, directly or indirectly, some form of anti-Muslim racism and prejudice in their secondary schools. However, there was
a wide range in how participants interpreted the racism that they experienced. For example, Ahmad adamantly suggested that there was anti-Muslim racism in his secondary school through his experiences. Zaid and Ismail were not as troubled by their experiences of racialization and did not articulate very strong sentiments of racism. They held these views despite the fact that they encountered a number of instances which demonstrated that anti-Muslim racism clearly existed in their secondary school experiences. Zaid and Ismail both described racist incidents in which their classmates associated them with terrorism, as not being a very serious issue. Zaid and Ismail interpreted these incidents as “funny” or as “jokes”. This attitude was emblematic of how racism was seemingly normalized in the day-to-day experiences of these participants. They were not attuned to how they were experiencing racism, as they were not offended and seriously concerned over these issues. In a way, it would seem that they had unconsciously accepted this type of treatment and categorizations, possibly because they were prevalent in state policies and practices, as well as political and media discourses in Quebec.

Participants’ suggested that the racialization of Islam associated them with violence and terrorism. Most participants described how the archetype of “dangerous Muslim man” as represented by the figure of the Muslim terrorist was regularly perpetuated through media discourses. Participants also described how they encountered this affiliation to terrorism in Quebec society as well as in secondary schools. Zaid, Ahmad, and Ismail discussed how they faced taunts and racial slurs associating them with terrorism and violence in their schools. They also described how at times they felt the need to regulate their speech in conformity to Quebec values and norms associated with secularism in their classrooms. Participants discussed how they feared reprisals or punishment for having beliefs that contradicted these policies or were not in line with the teachers’ beliefs. Hence, the participants did not describe racism in the form of physical violence and abuse, but rather in how they were perceived, stereotyped, and treated by classmates and teachers.

Conclusion and Implications

This article examined the racialized experiences of six Muslim men who attended secondary schools in Quebec in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. In this study, the participants’ experiences of Islamophobia in Quebec schools were triggered through the association of terrorism and backwardness to their “Muslimness”. Participants described how they encountered the notion of “dangerous Muslim men” in their secondary schools, which has become endemic in the context of the War on Terror. While one can situate the participants’ experiences within the broader context of the post-9/11 and War on Terror era, quite importantly, their experiences resonated particularly with racism and discrimination prevalent in Quebec state policies and media discourses during the same period. This study contributes to the body of Canadian critical race scholarship, since it examined experiences of Muslim men with Islamophobia in Quebec schools after 9/11. Furthermore, this study also provided insights relating to critical race educational scholarship by highlighting Muslim men’s experiences of anti-Muslim racism in educational institutions.

This critical ethnography provides valuable and important insights as it sheds light on how a group of Muslims experienced racism in Quebec secondary schools in the post-9/11 context. In addition, this study illustrates the complexity of prejudices that people might harbour, not conveniently defined in a single form but rather existing in a web of sentiments encapsulating ideas about race, racism, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, gender, and culture. This study brings to light a range of issues Said (1979) and others have explored as the lens of Orientalism through which people employ such sentiments and prejudices. In Quebec society, as in many other contexts, it is important to expose the complexity of racializing experiences of young Muslim men. This in turn may help educators and politicians better understand young Canadians Muslims and imagine a more just and equitable education for all students in the schools of Quebec.
Works Cited


