

Recultivating Culture:  
An Analysis of Culture as a Site of Ideology

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Chloe Casey has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Race and Ethnic Studies.

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I examine the ways in which the concept of culture functions as a site of ideology that is used to Other individuals and communities. Political, economic, and geographical positioning is reduced and manipulated, elevating the idea of culture into a primary way of viewing and understanding the world. As a case study, I will be examining the way in which culture is applied to individuals associated with or deemed to be associated with, by the white Western world, “the Muslim world.” The culturalization of these individuals will serve as evidence for the way in which the cultural framework is prominent in discourse today. I call for a closer critique of the ways in which the concept of culture is utilized in our world in order to call attention to a dependence on a logic of difference that results in the reproduction of historical systems of domination in the United States.

## Introduction

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray conducts a critique of Freud's essay "Femininity," and the way in which his interpretation forces an understanding of femininity, and woman's identity more generally, into "masculine games of tropes and tropisms," speaking more to Freud's positioning as a man than anything else (1974, 140). Similarly, I argue that a culturalist view of the world, as it functions popularly today in the United States, positions those deemed "Other" into an American game of tropes and tropisms. Political, economic, and geographical positioning is reduced and manipulated, twisting and elevating the idea of culture into a primary way of viewing and understanding the world. Culture as a concept is used to distance material conditions and everyday experience from discourse and politics, resulting more in a reflection of the interests of the United States government and dominant society than complexities of political and economic problems. Under a cultural logic, historical modes of power and their repercussions have been realigned around more convoluted axes, and therefore more difficult to locate (Gilroy 2004). The knowledge of how these historical modes of power have maintained in power comes "from mapping the space between the past and the rapidly changing future" (Silva 2016, 9). First, we must identify the ways in which the concept of culture works to create and uphold the notion of individuals and groups as "Other." Then, locate the ideological deployment of this abstraction on behalf of dominant systems in society.

Through a process of culturalization, similar to that of racialization, a series of "historically situated projects" organizes and represents human bodies and social structures in a way that marginalizes and discriminates against individuals (Omi and

Winant 2014, 124). The work of culturalization is not always to vilify individuals, but consistently establishes them as “Other.” Stuart Hall defines identity as the “names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within [narratives]...not an essence but a positioning” (2003). Individuals deemed “Other” in a given society represent the positioning of “outside” a society’s constructed identity of the “Self.” Both the conceptions of the “Self” and the “Other” signify and symbolize social, political, economic, and individual interests of the dominant group. With the spread of neoliberalism and the growing notions of a “globalized world,” this type of marginalization and discrimination is often masked in the rhetoric of “tolerance” and “celebration of diversity.” While the tactics and targets have shifted throughout history, the ideology leading to the discrimination faced by individuals continues. In order to resist the prejudice that the concept of culture permits, it is imperative that we call attention to the similarities between the Right and the Left in terms of a dependence on a logic of difference that results in the reproduction of historical systems of domination in the United States. As a case study, I will be examining the way in which culture is applied to individuals associated with or deemed to be associated with, by the white Western world, “the Muslim world.”<sup>1</sup> The culturalization of these individuals will serve as evidence for the way in which the cultural framework is prominent in discourse today.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note the illegitimacy of the categories that function in discourse today surrounding “the Muslim world,” “Islamic society,” and “Muslim identity;” as well as their close relation to the geographic region, the Middle East, Arab identity, and brown identification (Silva 2016). I say illegitimacy due to the fact that the category is a homogenized depiction created by the Western world. I replicate this category as such in an attempt to call attention to the simplification and generalization (in the sense of abstraction) that occurs in discourse.

A long history exists in the United States of an antagonism toward that which is and those which are deemed “Other.” In Gramsci's Relevance to the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Stuart Hall comments on the study of racism, writing, “No doubt there are certain general features to racism. But even more significant are the ways in which these general features are modified and transformed by the historical specificity of the contexts and environments in which they become active” (1986). Similarly, with culture, the significant work belongs not in the defining of the concept, but rather in the analysis of how “culture” has been modified, transformed, and in which contexts it is activated. A closer examination and critique of the concept of culture functioning in an ideological fashion, historically and currently, to Other individuals, communities, and regions is needed.

Due to its expansive list of definitions and uses, all of which are fairly complex and elusive, it is difficult to conduct a “tightly unified” argument about culture (Eagleton 2016, viii). A multifaceted approach is necessary when examining the role culture plays in our world. In “Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis,” Teun A. van Dijk writes that discourses serve as a site to examine various expressions of ideologies, acting as the “interface between societal structures, of groups, group relations and institutions, on the one hand, and individual thought, action and discourse, on the other hand” (van Dijk 1995). For this reason, discourse will be the primary location of my analysis, looking at how culture functions in the speech and text of individuals and groups in all realms of society.

# **Locating Culture as a Site of Ideology**

## **Culture as a Site of Ideology**

As Herbert Marcuse writes, in his defining of “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” there is an understanding of culture that “can serve as an important instrument of social research because it...signifies the totality of social life in a given situation, insofar as both the areas of ideational reproduction...and of material reproduction” (2007, 87). This understanding of culture allows for an exploration of patterns and tendencies in a society and has assisted in some invaluable critiques. There is, however, another common usage of the concept of culture in which a separation is made between culture and its socio-historical contexts, “making culture a (false) collective noun and attributing (false) universality to it” (ibid., 87). It is this second understanding of culture which I will be examining, the usage that separates culture from the material world and presents it as a “realm of authentic values” (ibid., 87). Under this conception, political, historical, social, and economic circumstances are relegated to being understood as “ways of life” (Žižek 2008, Lentin 2014, Ahmed 2015).

In his article, Marcuse explores how this understanding of culture, which he defines as “affirmative culture,” is a product of a specific historical “bourgeois epoch.” Functioning as a form of idealism that reserves “the true, the good, and the beautiful” for a small group in society, while withholding it from the masses. The idealism behind the concept of culture allows it to be easily separated from historical conditions, allowing for the idea of change to exist without any actual change in material

conditions or individual experience. It is because of this that the “celebration and respect” of other cultures can be so prevalent in discourse while discriminatory practices and inequality continue. Simultaneously, the separation of culture from material reality allows for the dismissal of culture as a site of ideology, as it is considered “natural,” out of bounds from human interference. Van Dijk defines ideologies as functioning as the “basic frameworks for organizing the social cognitions shared by members of social groups, organizations or institutions,” understanding culture as a site of ideology allows us to establish the important link between larger social formation and structures and smaller individual interactions and discourse (1995). Locating the ideological motivations behind the utilization of the concept of culture highlights the ways in which it functions as a tool to reproduce power dynamics in our world. Here, I turn to Slavoj Žižek’s “mapping” of ideology in order to call for an analysis of culture that acknowledges both its origin in idealism and its very real connection to and influence on material reality (1994).

## **Critiquing Ideology**

In the introduction to his edited volume *Mapping Ideology*, Žižek outlines various conceptions of ideology and the task of critiquing them (1994). Žižek presents ideology as circling around three axes: “ideology as a complex of ideas (theories, convictions, beliefs, argumentative procedures); ideology in its externality, that is, the materiality of ideology, Ideological State Apparatuses, and finally, the most elusive domain, the ‘spontaneous’ ideology at work at the heart of social ‘reality’ itself” (ibid., 9). I will be exploring how culture functions as a site of ideology along all three of

these axes, examining how the ideas and theories of culture are present in discourse and the material reality of political situations today.

To conduct a critique of ideology, one must determine “the elements within an existing social order which...point towards the system’s antagonistic character,” moving away from the obvious characteristics of its established identity (ibid., 7). The notion of “cultural diversity” in the United States points to a contrast between the “established identity” and “antagonistic character” of the nation. The United States is often praised for its accomplishment of diversity, claiming to be a “nation of immigrants.” As exhibited by Mark Lilla, a humanities professor at Columbia University who often writes for the New York Times, who declared: “It is a truism that America has become a more diverse country,” continuing to state that visitors from other countries “are amazed that we manage to pull it off. Not perfectly, of course, but certainly better than any European or Asian nation today. It’s an extraordinary success story” (2016). While there is truth in the notion of the United States being a diverse state, the “success story” narrative dramatically overshadows the nation’s history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, along with the continuing discriminatory policies and conditions of many in the country. The idea of the United States as welcoming and promoting diversity, the multiculturalist view, distracts from the wide array of evidence, historical and current, that highlights the nation’s perpetuation of a patriarchal, white dominant society.

In this contradiction between the nation’s “established identity” and “antagonistic character,” we also see one of Žižek’s other primary points, that “ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion’” (1994, 7). Critiques of ideology are no

longer limited by the understanding of ideology as false. A standpoint can be backed by “true” content and also be ideological. The notion of the United States being a culturally diverse nation can simultaneously be true and ideological. It is true that various groups of individuals live in the United States that look different, speak different languages, practice different religions, engage in different traditions etc. However, the factual truth of this multiplicity in no way exemplifies the achievement of the equality that this praising of diversity and multiculturalism depicts. We must give “acknowledgment of the fact that it is easily possible to lie in the guise of truth” (ibid., 8).

Another “truth” in which the discriminatory practices of culture hide behind is the reality that differences exist in our world. If not through culture, how are we to understand the variations we see in human life? However, culture is not simply used to describe the differences that exist in the world, but rather to exploit the notion of difference to create narratives that support the desired hierarchies of those dominant in society. As it is used, culture acts as an ideological tool expressing the nation’s antagonistic anxiety of the “Other.” As Edward Said outlines in *Orientalism*, the creation and discrimination toward “the Orient” does not only form the depiction of the “Oriental object,” but the “Occidental subject” as well (1994). The notion of the “Self” is dependent on the conception of the “Other.” Terry Eagleton writes that “the idea of culture is traditionally bound up with the concept of distinction” (2016, 155). The concept of culture functions similarly in the sense that it is always simultaneously defining both the culture that is “our’s” and the culture that is “their’s.” Implicitly oppositional, culture is defined through projects of exclusion, drawing lines of

difference that mirror the current systems of domination. Therefore, the identification of cultures, or identification by culture, results in the Othering of individuals who serve as the “antithesis” to a specific culture’s depiction of the “Self” (Young 1995).

# **Defining Culture and Cultural Racism**

## **Defining Culture**

To define “culture” is often the first step in an examination of the concept, however, a definition is limited in its ability to examine the ways in which the idea of culture is utilized and relates to material and social conditions. While culture is often confined to the realm of the symbolic, removing it from this enclosure allows us to see the ways in which this ideology relates to practical and material modes of existence (Eagleton 2016, 4). In *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Zygmunt Bauman describes the history of the concept of culture being used as a tool for larger colonial, national, class, and individual motivated projects (2011). While not stated explicitly, various understandings of culture reflect the various projects it has been used for.

As the definition of culture shifts throughout history it is important to track the nature of the distinctions the concept is making, as well as the purpose for such distinctions. Culture functions to create and support hierarchies, expressed in the way that the concept creates distinctions within national and global societies. Culture is used to define certain individuals, seen as ruled by their culture, while it elevates others, seen as knowledge and individuality (Ahmed 2015). When employed by dominant Western society, the term is divided in a way that it can function as both “synonymous with the mainstream of Western civilization and antithetical to it” (Young 1995, 53). Eagleton calls attention to the origin of the word culture, commenting, “we derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation” (2000, 1). Culture’s root in agriculture is crucial to

acknowledging the concept of culture as an activity rather than an entity. Culture functions as a tool for domination rather than an objective view of the world.

First, I will examine culture's shift to functioning as a tool for larger social projects in an examination of Matthew Arnold's defining of culture in *Culture and Anarchy*, looking at the ways in which Arnold's conception of culture was utilized as a tool to the nation of England and its colonial projects. Then, I will move to examine the ways in which culture functions as the new articulation of historic racist ideology.

### **Matthew Arnold and the Expansion of Culture**

In the 19th century, with the emergence of the industrial class, and the notion of a common people, understandings of culture shifted from focusing on personal cultivation to the larger idea of culture as an agent for social change, "a navigation tool to steer social evolution towards a universal human condition" (Eagleton 2016, 117; Bauman 2011, 6). Originally published in 1869, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* defines culture as the "study of perfection," the mode to which individuals will unite and better human society. For Arnold, the pursuit for perfection is "an inward condition of the mind and spirit," as well as one for "general expansion" (2007, 210). Arnold engages with culture as both a tool for personal growth as well as one that can be applied on a universal level. The double view of culture determines two projects for the concept. For Arnold, culture is to be applied to the individual self as well as England's national projects. Here lies culture's ability to be both "synonymous with the mainstream of Western civilization and antithetical to it" (Young 1995, 53). On the one hand, culture identifies the ability to cultivate and refine, and on the other hand, it identifies the "raw material for such refinement" (Eagleton 2000, 5). The cultivation

and refinement belong to England, while the “raw material for such refinement” lies in its colonial project. Arnold’s conception of the “common good” is clearly reserved for a specific identity, as his notion of a universal good is deeply tied to the nation of England and the “English race” (2007). Arnold’s focus on England and its superiority reflects his lack of interest in disrupting modes of domination, but rather using culture as a tool for the state. As he writes, “No people in the world have done more and struggled more to attain this relative moral perfection than our English race has” (ibid., 214). For Arnold, England’s “great worldly prosperity” is a reflection of its culture, its population’s “study of perfection,” rather than acknowledging any of the violence and domination that led to the colonial power’s “worldly prosperity.” A focus on nationality when defining culture results in the dismissal of a class consciousness (Wood 1996, 15). When the nation is centered behind a definition of culture, the understanding created will exist as a reproduction of the modes of categorization and dominant ideology of the state, proving ineffective for social and political change. While his notion of culture offers subtle critiques of industrialism, and therefore capitalism, expressing a desire to rid society of economic classes, it does far more to lay the foundations for “Romantic nationalism” (Eagleton 2016, 124). Culture therefore exists as both, separate from reality, therefore distanced from state politics, yet, intimately connected to national identity.

Arnold’s definition of culture reinforces the idea that there is a single good, a single beautiful, in the world, a force greater than each individual. As Marcuse points out, an understanding of culture focused on “the world of the true, the good, and the beautiful is in fact an ‘ideal’ world insofar as it lies beyond the existing conditions of

life” for the great majority of individuals and is reserved for a select few belonging to the dominant class (2007, 84). Continuing to argue that “just as each individual’s relation to the market is immediate...so his relations to God, to beauty, to goodness, and to truth are relations of immediacy” (ibid., 86). Arnold’s separation of one’s conditions to one’s ability to achieve “what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming” depoliticizes the fact that individuals are placed into conditions. There are no innate traits or virtues of people who are “chosen” to see the “good and beautiful,” it is “rather the fact that the statement ‘this is beautiful’ is binding precisely because it was uttered by them and confirmed by their actions” (Bauman 2011, 4-5). Proving that the concept of culture functions discursively, as a tool, “to persuasively help construct and confirm already present ideologies” (van Dijk 1995). Culture is invested in what is, current positionings, and the reproduction or needs of the dominant system. Bauman references Bourdieu’s *Distinctions* to comment that “culture manifest[s] itself above all as a useful appliance, consciously intended to mark out class differences and to safeguard them: as a technology invented for the creation and protection of class divisions and social hierarchies” and the reproduction of such distinctions (2011, 4). Arnold’s conception of culture is reflective of the needs of the nation state and those dominant in that society.

### **Arnold’s Culture Today**

In a study of the commentary accompanying the term “culture” into everyday use, Philippe Bénéton defines culture at its inception as defined by three characteristics: optimism, universalism, and eurocentrism (Bauman 2011, 53). We see these three characteristics in Arnold’s conception of culture and still present in many of the ways

the concept is utilized today. First, there is a character of optimism, a belief in the ability for change in human life, Arnold's desire for each individual to find perfection in the study of "good and beauty." This optimism can be spotted in both Trump's "Make America Great Again," as well as multiculturalism's phantasmatic ideal of the United States as a melting pot. Second, a universalism, the idea that culture could be applied and spread not only to the nation of England, but to the stretch of its colonial power as well. With the spread of neoliberalism and the idea of a "globalized world," this notion of universalism continues as culture acts as a framework in which to understand human life and societies. The very notion of a globalized world or cosmopolitanism is inherently invested in the Western world. Leading into the third and final characteristic, eurocentrism, "the conviction that the ideal was discovered in Europe" and was "in essence identified with Europeanization" (ibid., 2011, 53). In 2014 President Obama addressed the nation in a statement on ISIL, proclaiming, "America, our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. But as Americans, we welcome our responsibility to lead. From Europe to Asia, from the far reaches of Africa to war-torn capitals of the Middle East, we stand for freedom, for justice, for dignity. These are values that have guided our nation since its founding" (Obama 2014). From Bush's "Axis of Evil," to Obama's statements against ISIL, the notion of the United States as the "leader of the free world" plays upon the same type of exceptionalism Arnold's writing exhibits. The United States believes it has the knowledge of the "good and beautiful," as well as the responsibility to spread it around the globe. As with Arnold's admiration for England, this belief perpetuates the notion

of superiority and ignores the past and current history of violence and domination on behalf of the state.

## **Cultural Racism**

When looking at the implementation of the concept of culture, it is impossible to ignore the relation to race and racism. A debate that dominates most analyses of how culture functions as a tool for differentiation and discrimination circles the question: “Is this (new) phenomenon indeed a form of racism, or is it something different, for which perhaps another concept should be used?” (Rodat 2017, 136). Simona Rodat examines cultural racism and the phenomena associated with it in her article “Cultural Racism: A Conceptual Framework” (ibid.). On the one hand, Rodat argues that the broad use of racism has made it “an approximate synonym for exclusion, rejection, discrimination, hostility, hate, intolerance, phobia or contempt” (ibid., 132). While on the other, she outlines the argument that is made for specificity in definition and analysis for different forms of discrimination. Rodat defines “cultural racism” as when “the ethno-cultural origin is absolutized to discriminate, marginalize, segregate, exclude, or exile” groups and individuals (ibid., 134). In comparison, Rodat examines the definitions of racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia, Rodat argues for the importance of distinction between the various forms of discrimination due to differences in both concept and origin (ibid., 133). While all of the concepts refer to the “problematic relationship between ‘Us’ and the ‘Others’, [Rodat argues that] still they do not overlap” (ibid., 132). Rodat defines ethnocentrism as a global and universal phenomenon arising from a significant identification with one’s group and the belief in the superiority of that group (ibid.). This centering and elevating of one’s own group

can lead to “contempt and intolerance towards others,” but Rodat stresses this attitude as a symptom of ethnocentrism rather than a priority (ibid.). In contrast, Rodat defines the primary focus of xenophobia as the fear of anything “Other,” “hostility to all that is alien, and especially foreigners themselves” (ibid., 132). While there are distinctions to be made between biological racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia, along with the importance of knowing the contexts in which these sentiments arise, it must be noted that under the guise of culture, all three are allowed to exist and hide. Whether the lines are drawn based upon racial, ethnic, national, or cultural categories, all have been greatly shaped by the human society they exist in and should be examined for how they function to reproduce systems of domination.

### **Old Ideology, New Articulations**

Many scholars have explored this question by tracking the exit of “old,” or biological, racism and the entry of “new,” or cultural, racism. In “Is There a Neo-racism?” Étienne Balibar argues that the idea of cultural difference is simply a new articulation of racism’s project to dictate differences amongst groups while presenting these differences as established and natural (1991). Culture has been “essentialized to such an extent that it has the same deterministic effect as skin color,” executing the same “Othering” work as racism (Fredrickson 2011, 232). Martin Barker called attention to this “new racism” in his examination of the discourse and discrimination surrounding immigrants in England, specifically looking at the Thatcher administration (1981). Barker focuses on the administration’s discursive strategies, building upon a previous notion of the “threat of immigrants,” while shifting rhetorical strategies to frame the problem as one of “cultural difference.” In her article “Replacing ‘Race’,

Historicizing ‘Culture’ in Multiculturalism,” Alana Lentin tracks the transition from racial categorizations to cultural distinctions in mass discourse after World War II. Lentin argues that while the term ‘race’ was dramatically minimized in discourse, the notions of difference and superiority that fuel racism did not (2005). In a later article, Lentin argues that “racism has always adapted to the circumstances...to make its case” (Lentin 2014, 1273). Specifically looking at anti-black racism in the United States, Michelle Alexander reinforces Balibar’s notion of the adaptability of racism when she writes: “Any candid observer of American racial history must acknowledge that racism is highly adaptable. The rules and reasons the political system employs to enforce status relations of any kind, including racial hierarchy, evolve and change as they are challenged” (2011, 21). Alexander argues that while significant changes have been made to the legal framework of the United States, citing the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow laws, racial inequality persists (ibid.).

While discrimination based on culture has shifted away from a focus on race, its historical association and current implementation is highly intertwined with that of race (Rodat 2017, 137). It would be incorrect to completely separate the concepts of race and culture, as Robert Young lays out in *Colonial Desire*, culture has always been racialized, as race has always been cultural (1995). Young calls attention to the urge in the West to see “culture” as the “politically correct” way of conceptualizing race. Arguing that to separate the history of culture from colonialism and racism is simply a “fantasy” that some “in the Western academy at least have managed to” hold onto (ibid., 182). Far from being the truth, Young explains how this distinction is rather a simplified attempt to undo some of the conceptual wrongs made during colonial times.

In *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Zygmunt Bauman comments on a similar sentiment, writing that the once common custom “of explaining social deprivations by the inborn inferiority of the disadvantaged race has been replaced by a ‘politically correct’ interpretation of glaringly uneven living conditions as being the result of a multiplicity of lifestyle choices” (2011, 47). When the idea of “cultural difference” or “ways of life” masks conversations of race, it is functioning as a new discursive articulation of a historically established racist ideology. Gaudio and Bialostok argue that “Under the guise of culture, the linguistic manifestation of racist ideas has become so familiar, recurring, and generalizable that it hardly seems to count as racist” (2006, 53). The cultural framework allows implicit racism to exist in the “discourses of socially powerful individuals and institutions that are performed and circulated in public, mass-media venues” (ibid., 52).

In “The Trouble with Culture,” Rudolf P. Gaudio and Steve Bialostok argue that culture provides a justification for systems of domination: “To the extent that it is being used to perpetuate systems of domination that have their roots in racist modes of thought, therefore, culture effectively serves as a euphemism for race, even while it denies the social, political, and economic reality of racism” (2006, 53). While the study of cultural racism is fairly recent, the projects and systems of domination it perpetuates are not. Specifically looking at the history of Islamophobia, Junaid Rana focuses on the relationship and role of race, religion, and culture, concluding, similarly to Young, the impossibility of any complete distinctions from one another (2007). In the study of Islamophobia, the same goes for the distinctions Rodat presents between racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism. Islamophobic sentiment in the United States includes

aspects of these various forms of discrimination: cultural racism, in the notion of the “clash of civilizations,” biological racism, by tying Muslim identity to brown bodies, xenophobia, in the fear of the Muslim immigrant, and ethnocentrism, all sentiment existing under the name of protecting the “American way of life.” In *Brown Threat*, Kumarini Silva points out a similar pattern in the United States regarding individuals identified as associated to “the Muslim world.” Silva writes that the while the abjection of these individuals is often tied to the events of 9/11, it “comes out of a much deeper institutionalization of racism in the United States that is rooted in the history of slavery, immigration, and economic disparities that produce a form of collective social anxiety about otherness and difference” (2016, 5). Cultural racism represents the adaptation of the ideology fuelling biological racism in the sense that it does the work of “propagat[ing] differences, inequalities, discrimination and abuses of some categories of people” (Rodat 2017, 137).

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe how “everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification...often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation” (2014, 125). Therefore the idea of race and racialization in society become “‘common sense’—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (ibid.). The idea of belonging to or possessing a culture, along with dividing the world up based on these associations, has become a “way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world.” Today, the cultural framework dominates the ways in which we understand individual and group identity along with larger questions in global politics.

## **Cultural Framework and Culturalization**

### **Culture's Material Existence**

The cultural framework takes the idea of culture and applies it to historical, political, social, and economic conflicts in a way that reproduces the ideologies at work behind the concept rather than examining the conditions of a conflict. Both the questions and answers to political problems are dependent on a specific understanding and legitimacy of the notion of culture, creating a tautological argument that often masks the particular condition of a situation. As Magnus Hörnqvist and Janne Flyghed examine in their study of the discourse and policy surrounding the notion of radicalization, terrorism, and counter terrorism in Europe, conceptual frameworks applied to understanding a situation are reflected in the actions taken by the state (2012). The concept of culture frames and dictates the way in which governments are dealing with “radicalization” and “terrorism,” both terms in Western discourse that have been heavily associated with Islam. The authors identify two primary narratives circling the idea of radicalization, the “culturalist perspective” and the “exclusion perspective.” The “culturalist perspective” relies on the notion of cultural affiliation as the cause for radicalization, specifically referencing the global “clash of the civilizations” and individual cross-cultural tension (*ibid.*, 324-327). The “exclusion perspective” emphasizes a connection between social and economic conditions, specifically marginalization and unemployment, and a trend of radicalization (*ibid.*, 327-331).

Supported by the ideology behind culture, the “culturalist perspective,” assumes that “the Islamic society that exists within majority society” as the site of radicalization, building upon the notion that there are inherent and incompatible differences between the two (ibid., 326). This understanding elevates the idea that Islam determines one’s identity above all else and locks individuals into their determined “culture.” The essentialism and reductionism of culturally racist logic all individuals identifying with or identified as “Muslim” as “culturally incompatible or incapable of integrating into the dominant culture, and are therefore of concern to society” (Rodat 2017, 135). Leading policy makers to believe that for Muslim communities in Europe, “reducing unemployment or improving levels of education or housing conditions will not eliminate the cross-pressures that exist between different cultures (ibid., 327-328). Material conditions and everyday existence become overshadowed by this understanding of culture and identity. “Experts” on the subject argue for the urgent need to win “the hearts and minds” of those considered “at risk” of being radicalized (ibid., 327). Hörnqvist and Flyghed’s analysis depicts a clear separation between viewing culture versus economics as the stimulus for radicalization. This division ignores the obvious connections between the two, as well as completely ignoring the ideology of those who are studying and defining the topic. Hörnqvist and Flyghed call attention to the fact that what has been defined as the “phases of radicalization” are directly related to the steps of “counter strategies” taken by European governments (ibid., 321). Western governments’ “understanding” of “radicalization” informs the policy and policing of individuals, therefore materializing

in very real way, and when this conceptualization is so dictated by the cultural framework, specifically the “clash of cultures,” it is incredibly dangerous.

While the analysis that Hörnqvist and Flyghed produce is rich and incredibly insightful, they present these two perspectives without questioning or pushing back upon the ideologies creating these divisions and separations in society. Culture does not exist merely in the realm of ideas, it acts as the justification for an established way of existence, it “affirms and conceals” conditions of social life (Marcuse 2007, 88-89). Understanding the world in cultural framework both reduces political and socio-economic to the cultural, and constrains the terms of any debate “within a culturalist register that takes reified ‘culture’--both ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’--for granted” (Lentin 2014, 1271). A clear case study of the cultural framework and culturalization at work is the treatment in politics, media, and academia of “the Muslim world.” First, I will examine the process of culturalization, looking at Islamophobia as a project of culturalization. Then, I will examine the way the cultural framework has consumed political discourse by examining the narrative of the “clash of civilizations.” I will look to Kumarini Silva’s *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* along with Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand’s *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations* to examine the formation and reification of this culturalization of individuals, communities, and political situations.

## **Defining Culturalization**

In *Fear of Small Numbers*, Arjun Appadurai describes the current cultural framing as a “widespread, indeed global, phenomenon...whereby whole peoples, countries, and ways of life are regarded as noxious and outside the circle of humanity” (2006, 117). The process of culturalization reifies the association of the white Western

world with humanity and its “Other” as “outside the circle.” Culturalization is when the assumption of culture as natural is applied in order to create “oversimplified and homogeneously generalized” depictions of individuals and groups, most often the “non-White Other” (Ahmed 2015). The process of culturalization has both social and political consequences, usually backed by an ideological motivation to apply the label of “culture” (Ahmed 2015). The Othering of many individuals today relies discursively on the concept of culture, functioning as an essential marker of difference.

### **Islamophobia in the United States**

In “The Story of Islamophobia,” Junaid Rana defines Islamophobia as “a fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims” (2007, 149). The culturalization of Muslim individuals, as well as those who are assumed to be Muslim when they are not due to skin color, accent, name, ethnic origin, and nationality, places Islam as the definitive feature of their identity (Ahmed 2015). Iliya Harik argues that there has been a selective overemphasis in the depiction of Islam in the West “in order to generalize about [Islam as] a presumed feature intrinsic to the Arab-Muslim world” (2003). The emphasis on Islam ignores the historical, economic, political, and social circumstances of an entire region, as well as flattens all of the diversity among Muslims.

In “Islamophobia and American History,” Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg map a long and shared history of Islamophobia in the United States and Britain through a historical analysis of literature dating back to 1697 (2013). The authors note the strategic uses in literature “of Islam as the most abject in an effort to highlight the most exceptional aspects of the United States and the British Empire” (ibid., 27). The research conducted by Gottschalk and Greenberg exemplifies the way

in which Islamophobic practices have been working throughout history to depict Islam as a mark of difference and symbol of “extremity.” While it is not a new phenomenon, Islamophobic sentiments have stepped onto center stage in mass discourse in the 21st century.

Bottici and Challand discuss this discursive shift in the United States, defining it as “neo-Orientalism” and its focus on “political Islam” (2010, 56). With the end of the Cold War era, dialogues in the West regarding nation states in the Middle East quickly pivoted toward focusing on the relationship between Islam and state politics. Islam became the “new negative magnet” for a whole new series of dichotomies, at times directly and at times more covertly, such as: “Islam and democracy,” “traditional societies and modern societies,” and “community based societies and individually based societies” (ibid., 57-58). Presenting Islam in opposition to democracy reduces the complexity of any situation regarding a nation state, “as Islam, as a religion, does not have a brain, let alone a central authority or even a clear central ruling hierarchy that could actually ‘impede’ democracy” (ibid.). The hypostatization of Islam elevated its position as a system of belief to being “depicted as something that ‘governs’ the life of people” (ibid., 63).

In *Brown Threat*, Kumarini Silva discusses this elevation of Islam, arguing that global politics, rooted in a discourse of terror, have expanded upon the relation between Islam and “brown” identity (2016). Silva writes that this ‘new’ brown has shifted and expanded beyond Latinxs, settling to include a “metaphorical and somatic identity...unidentifiable and amalgamated Global South/Middle Eastern brown” (ibid., 7). In *Reel Bad Arabs*, Arab American actors discuss having a hard time getting work

not only because so few roles are available, but also, due to the fact than many times Latinx actors are getting cast for “Arab” roles due to the color of their skin (2006). Silva’s theorization of the expanding of this “new” brown identity, combining racial, ethnic, national, and economic categorizations, is reflected in Hollywood’s casting patterns. The constructed and emphasized combination of various forms of culturally racist, biologically racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic sentiment, Silva argues, has led to a general anxiety around the idea of a “brown threat” in the United States.

### ***Brown Threat***

Silva defines her project as an “excavation into contemporary anxiety—not psychological anxiety or individual anxiety but a social anxiety surrounding identity” (2016, 6). Silva describes the tumbling logic that clumps various identities into the image of a “brown threat,” following along the lines: “a militant Muslim becomes an Arab; all Arabs are brown and wear turbans; all brown, turban-wearing people are Arab terrorists; all Sikhs are brown and wear turbans; so all Sikhs are terrorists” (ibid., 31). The discrimination we see today functions by simultaneously rejecting and relying on past racisms (ibid., 27). It involves a combination of historical racist sentiments as well as reactions to current political situations, “assembling various vectors to produce a composite of the object (vs. the subject) in various contexts, including politics, media, and everyday life” (ibid., 16). Silva refers to this process as *subjugated essentialism*,<sup>2</sup> in which both the state and those who act on behalf of the state have produced an

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<sup>2</sup> Silva cites the work of José Muñoz (1999) on (dis) identification and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) on strategic essentialism to help her forms these “particular mappings” of identity, identification, and subjugated essentialism.

identity “where the brown body is constantly approached and managed as deviant and/or as a threat to the nation-state” (Silva 2016, 16).

Silva writes that while the abjection of these individuals “is seemingly always harnessed, rhetorically and ideologically, to the attacks in 2001, in reality, it comes [from] a much deeper institutionalization of racism in the United States that is rooted in the history of slavery, immigration, and economic disparities that produce a form of collective social anxiety about otherness and difference” (ibid., 5). Since 2001, the focus on this “threat” has become prominent in politics, media, and everyday life, however, the sentiment behind this focus belong to a long tradition of the heightened anxiety during turbulent times. Silva argues that the identifier of “brown,” functions not only somatically but also metaphorically when the identity of brown becomes “a moving and mutable signifier that can be applied to anybody that is considered outside the norms of social conventions” (ibid., 29). Calling attention to the fact that a focus on national security in the United States often means securing racial hierarchies both nationally and internationally. Silva writes that “long simmered below the mythologized melting pot of contemporary U.S. society...undergirding this discourse... [is] an implicit profile of those who fit within the secured nation-state” (2016, 28). The other half of the implicit profile of those who fit within the state, are those who belong outside. The “brown threat” falls into a historical pattern of the United States harnessing antagonism toward the “Other” and extending it “to any behaviors, places, spaces, and performances that challenge the hegemonic Whiteness of U.S. neo-nationalism” (Silva 2016, 29; Bayoumi 2009).

## **The United States and Its Antagonism Toward the “Other”**

As Rana writes in *Terrifying Muslims*, the current “Islamic peril...like other historical ‘perils,’ such as the ‘yellow peril’ and the ‘red peril,’” represent the new iteration of a pattern of anxiety existing in the United States being brought into focus (2011, 5). This is not to say that those racisms no longer exists, the inequality experienced by and persecution of numerous individuals on behalf of the state makes that very clear; but rather, that the state taps into previously established antagonism toward “Others” to direct the national anxiety to fit particular political conditions. Islamophobia is the current manifestation of the antagonism toward the “Other” in the United States. Moustafa Bayoumi explores this notion in *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, examining the anxiety in society that leads to culturally based hatred, citing the discrimination toward Indigenous peoples during the founding of the nation, Irish and Italian immigrants due to the practice of Catholicism, German Americans during World War I, Japanese Americans during World War II...in times of trouble or conflict anyone who is not “American” by the most conservative definition becomes suspect (Bayoumi 2009).

## **The Culturalization of Politics**

Within the cultural framework “political differences--differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation--are naturalised and neutralised into ‘cultural’ differences, that is, into different ‘ways of life,” (Žižek 2008, 140). The cultural framework applies an “eternal, metaphysical form” of culture to specific historical, political, economic, and social situations (Marcuse 2007, 86). While the idea of the “globalized world” has in part suppressed geographic distances and brought the

world into closer communication, the culturalization of politics has resulted in re-enactment of “spectacular distance” (Bottici and Challand 2010, 80). Under the rhetoric of “ways of life,” things deemed cultural are designated as “venerable cultural values,” difficult to understand and not to be criticized (Eagleton 2000, 80). Žižek suggests that the “evocation of the ‘complexity of circumstances’ serves [as a tactic] to deliver us from the responsibility to act,” working off the notion that it would be wrong to intervene in a situation without fully understanding it (1994, 5). While the concern for the complexity of situations is a valid one, the “complexity of circumstances” is used methodically as a rhetorical tool to sway the public based on when the state desires to intervene or not intervene. In an interview with Ellen Meiksins Wood, Aijaz Ahmad expresses a similar concern with the way in which culture is used. If culture assigns each group a separate form of judgement, there becomes a growing distance from any form of general judgement, along with a general a sense of responsibility due to the fact that “its cultural” (Wood 1996, 15). The culturalization of politics distances individual and political engagement by removing material conditions from the conversation in exchange for “cultural difference.”

### ***The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations***

In 1993 in an article written for Foreign Affairs, Samuel P. Huntington proclaimed that “world politics is entering a new phase,” and the “fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (1993, 22). Huntington later developed his theory into a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, arguing the new world order is one of

a “clash of civilizations” (1996). Edward Said, prominently known for theorization of Orientalism, responded, calling Huntington’s thesis “a gimmick like ‘The War of the Worlds,’ better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time” (2001). Said’s theory of the relationship between “the East and the West,” or “the Orient and the Occident,” highlights the role of politics and power dynamics (1994). In contrast Huntington’s theory emphasizes cultural differences and tendencies, writing that we should not understand countries “in terms of their political or economic systems...but rather in terms of their culture and civilization” (1993, 23). Huntington defines civilization as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have” (ibid., 24). For Huntington, “civilizations” fall under the category of “cultural entities,” therefore, when the sentiment behind Huntington’s theory is applied on a smaller scale, it is also often referred to as a “clash of cultures.” For example, the “culturalist perspective” present in Hörnqvist and Flyghed analysis of the discourse surrounding the “radicalization debate” derives from the same logic as Huntington, viewing the fundamental source of conflict is cultural (2012).

In *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations*, Bottici and Challand, call into question how Huntington’s theory gained such power in the modern “globalized” world, arguing that “the clash of civilizations” simply provided a name to a political myth that was already in the making. The authors show this through a media analysis of two French newspapers and two U.S. newspapers, tracking the use of the “clash of civilizations” notion in media (2010, 102-103). In the French newspapers, there is a large spike after 9/11, while a similar spike is expressed in the U.S. newspapers, the

“notion appears already quite strongly in 1994 and 1995” (ibid.). “On top of the Huntingtonian theme that is part of media debate in the 1990s, the 2000s see emotional sub-themes invade the core of media reports in the USA,” expressed through data on the increase in notions of “Islam and fear,” “Islam and danger,” and “Islamofascism” (ibid.).

Bottici and Challand define “a political myth [as] the work on a common narrative, which grants significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group” (ibid., 15). Bottici and Challand analysis of how the political myth of the “clash of civilizations” functions offers an outline to understanding how culture functions as a site of ideology more generally. Bottici and Challand identify the three main functions of a political myth as: reducing complexity, entrapping identity, and avoiding reality, all of which are present in the process of culturalization, whether it is of an individual or political situation (2010). The hypostatization of Islam serves as an example of the tactics of the myth to reduce complexity, entrap Muslim identity, and avoid the more nuanced reality. Perhaps the most important parallels between the use of culture in the United States and the role of a political myth is the addressing of specific political conditions in which a given group (ibid., 15). Another way of seeing how the discrimination of various cultures in the United States reflects the society’s antagonism toward and anxiety surrounding “Other.”

## **Cultural Framework on the Left**

### **Cultural Framework on the Left**

The harmful symptoms of the cultural framework do not belong solely to the political Right, as culture “is one of those rare ideas which have been as integral on the political left as are vital to the political right” (Eagleton 2000, 2). Often in the United States, the notion of racism and intolerance for difference gets relegated to a problem that belongs to a specific time and place, rather than a larger systemic problem of the nation. This makes it easy for individuals belonging to the dominant society to point “over there” to where the problem exists. While there are variations in discrimination and acts of discrimination in this country, it only serves as a distraction tactic to focus our energy “over there where things are really bad,” verses locating how racism exists in all of the country’s systems and institutions. For the Left to think of itself as separate, far from racism, is a huge misdiagnosis, which is why critical attention is needed to understand how racist ideology functions on what is deemed the liberal and progressive side of things.

Examining racist practices toward individuals with brown bodies, Silva writes that some of those practices have been and “continue to be violent, especially in the decade after 9/11, [but] there is also a corollary (seemingly benign) cultural appropriation and racism that is manifest in the U.S. popular culture” (2016, 8). The creators of *Reel Bad Arabs* find this same duality in their analysis of representation in media. Finding that Arab characters in Hollywood films are represented as either a “violent terrorist” as a source of comedic relief (2006). These two representations are

reflective of the multiple ways in which the anxiety around difference materialize. On one hand there are clear acts of violence and hatred, while on the other hand, the same investment in the notion of difference and the reproduction of the dominant is presented in a softer way, as acts of “tolerance” and “celebrations of diversity.” Because there is a shared dependence on the same logic of difference, moments when the United States is seen as “post-race(ism)...are illusionary and deeply ephemeral” (Silva 2016, 5). Liberal discourse calls great attention to such moments as evidence that things have changed, often ignoring the overwhelming amount of evidence that suggests otherwise. As Matthew Arnold called for the “study of perfection” to heal England’s troubles, currently, elite Leftist discourses in the United States call for multiculturalism as the answer for both domestic and foreign troubles. Silva writes that race in the United States is becoming “both increasingly central and increasingly invisible,” the need to locate the racist sentiment behind the left’s understanding and use of culture in order to call attention to the ways in which the same systems of categorization and discrimination are being reproduced and reinforced (2015, 5).

### **Critique of Multiculturalism**

In a world framed by culture, with the “clash of cultures” serving as the main source of conflict, multiculturalism claims to be the solution. Yet, because multiculturalism itself exists within a cultural logic, it at best only addresses the symptoms of larger structural problems. Multiculturalism presents itself as “liberal tolerance and support for communities’ rights to independence and public acceptance,” when in reality, it “acts as a socially conservative force” reproducing established systems and static conceptions of culture and identity (Bauman 2011, 46). Žižek

argues, a politics based on the notion of cultural “tolerance” creates a barrier for “further conceptual progress” (2008, 141). The logic behind multiculturalism homogenizes cultures as whole and distinct, rather than choosing to examine the many frictions within each group, community, society. Staying loyal to the understanding of culture as predetermined and “natural,” multiculturalism assumes “that the loyalty of the individual is a question answered in advance by the irrefutable face of belonging” to a culture (Bauman 2011, 47). Rather than genuinely engaging with the different ways in which individuals and groups live in and view the world, these differences are seen as pre-determined and static, dismissing the existence of collaboration and mixture.

In the notorious debate between Slavoj Žižek and Sara Ahmed, the two question the role of multiculturalism today. Ahmed argues that the notion of a liberal multiculturalism has itself become the hegemonic trait, causing backlash, expressed in the arguments around reverse racism and freedom of speech (2008). Ahmed sees the notion of “diversity as an ego ideal conceals experiences of racism, which means that multiculturalism is a fantasy which supports the hegemony of whiteness” (2008). Individuals and organizations want to present themselves as good, so present a multiculturalist front, even if racist practices lie below. Because multiculturalism and notions of diversity conceal experiences of racism, and still uphold the hegemony of whiteness, multiculturalism is the new face of racism. In his response to Ahmed, Žižek argues “that multiculturalism is hegemonic, only [in] that it is hegemonic as ideology, not that it describes the reality of predominant social relations” (2009). The “civil

racism” that Ahmed is trying to call attention is only possible under the guise of multiculturalism as an anti-racist idea.

In her interview with Aijaz Ahmad, Ellen Meiksins Wood poses the question of the usefulness of the concept of multiculturalism. Ahmad comments on the “absolutely necessary tensions between universality and particularity,” arguing that such tensions cannot be resolved through theory but rather “can only be lived, and the hope is that they shall be lived...in productive relation” (Wood 1996, 14). A conscious recognition of both universality and particularity are part of human social life, therefore, the recognition of difference and the concept of a multitude of cultures and educational and political plans to acknowledge such multiplicities of experience in social life cannot be refuted. To this point, Ahmad comments that one cannot be opposed to the base concept, but rather the “way this concept has come into play in the United States” (Wood 1996, 15). The acknowledgment of difference in human life through an exploration of culture is not intrinsically bad, however, the way in which the concept has been examined and articulated is more reflective of dominant positions/motivations in society than reality. Rather than resist or change the historically positioned categorizations of human life that exist in society, a logic of multiculturalism presents a “a levelled out notion of multiplicity and difference” which reflects previously established divisions in society (Wood 1996, 15). Multiculturalism we see today in the elite liberal sphere represents the “widening gap between cultural politics of difference and the social politics of equality” (Fraser 2009, 72).

## **Multiculturalism and Establishing the Other**

Bauman refers to multiculturalism as the practical consequence to the ideology of culture, supporting “separatist and therefore antagonistic tendencies, thereby making even more difficult any attempt at serious multicultural dialogue” (2011, 45). The way multiculturalism has come into practice, while stating to create coexistence between differences in society, in reality reinforces the separating lines between the two. Schools, like most state institutions, promote and reproduce the state’s notion of the “ideal citizen” and the inclusion of multiculturalist practices do little to shift this (García-Sánchez 2013). Looking at how the dynamics of cultural difference play out in everyday interactions in schools, Inmaculada García-Sánchez examines the contradictions present in multiculturalism, writing “these contradictions are part of routinized, banal exchanges, and therefore...are (re)produced in quotidian, seemingly insignificant interactions (ibid., 485). While events such as “Multicultural/Diversity Day,” seemingly promote inclusivity and acceptance of all culture, they simultaneously reinforce the notion that “culture” and “difference” as things that are “embodied in the Other” (ibid., 484). The dynamics of placing the role of “the Other” on specific students goes beyond the moments that are dedicated to diversity and carry over to day to day interactions. García-Sánchez identifies two primary patterns of treatment as being “tokenization” and “membership by ethno-prototype” (ibid.). In acts of tokenization, individuals are treated as the representative of an entire cultural group. Membership by ethno-prototype is the “extreme formulation of ideal membership to a national, cultural, or ethnic group which precludes multiple allegiances and erases hybridity and different levels of belonging to multiple groups” (ibid.). Under the guise

of multiculturalism, tactics of Othering are placed upon students. In these processes the individual is erased and replaced by pre-determined cultural groups, the ways in which dominant society categorizes and interprets difference.

In "Replacing 'race', Historicizing 'culture' in Multiculturalism," Lentin exposes the reality in which the same power structures remain:

The policy of multiculturalism itself was not historically the outcome of the struggle of 'minority communities' for greater recognition, as it is often supposed. On the contrary, multiculturalism can be seen as an institutional policy that, by replacing an analysis of the link between racism and capitalism with a focus on the importance of cultural identity, depoliticized the state-centered anti-racism of the racialized in postcolonial societies. (2005)

While multiculturalism claims to be progressive, and therefore indicative of positive change, many of the historical conceptions and uses of culture, tied to racist, colonial, and imperial systems of domination, remain prevalent today. The proliferation of discourses of multiculturalism as "the only viable frame both for political mobilization, but also for governmental and market control has infected society in general" (Lentin 2014, 1280).

## **Multiculturalism and the Market**

In 2017, American Eagle, a United States based clothing company, came out with a denim hijab that was exclusively released for sale on their website. The company followed the trend of others such as Nike, an active wear company, Pantene, a hair product company, and L'Oreal Paris, a cosmetics company, in embracing the image of the hijab in their advertisements and products. While some reacted negatively

to American Eagle's hijab, claiming that they would boycott the company, the great majority of responses were overwhelmingly positive, many praised the company for taking "an extra step towards inclusivity." The New York Post started their response with the question: "Has the hijab become as American as Apple and blue jeans?"

Following with: "American Eagle Outfitters thinks so, considering the breakout star of its Fall 2017 campaign is a Somali refugee turned American model sporting a denim hijab" (Pesce 2017). While huge brand names showing their "approval" of the hijab, including it into the America market, is progress in terms of recognition and representation, the focus on economic incentive highlights its weakness as a sign of political change.

American Eagle's release of the hijab was labeled "the latest sign that inclusivity sells" (ibid.). The New York Post reported on the release, commenting, "Marketing to Muslims feels long overdue, considering the global Muslim population spans nearly 1.7 billion people, with 3 million living in the U.S. And Muslim shoppers spend an estimated \$230 billion a year on clothing, according to the 2015-2016 State of the Global Islamic Economy Report, which is projected to grow to \$327 billion by 2019" (ibid.) Selling out in less than two weeks, the hijab was very well-received by shoppers, one commenter wrote, "We can only hope its success sends a message to more brands to embrace inclusivity and modest fashion. There's clearly a market for it" (2017). The economic incentive highlights the fact that companies are willing to make "political statements" if there is "clearly a market for it." These images promoting multiculturalism appear to signify progress in attaining equality, "while materially speaking the gulf between social classes assumes ultra-Victorian proportions"

(Eagleton 2016, 156). As Theodor Adorno theorizes in *The Culture Industry*, “what parades as progress in the culture industry...remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture” (1991, 100).

Halima Aden, the model wearing the hijab, stated in a video for *Vogue Arabia*, “Every little girl deserves to see a role model that’s dressed like her, resembles her, or even has the same characteristics as her” (2017). While, Aden’s statement is correct, that children deserve to have role models that extend past the image of white individuals, if the conditions of political and economic inequality, along with everyday safety, remain the same, a politics of representation is not enough. Wajahat Ali, an attorney and op-ed writer for the *New York Times*, commented, while this type of marketing in the mainstream is a step in the right direction of inclusivity, he was “worried that they also perpetuate stereotypes;” continuing to state that “companies need to engage with Muslim communities on the grassroots level...They need to advance the diverse narrative of what it means to be an American Muslim, over simply jumping on the bandwagon and using a fetish item to sell clothes,” citing the long and troubling pattern of fetishizing Muslim women through the hijab in the Western media. A politics of representations means little if power relations remain the same.

A politics based on recognition cannot be the final stage, recognition is not equality, equality in material conditions and lived experience is equality (Bauman 2011, 95). Bauman writes that “any struggle for recognition is doomed for failure so long as it is not supported by the practice of redistribution gets lost along the way”

(ibid., 46). As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” these problems based on the inequality of both material conditions and perspective framing can not be dealt with by metaphorical change (2012). Projects attempting to fix problems of inequality should be focused on redistribution rather than representational and metaphorical change.

Eagleton comments on questions of culture and the market, writing the aim of advanced capitalism is: “to preserve inequality while abolishing hierarchy. In this sense, its material base is at odds with its cultural superstructure. You do not need to proclaim your superiority to other peoples in order to raid their natural resources, as long as by doing so you maintain the material inequalities between them and yourself” (2016, 155). The inequalities existing in capitalism can continue to exist and hide behind advertisements of “acceptance.” But as Eagleton notes, just because those dominant in society no longer need to “proclaim superiority” does not mean that material inequalities are not being maintained.

In an article in *Teen Vogue* about the release of the hijab, Avery Matera wrote that the recent incorporation of the hijab showed the “new age for the fashion industry in becoming more accepting of hijabs and people’s choice to wear them” (Matera 2017). In recent years the hijab has been brought into the focus of many political debates. It has been used as a visual symbol in the West of both the oppression of women in Muslim communities as well as freedom and individual choice in the United States. Like many cultural objects, the hijab has been used to take a step away from the material conditions or motivations behind a situation to serve as evidence for the dominant narrative. When the United States wants to present Islam in a negative light,

the hijab signifies the oppression of women, but when the United States wants to be seen as accepting, the hijab signifies the individual's right to choose (Silva 2016, Žižek 2008). While there is something to be said for representation, Silva argues, when “representations of multicultural utopias become staples of visual media...the increased prevalence and reality of marginalization and coercion of bodies of color as un-American objects that need policing becomes less obvious” (2016, 5). We cannot look to media as a reflection of change, not when the real conditions have not changed or are getting worse. Žižek writes about the way “media structure our perception of reality in advance and render reality indistinguishable from the ‘aestheticized’ image of it” (1994, 15). Having artifacts dedicated to multiculturalist notions change our perception, we see commercials and school pamphlets that have a diverse array of faces and we see progress.

Adorno discusses how not only material products but ideas and concepts can too become commodities in the culture industry. Multiculturalism itself is a product of the culture industry, without a tie to any specific “saleable object,” people buy into the idea of “diversity” and “inclusivity” as representatives of what is good and progressive (1991, 100). Yet, these conceptions build of the notion of “celebrating difference” fuse “the old and familiar into a new quality,” the same system lives on with a new face (ibid., 98). The institutions and corporations that exists as representations of dominant society have no interest in altering the system that benefits them.

L’Oreal Paris, a cosmetics company, recently included a hijab-wearing model in one of its campaigns, marking “the first time a woman dressed in the head wrap worn by some Muslim women has fronted a major mainstream advertisement for hair

care” (Pesce 2017). The model, Amena Khan, withdrew herself from the campaign after backlash arose over tweets she posted in 2014 that were deemed anti-Israel. Khan released a statement apologizing for the tweets, writing, “Championing diversity is one of my passions, I don’t discriminate against anyone...I’ve decided to step down from this campaign because the current conversations surrounding it detract from the positive and inclusive sentiment it set out to deliver ” (Al Jazeera 2018). The “current conversations” she is referencing involve extremely important questions that need to be asked about a very serious and ongoing political conflict in our world. Multiculturalist advertisements focussing on inclusivity and diversity aim to be apolitical in order to reach the widest market, not to spark political engagement. Representation in the market fails to serve as a good location for political and social change considering that no culture, custom, tradition, belief, identity etc. “can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness” (Adorno 1991,103). Within the culture industry, those who hold the most power have their interests met first, which means more money and power for those who already possess money and power.

### **The “Failure” of Multiculturalism**

The failure of multiculturalism to do what it claims has not gone unnoticed, expressed by many nations as “crisis of multiculturalism” and, specifically in the United States, in the debate about the role of culture and identity in politics (Chin 2017). Sara Ahmed references these sentiments when she discusses the popular feeling “that multiculturalism went ‘too far’...we celebrated difference ‘too much’” (2008). In Europe, nations are expressing anti-immigration sentiments through the narrative of the

“crisis of multiculturalism,” arguing that the clash of cultures is too strong and individuals are unable to assimilate (Chin 2017). Stemming from a multiculturalist logic, there is a debate currently in the United States of the role that identity and culture should play in politics. This sentiment is a reflection of the belief that culture and identity are concepts that should exist outside the realm of politics. The general ways in which we conceive of identity, such as race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, gender, class, and sexuality, are reflections of our political, economic, historical, geographical, and social positioning. To return to Stuart Hall’s definition, identities are simply the “names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within [narratives]...not an essence but a positioning”(2003). Culture and identity need to be recognized as preconceived fictitious notions that are reified in the categories, privileges, oppressions, and material realities individuals experience. Identity and culture are only effective concepts when they are used as political tactics to acknowledge and resist systems of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

### **Post-Politics**

The culturalization of our world has resulted in a post-political logic where political consciousness is replaced with oversimplified apolitical narratives (Žižek 2008, Lentin 2014). Historically racist ideologies hide behind the guise of culture as “natural” and beyond human control, distracting us from locating how the systems of domination in our society function. The notion of culture diverts attention away from the fact that “empire and gender and race are central to the structure of differences” in the United States (Wood 1996, 15). Political situations are lifted out of their historical socio-economic context, resulting in the erasure of direct political action. Politics existing in a cultural framework are void of a political solution, due to the fact that culture “is itself the illness to which it proposes a cure” (Eagleton 2000, 31). When identity and politics are consumed in a logic of culture and cultural difference, there leaves no room for political solidarity.

### **Recultivating Culture**

In her article “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous writes on the liberation of woman:

Not that in order to be a woman-in-struggle(s) you have to leave the class struggle or repudiate it; but you have to split it open, spread it out, push it forward, fill it with the fundamental struggle so as to prevent the class struggle, or any other struggle for the liberation of a class or people, from operating as a

form of repression, pretext for postponing the inevitable, the staggering alteration in power relations and in the production of individualities. (Cixous 882)

Rather than abandon the concept of culture and the groupings it creates entirely, for fear of falling into “post-race” logic, we need to “split it open, spread it out, push it forward.” Reflecting upon the history of the concept of culture and its close ties to systems of domination allows us to “split it open” and see the various ideologies at work. Seeing culture as functions not only in the realm of the superstructure, existing in the realm of ideas, but at the base as well, having direct effects on the lives and interactions of individuals, allows us to “spread it out” and see the various ways in which this concept shapes reality. Once the pervasiveness and scale of this ideology is recognized, we can move to “push it forward” and form new political solidarities.

Originally posed by Audre Lorde, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable” (1984, 111). As seen in the practices of multiculturalism, working within the system and its set of categorizations results in the reproduction of hierarchies existing in that particular system. A form of change or solidarity invested in the categorizations created by the dominant society, means for a narrow possibility of change. The notion that the world is divided into cultures that all individuals belong to distinct cultures serves as the “perfect preventative antidote to the cross-societal political alliances that could be fostered in this age of heightened connectivity” (Ahmed 2015). We need to form political solidarities that surpass the confines of static notions of culture and identity.

In *Violence*, Žižek suggests the forming of a solidarity of struggle, forming relations on the basis of shared experience versus essentialized categorizations (2008, 157).

Appadurai argues that focusing on ideas of civilization rather than civilizations as such, we recognize that such totalizing battles “can occur within the great traditions and regions of the world and not just across them,” (2006, 118). Rather than focusing on the various cultures in the world, we should turn our gaze to the concept of culture itself to help us locate the specific struggles within each society. Understanding how culture functions as a site of racist ideology allows us to better understand how oppressive systems are functioning within society in the United States.

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