



Routledge Research in Gender, Sexuality, and Media

NORTH AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN ARTISTS TALK BACK

ASSERTIONS OF UNINTELLIGIBILITY

Kenza Oumlil



“Kenza Oumlil’s book is a compelling interdisciplinary analysis of gender and cultural representations of Muslim diasporic communities in North America. The text orchestrates an intellectual dialogue between U.S. black feminists and Muslim diasporic artists, providing a prescient intersectional framework with which to discuss issues of identity and self-representation. Oumlil makes a perceptive intervention that exposes the hegemonic cultural apparatus while also highlighting alternative aesthetic practices that challenge and subvert it.”

Ella Shohat, author of *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*

“Can Muslim women represent themselves? Kenza Oumlil’s *North American Muslim Women Artists Talk Back: Assertions of Unintelligibility* is the sustained record of her critical reflections on this vital question. The result is a pathbreaking momentum in rearticulating the possibilities of constructing discourses of resistance to domination—a focussed and deeply satisfying read.”

Hamid Dabashi, author of *Contemporary Art, World Cinema, and Visual Culture: Essays by Hamid Dabashi*

“*North American Muslim Women Artists Talk Back* describes an infiltration. Artists creep up on the mainstream, ambush and unsettle what they can, when they can. Oumlil shows us that the mainstream is no easy place for Muslim women artists to navigate. Riding with them through the currents of patriarchy and white supremacy will fill us with wonder. We will gasp and laugh and shake our heads in dismay and it will all be worth it.”

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North American Muslim Women Artists Talk Back

This book focuses on the ways in which North American Muslim women artists “talk back” to dominant discourses about Muslim identity and work to counter mainstream stereotypes and representations. It examines the possibilities of constructing discourses of resistance to domination.

Against a backdrop of dominant media representations of oppressed and passive Muslim women, the media interventions of the exceptional women artists, whose voices are showcased in this book, demonstrate that Muslim women are diverse and autonomous agents who have, historically, and continue contemporarily, to fight against all forms of injustice including those that seek to circumscribe their realities and experiences. To explore expressions and articulations of alternative discourses, this book analyzes the media texts of exceptional women artists: the stand-up comedy of Palestinian-American Maysoon Zayid, the cinematic interventions of Iranian-American Shirin Neshat, and the television comedy of Pakistani-Canadian Zarqa Nawaz. Using a methodology consisting of a textual analysis grounded in the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory and informed by gender studies and alternative media research, the analysis is supplemented with semi-structured interviews with the artists.

This book is suitable for scholars and students in Gender Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, and Politics.

Kenza Oumlil is an associate professor in Communication at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco. Oumlil holds a PhD in Communication from Concordia University in Montréal, Canada. She has published widely on representation, gender, and media, including articles in the *Journal of North African Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Journal of Middle East Media*, and *Al-Jazeera English*.

Routledge Research in Gender, Sexuality, and Media
Edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, University of Notre Dame

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First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Oumlil, Kenza, author.

Title: North American Muslim women artists talk back : assertions of unintelligibility / Kenza Oumill.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2022. |

Series: Routledge research in gender, sexuality and media |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022007868 (print) | LCCN 2022007869 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780367263669 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032284965 (paperback) |

ISBN 9780429292927 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Muslim women--North America. | Women--Identity. |

Muslim women in art. | Muslim women in literature. |

Muslim women in motion pictures.

Classification: LCC HQ1170.O96 2022 (print) | LCC HQ1170 (ebook) |

DDC 305.48/697097--dc23/eng/20220223

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007868>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007869>

ISBN: 978-0-367-26366-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-28496-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-29292-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429292927

Typeset in Sabon
by Newgen Publishing UK

In memory of my mother, Zhor Medaghri Alaoui



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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the contributions of Shirin Neshat, Maysoon Zayid, and Zarqa Nawaz, who have provided the inspiration for this writing. I thank each of them for her generosity and patience. I wish to acknowledge the support of my mentors and colleagues. I am forever grateful to Yasmin Jiwani for being an amazing source of inspiration and strength throughout the years, and for her support and encouragement. My ongoing conversations with Yasmin about the praxis of research have deeply informed this project. For the depth of our conversations, and her generosity of spirit, I will always owe the greatest debt of gratitude to Yasmin. John Downing has my eternal gratitude for his incredibly generous and instrumental support from the very early stages of this book project. I could not have written this book without the most dedicated support and encouragement from Yasmin and John. I would like to thank my home institution, Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, for providing me with a university research grant to support this project. Thanks to it, I was able to benefit from the precious help, at different stages of this project, of my dedicated research assistants: Yasmine El Housni, Yasmine El Abdessalami, and Ayah Isbayene. Special thanks go to my colleagues at Al Akhawayn University: Nizar Messari, Abdelkrim Marzouk, Eric Ross, Paul Love, Zaynab El Bernoussi, Stefano Bigliardi, and Claris Harbon. I wish to acknowledge the Council on Middle East Studies at Yale University and Jonathan Wyrzten particularly for inviting me to give a talk on the topic of my book project: the media interventions of North American Muslim women artists. I would also like to thank Merouan Mekouar, Leslie Jacobson, Jaafar Aksikas, and Nadia Guessous for their gestures of solidarity and support within and beyond the walls of academe.

To my family, my most heartfelt thanks go to my husband Ahmed Khallaayoun for his love, kindness, and encouragement. Special thanks go to my father Ali Oumlil for his instrumental support and encouragement throughout my academic journey. I am also grateful for my other constant companions through this writing: my children Zhor and Amine; my

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siblings Bahya, Tachfine, Samia, and Ilias; my stepmother Nouzha Amor; my brother-in-law Ghassan Murad; my niece Laila; and my cousin Nezha Alaoui. Lastly, everything that I have written was built upon the foundations of feminist thought and action that my mother, Zhor Medaghri Alaoui, instilled in me. May she be remembered as a woman who dedicated her life to gender justice.

Introduction

What is my impetus for continuing to research the discursive manifestations of race politics, which are of course gendered, after all these years? My interest in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses has continued to inspire my academic work for many years now, as sadly the current socio-political climate still indicates that these issues are not resolved; they are intensifying in the current conjuncture.

When I was still living in the United States during the climate of 9/11, I witnessed the implementation of measures like the USA PATRIOT Act and the war on Afghanistan. Having met and known Muslims who had been randomly detained, interrogated, and deported (all of this within a “legal” framework enabled by the USA PATRIOT Act), I was experiencing the very real consequences of hatred. During these times, what the media was presenting was surreal – with phrases like “why do they hate us?” making headlines that were diluting the complexity of these issues, erasing Western and US responsibility, as well as framing Islam as the enemy. In this context, I actively sought out alternative discourses that counter hate speech. My attempt to heal some of the “spirit injury” (Wing, 1990) that I would experience with every encounter with racism and sexism led me to take interest in online videos, music, and blogs that propose realities beyond discursive dehumanization. This interest subsequently provided the foundation of my doctoral work conducted at Concordia University in Canada.

Today, writing from Morocco where I live and teach communication and gender, we are witnessing another moment of intensified race politics that has a transnational impact, making the terrain of alternative media all the more critical. It seems imperative to study the ways in which targeted communities participate in the construction of their own identity and lift some of the burdens of representation – which have real consequences on their everyday lives. The recent airport scrutiny procedures in the age of President Trump, the US laptop ban on flights departing from a list of eight Muslim countries, racial profiling, the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the Canadian context, shown for example in the January 2017 Quebec City mosque shooting, among other innumerable incidents of racism and hate crimes have serious consequences on the affected communities. At the same

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time, Islamic State operates to construct a narrow, religiously distorted understanding of identity and to regulate “proper” enactments of Muslim identity. With the US departure from Afghanistan, withdrawing its last remaining troops in August 2021, and the Taliban’s resurgence to power, we are reliving 20 years later a long-standing mediated war. In this and other ways, 9/11 is still present as discourses of Islamophobia persist, as we have just addressed in a special issue of the *Islamophobia Studies Journal* (see Oumlil, 2021). By no means have we reached a post-racial and post-Islamophobia world. 9/11 was a defining moment and a turning point that still bears relevance today. As I argue in this book, the paradox of 9/11 is that although it exacerbated discourses of fear and hatred that have real material consequences, including ongoing legislation that outcasts Muslims, it also opened up doors for Muslim voices and artists in response to a demand for their perspectives and voices in the public sphere. I argue in this book that a new genre of representations emerged in the 9/11 context (e.g., in Chapters 3 and 4, I situate Zayid and Nawaz’s emergence in the public sphere as part of this 9/11 genre of representations). Thus, the more current transnational context of Islamophobia (i.e., the fear and hatred of Muslims; Rana, 2007) carries the traces of a post-9/11 world. However, I note that anti-Muslim sentiments preceded the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, based on previous studies that demonstrated that these representations existed even prior to 9/11 (Karim, 2000; Said, 1978; Shaheen, 1984, 2001; Yeğenoğlu, 1998).

Muslim women in particular occupy center stage as Western liberal discourse places them as the markers of Muslims’ place in the continuum of modernity (Razack, 2008). Indeed, wars, occupation, and indefinite detentions, to cite but a few implications, have been conducted by using the rhetoric of liberating Muslim women, a type of race thinking that Leila Ahmed has previously called “colonial feminism:” feminist discourse deployed strategically to serve imperial and colonial goals (quoted in Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784).

Within this context, how do North American Muslim women “talk back” to dominant discourses about their identity? The term “talking back” is used in reference to bell hooks’ (1989) seminal work on race, gender, and representation, and is defined as acts of talking that move the speaker from an object to a subject position.

In this book, I explore the creative works of three significant women artists. In searching for a niche that was meaningful and that spoke to my reality, I came across these three artists, among others. What struck me about these women was their position as charismatic artists whose work has gone beyond the borders of their physical and cultural nations. This appeal rests on what they are saying and the realities of those who are located in these other nations and in similar situations.

This book, titled *North American Muslim Women Artists Talk Back: Assertions of Unintelligibility*, examines the expressions and articulations

of counter-hegemonic discourses on the part of Middle Eastern and South Asian women in the United States and Canada, with particular attention to race and gender. In order to look at processes of “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to dominant media discourses, I selected the following case studies for analysis: (1) the stand-up comedy of Maysoun Zayid, (2) the visual art and films of Shirin Neshat, and (3) the films and the television comedy (*Little Mosque on the Prairie* 2007–2012) created by Zarqa Nawaz. These case studies were selected because they constitute long-term interventions to alter the dominant media sphere within the realm of popular culture, and benefit from a wide reach within particular “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980).¹ As well, they are widely disseminated in sites other than mainstream avenues and media.

My central argument is that these works are constitutive of a discourse of resistance. Taking the lead from bell hooks (1989), these acts can be categorized as “talking back.” What I want to emphasize here is that these representations signify a re-articulation of identity and a call for a redistribution of symbolic power. In the process of circulating their perspectives, the artists themselves have faced considerable backlash, pointing to the ways in which their discursive interventions function as assertions of unintelligibility – one of the core concepts of this book. I have defined assertions of unintelligibility as the statements that marginalized people make in support of their rights, and which are typically met with hostile responses from the dominant social order. In the persistent endeavor to utter their voice and difference in a general climate of hostility, their assertions are difficult, but not impossible, to understand. For the “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980) that share similar experiential realities, their speech finds resonance. Within a hegemonic setting, their defense of their point of view is often dismissed as sheer nonsense through one of three mechanisms: (a) silent speech, (b) speech constructed as insane, (c) and punishable speech.² Therefore, through this concept I have attempted to bring to the fore the question of legitimacy of speech – that is, how the social location from which one speaks, and the public to whom that declaration of self is communicated, allocate meaning to the very act of self-representation. Drawing from the work of postcolonial and alternative media scholars, I have defined self-representation as the storytelling and discursive productions of marginalized people whose voices have been historically evacuated from dominant narratives (Baltruschat, 2004; Juhasz, 1995; Loomba, 1998; Rodriguez, 2001; Shohat & Stam, 1994; Trinh, 1989).

My interest in language stems from an understanding of words as legitimizing and underpinning actions. The constructed or real imminent dangers sustained in a climate of fear, like in the 9/11 era and the more recent Trump years, lay the foundation for an enduring “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998). The systems created in the situation of crisis/emergency/exception (like the policies that legitimate surveillance and indefinite detentions on those grounds) have outlived temporality. This is not to deny the causality

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of economic and geopolitical factors but to emphasize that wars and policies are justified via discursive means.

Given that Muslim women are predominantly constructed as passive victims in need of saving and the prevalence of negative representations of Muslims, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and South Asians, it becomes imperative to think about how to respond and counter these portrayals, particularly because they have real material consequences. In this book, I examine how the selected mediated interventions “make do” from available stocks of materials from popular culture and the dominant media sphere. Sustaining discursive resistance involves reaching out to “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980), as any given text has different meanings for different cultural groups. Ultimately though, I am interested in the power of the imagination to offer other worlds of possibility and incite visions of freedom, which might then materialize in collective action.

My book conducts a textual analysis to unpack the meanings embedded in each media text, supplemented with individual interviews with the artists involved. The book additionally incorporates in the analysis of audience responses that have been posted in the public domain, such as blogs and reviews. It examines resistance in language as it occurs through the performance/performativity of identity. It is through the performance and “(re) presentation” of identity that the selected artists circulate meaning. They are immersing themselves in the public domain and in a mediated discourse in order to gain visibility.

Furthermore, the book locates moments of “talking back” in terms of the spatio-temporality of the emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses. Drawing from Gramsci, this work conceptualizes what I refer to as the conditions of emergence of alternative discourses. I examine the content and form of the selected interventions and theorize their tactical interventions by situating them within the wider context of the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic system. The purpose of my work is to derive from my case studies the constitutive “moments” of counter-hegemonic emergence.

The analysis I present details the ways in which the selected artistic productions emanate from the *cultural* margins, which while they are connected to the economic margins or works produced by those who are marginalized as a result of class, are not necessarily synonymous to it.

Postcolonial theory indicates three stages to mental decolonization and taking voice, which do not always occur in a clear-cut sequential manner. The first stage is a “counter-sensibility” to one’s “own” representation in the mainstream media – referred to as “aberrant” (Stam & Spence, 1985) and “oppositional readings” (Hall, 1981) of dominant media texts, and described as sense that is not part of common sense; the reader in this case generates an understanding of the media text that goes against the dominant perspective. The second phase is being able to articulate/de-construct the dominant construction: to identify and define it. This is where studies of dominant discourse are crucial. Postcolonial theory and critical feminist