Muslim American youth and post-9/11 Islamophobia
Interfaith activism and the limits of religious multiculturalism

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Introduction

The heightened Islamophobia that has been stoked in the US by Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and election, as well as his anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies, intensified the Islamophobia that was consolidated after 11 September 2001. Muslim American communities have been on the frontlines of struggles against racism and nativism since the events of 9/11. Young people who belong to the “9/11 generation”, in particular, and who have come of age after 2001 live in a moment when Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern Americans are viewed as the enemy within. Under the PATRIOT Act (2001) and with the expanded powers given by the US state to law enforcement and intelligence agencies to “preempt” terrorism, Arab, South Asian (particularly Pakistani), Afghan, Iranian, and Muslim Americans in general have been subjected to surveillance as well as detention and deportation. Yet the racial othering and surveillance targeting Muslim and Arab American youth did not begin on 11 September 2001. This Islamophobia and Arabophobia (or anti-Arab racism) is not exceptional, but situated in the longer, global history of US imperial policies in West and South Asia and in relation to other, domestic processes of criminalization, surveillance, and elimination of racialized peoples by the US state.

This chapter is drawn from an ethnographic study, conducted in Silicon Valley in northern California between 2007 and 2011, in the South Bay Area and in the nearby cities of Fremont/Hayward that have a large Afghan population (Maira 2016). The study explores the political subjecthood of young people targeted in the War on Terror and in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism. It is based on my interviews and fieldwork with college-age Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth (largely Muslim but also including non-Muslims) – some of whom but not all were involved in political organizing. The larger project focuses on how these youth turned to rights – especially civil rights and human rights – to respond to Islamophobia, racism, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and how they simultaneously grappled with the limits of rights-based activism. In this essay, I focus on the ways in which responses to Islamophobia in the 9/11 generation have often been based on a framework of liberal interfaith
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Youth activism and civic engagement, and explore the implications of this turn to interfaith organizing for Muslim American political subjecthood and national identity.

I argue here that liberal interfaith programs are often a funnel for Muslim American youth into state-sanctioned “moderate” politics and a means to contain more “radical” critiques of Islamophobia that would situate it in the imperial history of the US and its global policies of expansion, containment, and hegemony. This political repression has occurred in a post-civil rights moment and in the presumably post-racial era signaled by the election of Barack Obama. After Trump’s election, there was a similar push for interfaith coalition-building in response to intensified Islamophobia, which I will demonstrate generally strengthens a framework of national inclusion and liberal multiculturalism. While these coalitions have in many instances helped generate cross-racial solidarity, which is commendable and important, they have also helped produce what I call a religious multiculturalism embedded in “proper” politics for Muslim American youth.

Post-9/11 civil rights activism

After 9/11, many national Muslim American organizations that were focused on political mobilization launched, or expanded, civil rights campaigns in response to the heightened discrimination faced by Muslims, Arabs, South Asians and “Muslim-looking” people (especially turbaned Sikh males) in the US “Know Your Rights” workshops were organized by coalitions involving Muslim, Arab, and South Asian American activists and lawyers who tried to do grassroots outreach to communities at mosques, gurudwaras (Sikh temples), and community spaces, as well as to youth. Given the mass detentions, deportations, and surveillance in the War on Terror, and the violations of constitutional rights under the USA-PATRIOT Acts I and II, this was certainly a necessary and strategic response to the crisis experienced by those defined as enemies of “homeland security” (I want to acknowledge that I participated in and organized some of these outreach workshops and campaigns myself). For example, the “Special Registration Program” established in 2002 required Muslim males who were non–citizens from 24 Muslim countries (and also North Korea) to register with the federal government, resulting in mass detentions and deportations—an infamous event many are not aware of today when discussing Trump’s anti-Muslim/Arab/African travel bans. By 2010, the language of Islamophobia had shifted more consistently toward focusing on the enemy lurking within the US at a moment when Obama publicly announced his strategy for ratcheting up the “Af-Pak” war; Deepa Kumar (2014, p. 172) argues this necessitated a national and moral panic about “homegrown terrorism” to legitimize the War on Terror.

The turn to civil rights activism by Muslim Americans was described as a “new civil rights movement”, situating it in a genealogy of US civil rights and pivoting on African American struggles. This “Muslim rights” movement is focused on racial, and in this case, religious inclusion and I argue it helps produce a Muslim American politics legible in neoliberal democracy. The language of civil rights is one that generally resonates with the younger generation of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan Americans who find in it a framework for linking their critique of Islamophobia and racism to a longer history of struggles by other groups in the US (Kibria 2011, p. 74). For example, Aisha, a young Palestinian American woman who grew up in Union City (near Fremont), was very involved with both domestic and global Arab American activism as a student and after graduating from college. She translated Muslim and Arab American activism into a national discourse of civil rights, commenting, “African Americans had their struggle, they fought for their civil rights, and now Muslim Americans have to do the same. I think it’s
about democracy.” In a sense, Muslim Americans were the canary in the coalmine after 9/11, and so provided an opportunity for redemption of US democracy at a moment of mounting international critique of violations of civil liberties of Muslim and Arab Americans.

The turn to civil rights is a powerful theme in the production of cross-racial solidarity and is propelled by pragmatic concerns with addressing discrimination and profiling of Muslim and Arab Americans as well as the political imperative of resisting violations of civil liberties in the name of “national security” (Sirin and Fine 2008, p. 110). This has entailed a push for civic engagement and greater involvement with electoral politics and in the public square. For example, a survey in 2005 by the Muslim Public Affairs Council (2005, p. 4) found that a full 99% of Muslim American youth believed that national Muslim organizations should “engage in dialogue with the government and the general American public to get our rights”, and 94% thought that “Muslims should be involved in the American political process ‘even though they may disagree with the government’s foreign policy.’”

The latter finding, where young Muslim Americans acknowledge their dissent against the US state’s overseas policies while simultaneously looking to the nation-state for bestowing rights, hints at the tension in the demand for “rights” if circumscribed by national “dialogue” and inclusion. Commenting on the shift to greater “civic engagement” by Muslim Americans, Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine (2008, p. 110) cite a remark by a young Muslim American man that illustrates how post-9/11 civil rights activism can shore up a nationalist narrative: “Especially in this nation, when one strives to do something, anything is possible.” While not all youth engaged in civil rights campaigns are as celebratory of the American Dream, the turn to civil rights is fundamentally driven by an appeal to the nation-state as the arbiter of rights, individual as well as collective, and often by an assumption that liberal democracy is the horizon of political mobilization in response to Islamophobia and racial violence. For some youth I spoke to, however, political mobilization is framed in part by domestic civil rights but not confined by it, as they also engage with a discourse about imperialism and national sovereignty for overseas homelands, often via human rights, as I elaborate in the larger project (Maira 2016).

The interfaith movement

In tandem with the focus on “Muslim civil rights”, Muslim Americans became increasingly active in a growing interfaith movement since 2001, including interfaith youth campaigns that emerged on college campuses and rapidly spread across the US since the early 1990s (Patel and Brodeur 2006). Muslim Americans who felt attacked or isolated after 9/11 often threw themselves into organizing interfaith programs on campus and in mosques and community centers (Afzal 2015). Interfaith youth programs generally involve various kinds of workshops, forums, and volunteer activities that include Muslim, Jewish, and Christian youth and attempt to connect the “Abrahamic traditions”, through a paradigm that emphasizes commonalities among the religions of “the book” (i.e. the Bible). Interfaith youth activism has thus become a significant site for alliance-building, circumscribed by the parameters of religion, and also a platform for education about Islam. In some cases, however, it has also legitimized acceptable Muslim American identities and “proper” coalitional politics in the War on Terror.

The focus on education and outreach by Muslim Americans is not itself problematic but it is apparent that the turn to liberal interfaith politics is part of a national strategy for managing race relations via a discourse of religious inclusion. One Muslim American community leader recalled that he told an advisor to President Bush after 9/11, “The president has to visit a mosque. You have to say ‘churches, synagogues, and mosques.’ When they say ‘Judeo-Christian,’ you
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Inclusion for Muslim Americans is thus framed through religious pluralism and as a strategy for winning political recognition for a faith-based community that belongs to, and is not outside, of the US multicultural state—a demand that in and of itself is not problematic, but only if it brackets a critique of the state beyond the domain of religion or culture. The problem is that in the post-9/11 context the interfaith movement is built on the same tenets of liberal inclusion that contain politics through liberal civil rights activism. Liberal, religious multiculturalism has been presented as a solution to the problem of Islamophobia, racial violence, and military occupation, obfuscating or containing a critique of the geopolitical imperatives of warfare and structural issues of race and racism. The “problem” Muslim Americans face is reduced to issues of inter-religious and inter-cultural fear, understanding, and acceptance that can be resolved on the terrain of culture and faith alone, without considering state violence.

The irony is that liberal multiculturalism is perceived as a failure for both the left and the right: for conservatives and nativists in the US as well as the UK, liberal multiculturalism is blamed for undermining the “civic integration” of Muslims and “providing a space for militant radicals” or even for fostering violence or riots among Muslim youth in recent years (Esposito 2011, p. xxv; Modood 2002, p. 206). Yet religious multiculturalism, or multi-faithism, is sanctioned by the state and buttressed by the simultaneous trend within the Muslim American community, and among youth, emphasizing Islam as a religion that crosses national, ethnic, and racial boundaries. This pan-Islamic universalism contributes to a discourse of pluralism within Islam, but also to a discourse of Islam within religious pluralism, aligning it with liberal multiculturalism. The issue, however, is that this notion of ethnic diversity and cross-racial affiliation is often limited to forms of solidarity and boundary crossing that do not challenge the state and expose the root causes of Islamophobia.

Interfaith “dialogue” projects involve state interventions in religion and the anointment of selected religious representatives and religious streams, thus promoting certain expressions of Islam and particular Muslim leaders (Hicks 2013; Aidi 2014, pp. 72–74). Arun Kundnani (2014, p. 77) points out that in the US as well as in Europe, a “state-sponsored Islamic leadership” has been established with the “multicultural recognition” of “new religious identities”, describing this as a shift to “multi-faith-ism” that creates a paradox for presumably secular states who now “endorse an official version of Islam.” Furthermore, liberal-progressive foundations and other groups have invested funds in interfaith projects; it is significant that youth are seen as “bridge builders” within this model of civic integration and inclusion (Ahuja, Gupta and Petsod 2004, p. 17; Afzal 2015, pp. 168, 173).

Liberal interfaith coalitions, I argue, represent the boundaries of permissible responses by Muslim Americans to the War on Terror and critiques of Islamophobia. For example, Malaika, a Pakistani American woman who was born in Santa Clara and grew up in San Jose and Tracy, California, talked about coordinating an “interfaith club council” at her college and organizing events such as a lecture series for “Islam awareness week” and workshops such as one on “debunking stereotypes” about “women in Islam”. She commented wryly that the event was a “boring one, but it was necessary”. That is, if (non-Muslim) Americans just knew more about Islam and Muslims, they wouldn’t fear, hate, or suspect them. But it is also worth noting that Malaika describes these programs as “necessary”, for Muslim American youth have to grapple
with fraught political choices in a climate of external as well as internal regulation of “proper” or safe politics – what statement going beyond the framework of liberal rights will not land you in prison? What action of cross-racial is really worth the risk?

The politics of performing a “good” or moderate Muslim identity is fraught in a context in which the state sanctions liberal civil rights and Muslim American activism while criminalizing other forms of protest politics or political speech as anti-American or pro-terrorist, leading to self-regulation as well as internal divisions within Muslim and Arab American communities (Maira 2009). My analysis of “good” and “bad” Muslim political subjectivities builds on Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004, p. 15) argument in Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror, where he observes that after 9/11:

President Bush moved to distinguish between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” . . . “bad Muslims” were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that “good Muslims” . . . would undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them.” . . . But . . . unless proved to be “good”, every Muslim was presumed to be “bad.” . . .

The disciplinary framework of the good/bad Muslim subject is a bait-and-switch that regulates what constitutes acceptable politics and youth activism but it is also increasingly contested in the post-9/11 culture wars, including by Muslim American youth, activists, and organizations.

Many interfaith programs tend to propound ideas of liberal “tolerance” and “dialogue” that are embedded in assumptions about multicultural/multifaith belonging and also neoliberal democracy, having grown out of the George W. Bush administration’s effort to push social services out of governmental agencies and into privatized “faith-based initiatives.” It is apparent that the growing “interfaith industry” that has burgeoned since 9/11 has drawn on liberal notions of pluralism to produce a religious multiculturalism. In the multicultural, post-racial state, the institutionalized “grammar of diversity” conceals deeper issues of political and economic inequality and focuses instead on cultural, and now religious, “diversity” (Ahmed 2012, p. 13; Melamed 2011). The problem is that the investment in religious multiculturalism is often at the expense of antiracist critiques of racial violence against South Asian, Afghan, and Arab Americans, and sometimes also at the expense of progressive inter-racial solidarity.

The growing interfaith movement has significant implications for cross-racial and cross-class alliances as well as fissures in Silicon Valley. Iman, a Palestinian Muslim American who grew up in Santa Clara and attended Granada Islamic school, observed that interfaith alliances in the local Muslim American community often took precedence over solidarity with other immigrant groups. She lamented the lack of inter-racial solidarity with Latino/a youth during the high school walkouts and immigrant rights marches and mass protests by undocumented immigrants in 2006, observing:

The Hispanic community in my high school was big and they organized a walk-out event when everyone left campus, and that was huge. And it would have been nice if the Muslim community made a bigger effort to participate. Because the Hispanic community in San Jose is huge. But instead I feel like we did outreach to like the Jewish community, or the Christian community. And we’d go to churches and synagogues and that was it.

Iman’s comment struck me because it suggested that Muslim American youth at her high school in Santa Clara, and possibly also the Muslim American community in Silicon Valley at large, missed an important political opportunity to forge an alliance with the immigrant rights.
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movement in the area, failing to connect the issues that Muslim (Arab, South Asian and other) immigrant communities were facing after 9/11 to those of Latino/as and others subjected to profiling, incarceration, and deportation. In general, interfaith and also liberal civil rights activism in Silicon Valley has not always tackled broader questions of police brutality or immigration that are considered outside the bounds of a proper or “moderate” Muslim American politics (though the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged at tail end of my research sparked more radical acts of solidarity between Muslim American activists and black and brown communities protesting police violence).

There is also the vexed issue of alliances and fissures between “immigrant” Muslims (or Muslims of South Asian, Arab, Afghan and Iranian origin) and African American Muslims, in the context of the growing migration of Muslims to the US after 1965 from South and West Asia, including a class of highly educated, Muslim professionals (Abdullah 2013). Where does solidarity with Black struggles fit within interfaith coalitions and Muslim American youth activism? Inter-racial as well as class tensions have sometimes marred immigrant Muslims’ relations with African American Muslims, who are the largest US-born group of Muslims and constitute approximately one-third of the Muslim population (there is also a growing Latino/a Muslim community). Relations between Black and immigrant Muslim communities are a key issue for Muslim American youth and a point of contention for Muslim Americans at large (Jackson 2011).

At the same time, it is apparent that in the San Francisco Bay Area, there are several sites in which cross-racial affiliations are produced between immigrant and Black Muslim communities, among youth and more generally, including on the terrain of civil rights or social justice organizing. Prominent in these interracial alliances are Muslim community leaders such as Imam Zaid Shakir, an African American Muslim cleric and one of the cofounders of the Zaytuna Institute in Berkeley. Laila, a Pakistani American who grew up in Fremont, recalled an event organized by the MSA (Muslim Student Association) on her campus focused on the war in Iraq, featuring Imam Zaid Shakir and two Iraq war veterans, as well as a collaboration between the MSA and the Black Student Union for Black History Month. For Laila, such events highlighting and creating linkages with African American youth demonstrated how to “promote more unity” among Muslim Americans of diverse racial backgrounds, via a critique of war and state violence. The affinity between Muslim American youth from immigrant communities and other US-born Muslim Americans partly grows out of a shared cultural and generational experience and also an understanding of being a racial minority and growing up with US racism (Aidi 2014; Daulatzai 2012). This new, cross-racial Muslim youth culture is also apparent in the ethnically and racially diverse Ta’leef Collective, a community organization in Hayward, which focuses on outreach to youth and converts and which fosters cross-racial community building via popular culture.

“Green” activism and political censorship

A key element of many interfaith projects, especially those that attempt to perform a “good” Muslim citizenship, is volunteerism and community engagement compatible with neoliberal democracy. Mariyam, a Libyan/white American woman who was involved in a local chapter of the Muslim American Society since she was in high school, had participated in their interfaith youth projects which included cleanup programs with the Catholic church and the “Muslim Green Team”. The paradigm of interfaith volunteerism is part of a growing “green Muslim” movement that has connected faith-based community service tied to ideas of environmental stewardship and entrepreneurship. In and of itself volunteerism are not problematic, but it is the collusion between these activities with neoliberal policies of privatizing social services and
the channeling of youth into “safe” politics, rather than more radical organizing, that warrants critique. Neoliberal governmentality and the erosion of social welfare provides the context in which interfaith programs provide yet another arena for the promotion of the virtues of productivity, autonomy, and self-reliance (Duggan 2003). This is compelling for Muslim Americans who can prove through public community service and volunteer initiatives that they are, indeed, model minorities or virtuous Americans.

“Green” activism, it seems, is more easily wedded to liberal social justice models of interfaith youth organizing than antiwar and anti-occupation politics. For example, Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, a second-generation (Black) Muslim American, is the author of *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet* (2010), which has inspired regional networks of Muslim Americans who participate in volunteer projects. Abdul-Matin’s core mission is to “rebrand” Muslim Americans as environmental activists and “moderate” political actors, not extremists, stating:

> Look, everyone wants to know where the moderate Muslims are. They’re everywhere. They go to work, they go to school. Frankly, they’re boring – which is why the media doesn’t do any stories about them . . . I’m highlighting Sarah the Muslim who believes in recycling . . . I hope my book will re-label Muslims from terrorist to activist or, even better, environmentalists. I want Muslims to be known as the people who save water.  
> (Ebrahimji 2010)

While not all Muslims who engage in cleanup or recycling projects necessarily want to be interpellated as “moderate Muslims” who “save water”, these emerging forms of activism and especially volunteerism have come to define “moderate” political subjecthood for Muslim Americans. Of course, in the War on Terror, there is an understandable anxiety among Muslim American youth about being labeled “radical” given state surveillance and the moral panic about “radicalization” of Muslims, especially youth. But as a young CAIR activist from the Bay Area commented thoughtfully:

> Interfaith alliances have always been a big part of CAIR. Muslim Americans didn’t know how to open their doors to others ten years ago. But now the entire focus is on outreach, and in and of itself, it’s not the solution. Clearly there needs to be more work done . . . I think the more institutionalized this outreach is, the less useful it is.

The interfaith movement has been increasingly institutionalized in liberal spheres such as the academy and non-profit organizations where interfaith dialogue has been promoted, and also, notably, in programs related to Israel/Palestine. In these interfaith (and intercultural) programs, involving the triad of Muslims, Christians and Jews or the dyad of Muslim-Jewish or Arab-Jewish dialogue, analyses of political conflict and structural inequity are displaced outside of the realm of the state to the domain of culture or religion, confined to what Mamdani (2004) calls “culture talk”. Intercultural and interfaith dialogue has achieved a preeminent role in the post-9/11 political field as the legitimate frame for discussing political questions, erasing issues of sovereignty, colonialism, and dispossession in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

However, I found that tensions related to Middle East politics and the systematic censorship of the Palestine question often ruptured interfaith coalitions on college campuses, forcing the question of anti-Arab racism to the surface and interrupting a liberal consensus. For example, Jenaan, a Palestinian/Korean/white American woman from San Jose, recalled that in the interfaith student group she belonged to at San Jose State University, some of the Jewish
American students did not want Muslim youth to wear clothing or jewelry with the colors of the Palestinian flag. Jenaan protested:

I was, like, “This isn’t the issue we’re discussing. I can wear whatever I wanna wear!” But they didn’t understand that, they were just, like, “Oh, you can’t wear red, you can’t wear black, you can’t wear green.” You know, the colors of Palestine. I was like, “I’m going to wear whatever the hell I want to wear! You can’t tell me what not to wear.”

The campus interfaith program became a repressive site for Jenaan when the expression of her Palestinian national identity was censored and the “issue” suddenly became one of regulating permissible Arab political identities, however symbolic (arguably Jewish students would not be asked to remove the Star of David, although it is also an element of the Israeli flag, let alone the colors blue and white; this would be considered anti-Semitic yet this anti-Palestinian racism was considered acceptable). This vignette illustrates the ways in which interfaith alliances limit political solidarity and how difficult it is for a politicized or nationalist Arab American identity to be inserted into religious multicultural alliances – as also politicized or anti-imperialist Pakistani or Afghan identities. It could be said that the green of environmentalism is more permissible for Muslim American youth politics than the green of “red-black-and-green” Arab/Palestinian nationalism.

Many interfaith youth programs do address the “conflict” in Israel–Palestine (notably, the word occupation is rarely used, let alone colonialism or apartheid) but only through a model of Jewish-Muslim/Christian dialogue. For example, Sabina, a young Indian American woman from Santa Clara who was active in the MSA, had participated in an interfaith program on Jewish-Muslim relations for high school students, organized by Abraham’s Vision; she said that the discussion got “pretty heated” when the participants began speaking about the “Israel–Palestine issue”. She recalled that the organizers did not want youth to get into a “political discussion” or “arguments” and steered them away from the topic. In their view, she said,

The point is to use this space as to way unify and see what are possible solutions for the future. They wanted us to relate our identity being a Muslim or a Jew and why those identities made us sympathize with this issue . . . They made it seem so simple and they knew how to speak. That would make us so mad because we didn’t know how to respond.6

Sabina added that the program received an award at the time from President Clinton, underscoring the ways the US state actively supports and promotes interfaith projects that steer youth away from critiques of Middle East politics and US foreign policy and funnels them into depoliticized spaces focused on religious and cultural identity talk. According to youth I spoke to, the Palestine question is also situated by interfaith programs in a discourse resting on the fallacy of neutrality or not “taking sides”.

But in a charged political field in which a pro-Israel narrative has long represented the mainstream of US politics and media, an uncritical or “neutral standpoint” is actually a deferral to the norm. The erasure of issues of racial violence, imperialism, and dispossession via a liberal interfaith model is what some progressive Muslim American critics have called the “faithwashing” of the politics of “apartheid and occupation” in Israel–Palestine (Saeed 2014). It is clear that a political analysis of modern conflict and warfare in Israel–Palestine, in particular, and also generally in West or Southwest Asia, is elided by focusing on presumably incommensurable cultural and religious differences that breed “hate”, between Muslims and non-Muslims.
The deferral of anti-imperial and antiracist politics has to be situated in a context in which, as Steven Salaita (2006) and others have pointed out, protests of Israeli state policies, including on college campuses, are viewed as automatically anti-Semitic and outside the bounds of not just freedom of expression but also civil politics. Student activism for Palestinian rights is routinely subjected to disciplinary measures and censorship by campus administrators as well as off-campus partisan groups and activists are often blacklist ed and defamed. The systemic repression of Palestinian/pan-Arab nationalism and Arab American politics has occurred in tandem with US interventions in the Middle East and ongoing, unconditional support for Israel (see Abraham 1994; Orfalea 2006; Said 2000). Given the centrality of the Palestine question for Arab American politics and also for pan-Islamic activism in the US, an Arab American political identity or anti-Zionist Muslim identity fits uneasily within multicultural identity politics in the US, which can accommodate only a de-politicized Arab or Muslim American identity (Naber 2008). It is also apparent that in some cases, Arabs are subsumed within the master category of “Muslim” and that the conflation of Muslim-ness with Arabness has been simultaneously consolidated and unsettled after 9/11. This is one of the tensions that troubles the production of interfaith coalitions that privilege religion and undermines their relationship to antiracist, antiwar movements, including to campaigns involving radical Muslim Americans.

Clearly, not all youth who participate in interfaith programs on campuses or in community settings support a liberal discourse of diversity that evades a political critique of dominant nation-alisms, and some vigorously challenged this move, as Jenaan’s and Sabina’s observations suggest. I also want to acknowledge that there is interfaith organizing around the country that has focused on progressive, cross-racial, grassroots organizing; for example, the Inner-City Muslim Action Network in Chicago, which addresses urban poverty and police brutality and engages in direct services, social justice organizing, and arts programming (see Aidi 2014, p. 186). There is also a growing progressive interfaith movement that has mobilized in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement opposing Israeli occupation and racism, including groups such as Sabeel and American Muslims for Palestine that have been involved in campaigns for divestment from Israel by churches. However, the deflection of radical critiques of the state through liberal interfaith activism is important to consider as a sanctioned response to Islamophobia that foregrounds liberal models of religion as the basis of proper political subject-hood. Muslim liberalism thus displaces radical racialism in the multicultural economy of difference and the “post-racial” era.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by noting that there have indeed been cross-class and interracial alliances challenging the parameters of acceptable Muslim American politics and liberal civil rights activism, forged by progressive Muslim, South Asian, and Arab American activists and involving Latino/as, African Americans, and Muslim Americans, particularly in movements focused on immigrant and civil rights in San Francisco and Oakland. There have also been anti-imperial and antiracist coalitions forged with antiwar and Black Lives Matter activists and Native Americans, such as those led by young activists with the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) chapter in San Francisco in the 2000s (an organization which later morphed into the Arab Resources and Organizing Center which is deeply involved in joint struggles). One prominent instance of cross-ethnic coalition building in Silicon Valley has been the solidarity of progressive Japanese American activists with Muslim and Arab American communities since 9/11 in San Jose, as well as in northern California in general, reflective of the larger post-9/11 alliance forged by Japanese Americans across
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The nation. In most instances, this Muslim/Arab-Japanese American solidarity connected the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II to the contemporary demonization and profiling of Muslim Americans as enemy aliens, and in some cases, it has also extended to opposing the war in Iraq and supporting Palestinian and Arab American activists targeted for surveillance and deportation (Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress September 11 Committee 2007). Thus the turn to civil rights has been accompanied by transnational solidarity with others suffering from US imperial violence, and contestations over the which forms of politics are “civil” and who is human, which subjects deserve solidarity or the recognition of rights and which groups must be evicted and exceptionalized to save the nation.

Notes

1 I want to point out that the MPAC survey was conducted among youth (14–25 years) attending the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America, who were strongly affiliated with Islamic institutions (Muslim Public Affairs Council 2005, p. 2).
3 For example, see http://green-muslins.org.
4 The US state has since World War II increasingly adopted an official, liberal multiculturalism so that the state is not only the “guarantor of rights” but also assumed to be antiracist, even as it directly or indirectly suppresses movements that demand genuine racial justice (Reddy 2011, pp. 194, 210).
5 For example, this issue came to a head in Muslim American media and activist circles when a delegation of Muslim American leaders spent a year at the Hartmann Institute in Jerusalem. One of the delegates concluded that despite her previous reservations of censorship of Palestine in interfaith programs, the dialogue with Jewish Zionists convinced her to be less critical of Zionism, in an article published in Time during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and Gaza in summer 2014 (Choudhury 2014).
6 Sabina is referring here to the Unity Program of Abraham’s Vision for high school students, focused on Jewish–Muslim relations, Islam, and Judaism. See www.abrahamsvision.org/programs/unity-program.html.
7 See the extensive report by Palestine Legal (2015).
8 I wish to thank Saree Makdisi for this point about Arab-ness as dissolving into the “master category” of Muslim-ness.

References


