



Palestinian, Arab, American, Muslim “Looping Effects” of Categories and Meaning

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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the power and messiness of identity categories and their meaning. Inspired by the term “looping effects” of philosopher Ian Hacking, I discuss the intricate processes of looping and shifting meanings of categories within and between the realms of the *public* and the *personal*. I argue that the notion of looping can contribute to the way we think about the relationship between categories and those being categorized, or in Hacking’s words, the relationship between “names” and “the named.” Due to a wariness of the discursive and linguistic determinism of poststructuralist approaches, I intend to show the intricacy of the “subjective in-between” and the urgency of agency by focusing on one young woman’s unpredictable negotiation of various categories, such as Muslim, American, Palestinian, and Arab, categories placed on her by others as well as herself at different times and in different places. Drawing further on Hacking’s work, the paper also reflects on the ways we as scholars are “making-up” people through the use and promotion of certain categories, and how people categorized embrace and/or resist these in dynamic ways throughout different scales, from public and political spaces to the intimate scale of the personal.



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Introduction

Within the social sciences and the humanities, including academic fields such as Geography, Anthropology, English, and Cultural Studies, much attention has been given to problematizing the notion that categories and identities have essential and inherent meaning. There has been a primary focus of efforts to deconstruct power relations and hierarchies and to demonstrate the shifting and multiple meanings of identities. Poststructuralist approaches have employed the methodology of deconstruction, analyzing the production of discursive meanings and the discursive effects of categories. Others, such as existential and phenomenological approaches, have analyzed the diverse meanings categories have in personal lives as a result of a dynamic interaction between social and personal worlds. Throughout my own research on Muslim lives and identities in Sweden and the United States, I have been drawn epistemologically and methodologically to the latter approach. Through person-centered ethnography (Linger, 2001; Mansson McGinty, 2006), which recognizes the urgency of personal meaning and understanding, the complexities of lived realities emerge and are materialized into messy transcribed interviews where the subject/person/self, and the various categories used, are moving in many directions. The meanings of categories keep shifting on different scales, between personal identity and public representations, between self-experience and self-representation.

I think of this paper as a reflection piece—an essay on the messiness of categories and representations and their meaning, and the processes of making sense of who one is in the world through available categories. The piece has been further inspired by my reading and engagement with the idea of “looping effects” of philosopher Ian Hacking, and how I understand it within a broader analytical framework. In previous work (Mansson McGinty, 2006), I used it to analyze identity negotiation in the context of conversion to Islam; in this paper, I want to explore it further in the context of my more recent projects on Muslim American identities. This paper is also partly a result of an increased wariness regarding my own use of various categories and the ramification it has in my work and writing. I am here mostly concerned with the meaning-making of the categories of “Muslim,” “Arab,” and “Palestinian” within the realms of the *public* and the *personal* and the looping effects within and between them. As such, I reflect on some observations also made in two recent articles (Mansson McGinty, 2012; 2014). This paper explores the looping effects within the “subjective in-between,” the intermediate space of human interaction (Jackson, 2013, 24). Drawing on two interviews with one young woman, Dalia², I argue that such looping effects of meaning come to surface during the interpersonal dialogue of the interview. Further, the paper highlights how looping effects are place-based.

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Scholarly Production of Muslim Geographies

It has been argued that the prevalence of poststructuralist thought in the social sciences and the humanities has led to linguistic, symbolic, and discursive determinism with respect to accounts of subjectivity, agency, and meaning. For example, within feminist and gender studies, the notion of subjectivity has been primarily explored through the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, leaving little room for the complexity of human agency or personal meaning (cf. MacNay, 2000). From a poststructuralist or Foucauldian perspective, agency is understood as merely discursively formed and determined—a discursive construct—dismissing processes that pertain to people’s agency in constructing their own subjectivity. No kind of determinism—biological or cultural—is intellectually satisfying when understanding social life, as it treats one specific factor/realm as exclusively decisive. Feminist scholars from different disciplines have offered a variety of critiques and theoretical approaches to go beyond the impasses of such cultural and discursive determinism (Abu Lughod, 1993; Chodorow, 1999; MacNay, 2000; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Although working within different theoretical school of thoughts, they advocate for a more experientially oriented (phenomenological) perspective which treats agency and subjectivity as necessarily lived and embodied.

In contrast to interpretative approaches with its exclusive focus on public symbols and representations, person-centered ethnography “draws attention to the linkage between the circulation of representations and diverse, textured human lives” (Linger, 2005, 15). The prevalent trends of interpretative and discursive approaches in many social science disciplines, such as Geography and Anthropology, often dismiss psychological and biographical realities. Overlooking the personal meaning-making may reify notions such as the cultural (culture), the social (society), and the spatial (space), namely, treating such abstract phenomena as homogenous and bounded objects, as real and concrete “things” that can be directly felt or experienced, influencing everyone equally, rather than looking at them as complex social processes which are negotiated by individuals in different ways. Person-centered ethnography, through in-depth interviews and observations, explores how people see themselves in the world, and how they appropriate and engage with social and public categories, symbols, and representations. As such, it is a method and methodology which lends itself nicely to social scientists who are interested in attending to and exploring the dynamic processes of looping, taking both the discursive and personal meaning into account.

Drawing on Hanna Arendt’s term “subjective in-between,” anthropologist Michael Jackson elaborates an existential anthropology which looks at “that which comes into being in the intermediate space of human interest and interaction” (2008, xiv), an approach that avoids crude oppositions of culture and individual (or the subjective and the objective), as well as reducing human existence to any such term as culture, society, or mind (xii). Phenomenological and existential anthropology, as well as psychological anthropology, longstanding traditions that

draw on philosophy and psychology, have provided different methodological and theoretical approaches to examine the experiential lifeworlds and the “dynamic *relationship* between circumstances over which we have very little control and our capacity to *live* those circumstances in a variety of ways” (Jackson, 2008, xi).

I understand looping effects as emerging out of the relationship between social circumstances and the human capacity to live them—the *capacity* to reflect, act upon, resist, comply and make sense of oneself in the midst of them. In Jackson’s words, “...the intersubjective must be considered in relation to the intrapsychic, since we cannot fully understand the nature of social interactions without understanding what is going on in an actor’s mind” (2013, 6). This approach acknowledges psychological and mental processes, and, hence, a personal world is not understood as a direct product or an effect of discourses. From this perspective, a person’s engagement and understanding of a category, or discourse, is not a straightforward process. Categories do not have inherent meaning, rather they are infused by particular personal experiences and emotionally charged memories. Or put differently, an identity category becomes meaningful first when infused by biographical particularities and emotional life. It gains life and becomes object of reflection in the subjective in-between space of social interaction, such as the in-depth interview (cf. Linger, 2005).

Attention to looping effects does not only encourage us as social scientists to critically reflect on the relationship between social categories and personal subjectivity, but equally important it urges us to interrogate the very categories we rely on in our research—the social categories we impose on people in our analysis of their social worlds. Simply put, people categorized are talking back to us. The increasing scholarship of Muslim identities and geographies have significantly contributed to discussions on Muslims’ negotiation of identity, gender, space, dress, experiences of discrimination, and public perceptions and representations (for example, Aitchison, Hopkins, and Kwan, 2007; Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera, 2008; Gale, 2013; Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Falah and Nagel, 2008; Mansson McGinty, 2014; Phillips, 2009)³, but I wonder if our work might run the risk of reifying the “Muslim” category unintentionally, despite the frequent assertions about diversity and multiplicity. No doubt, researching Muslim identities and geographies is “an unavoidably political enterprise” (Gale and Hopkins, 2009, 1); researchers most often find themselves writing within and against Islamophobia (Mansson McGinty et al., 2013). However, encouraged by a political motivation to challenge prevalent anti-Muslim discourses and the stigmatized “Muslim,” scholars rely on and perpetuate the very same identity category (cf. Mills and Gökariksel, 2014). Overall, the academic knowledge production of Muslim geographies appears to be highly constituted within the backdrop of Islamophobia. In a similar

³ This is only a very small sample of the increasing body of work on Muslim geographies. Although I’m restricting the references to geographical work, I believe the same argument can be made about other non-geographical work with the social sciences.

vein, Amy Mills and Banu Gökarişel argues that “Muslim identities are often discursively given a status as already existing, as something to study, and as distinct from others” (2014, 905). Much of the work on Muslims in the West, in journal articles as well as books, my own included, start with accounts of Islamophobia, the construction of Muslims as “Other,” anti-Muslim rhetoric, references to war-on-terror, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and July 7, 2005, or Huntington’s “clash of civilizations.” Although these accounts are crucial and I am far from denying the pervasiveness of Islamophobia—we know all too well of its power and prevalence—I believe we should start asking questions such as: What happens when the reference to Islamophobia becomes an inevitable reference, an intellectual reflex? What happens to our research narrative when Islamophobia becomes the dominant backdrop through which we write about and understand Muslim lives? How does it shape the questions we ask? Does Islamophobia always have to be featured as the prevalent political backdrop when we discuss Muslim identities? Could it be that our scholarly accounts of Islamophobia and Muslims’ experiences of discrimination overshadow other salient identities and discourses, and consequently reify the category of Muslim? By imposing certain identity categories (Muslim) and prevalent discourses (Islamophobia) on the people we work with and study, we inevitably “make-up” people (Hacking, 2007). Moreover, I wonder if it would be more productive, and allow for further anti-racist coalition-building, if we were to treat Islamophobia as a dimension and product of a much larger complex field of racism.

In line with Hopkins (2009) and Nagel and Staeheli (2011), I ask what other identities are important to our Muslim informants? Hopkins (2009, 38) writes: “Approaching Muslim communities through acknowledging other identities—such as age, disability and locality—may assist in the reimagining of Muslim individuals and families along more diverse lines.” Similarly, in their piece on political mobilization amongst Muslim Arab American activists, Nagel and Staeheli (2011) critique the tendency in both scholarly and public discourses “to fixate on Muslim identities at the expense of others” (2011, 453), urging “current scholarship to look beyond ‘Muslimness’ as the sole, defining feature of Muslim politics” (454). “Muslimness” *means* different things, to different people at different times and in different places, as we will see below.

Looping effects

Philosopher Ian Hacking (1995, 1999, 2007) has offered an interesting discussion about categories or classifications and their interaction with the people classified, a dynamic process he calls “looping effects.” I draw on his notion of looping effects fully aware that I use it rather liberally and may be taking it in directions and giving it meanings beyond what the author himself had in mind. Although Hacking is primarily interested in classifications such as “multiple personality,” “autism,” and “obesity” and not those of gender, race, or ethnicity, he

acknowledges that the same kind of thinking can be applied to these as well (Hacking, 2007).

Hacking (ibid) argues that the human sciences, including the social sciences, psychiatry, and clinical medicine, create classifications of people, or “kinds of people,” and are “making up people” (2007, 285, 293) through a complex framework of five interacting elements: a) classifications, b) people, c) institutions, d) knowledge, and e) experts/professionals. He further identifies ten engines of discovery that generate knowledge and the making up of people: count, quantify, create norms, correlate, medicalize, biologize, geneticize, normalize, bureaucratize, and lastly, resist and claim new identity. The last three elements are of particular interest to this paper as they speak to the looping effects of categories such as “Muslim” and “Arab”—religious/ethnic/racial categories produced and reified through political, scholarly, and media discourses—and how people categorized as such resist these, in Hacking’s words, “resistance by the known to the knowers” (Hacking, 2007, 306). The kinds of people classified interact with the classification, claiming “rights to their own knowledges,” (Hacking, 1995, 382) causing looping effects and the emergence of new categories, or the inscription of new meaning into existing categories.

In his piece *Kinds of People: Moving Targets*, Hacking argues against Nietzsche’s “linguistic idealism,” represented by the idea that “more depends *on what things are called* than on what they are” (Nietzsche cited in Hacking, 2007, 294). Hacking refers to his own philosophical approach as a type of dynamic nominalism as he is concerned about the interaction between names and people—“how names interact with the named” (ibid, 294). As he continues, names do not work their magic by themselves, but rather names are only one part of the intricate process of the classifications of people, how they influence the people classified, and how classifications change as a result. Thus, the relationship between people and categories is not a one-way street, as people themselves in various ways identify and interact with these categories. As such, people are “moving targets” (ibid, 293).

I find Hacking’s concept and discussion of looping effects particularly useful for three reasons. First, conceiving of people studied by the social sciences as “moving targets” emphasizes that they are not passive recipients of the categories imposed upon them. Second, his discussion of classifications sheds important light on how “social, medical and biological sciences create new classifications and new knowledge” (2007, 286). Clearly, works within the social sciences have produced certain knowledge about, in this case, “Muslims” and “Arabs,” in direct response and reaction to Islamophobia (cf. Mansson McGinty, 2012). The third reason most likely extends Hacking’s own intended areas of concern and interest. I find the notion of *looping* appealing as it translates nicely to the shifting processes of meaning-making; something happens to ideas/discourses/categories (as well as the self) when appropriated and employed by individuals. Although Hacking does not engage in looping effects within this

realm, I take the freedom to use his terminology as a source of inspiration to discuss the looping effects of meaning within the context of one Palestinian American woman's life.

Further, by exploring the looping effects in different spaces, at different scales, the paper features the geographical dimensions of looping effects. Similarly to Nagel and Staeheli (2011), I understand "the public" as fluid and pluralistic—as "constituted by multiple publics, or 'counterpublics'" (444). As they emphasize in their work on the political mobilization of Muslim Arabs in Britain and in the United States, it is first when we recognize the multiple identities of Muslims and the various ways they interact in and with different publics (through different organizations and coalitions) that we can challenge the essentialization of "Muslim communities" (ibid, 444). Further, looping effects of meaning and the shifting meanings of categories in personal lives take place in real, lived places. As I intend to show through the interview with Dalia, subjectivities and sense of self and belonging emerge through affective place-based experiences and interpersonal interactions. Such perspective seems to partly resonate with an approach, articulated by Mills and Gökariksel (2014), which does not depart from identity categories assumed *a priori* but rather the "intersecting processes of identity in place" (910).

Looping effects in public and personal realms

Public representations of Muslim and Arab Americans

I would argue that there are only a few prominent public representations or categorizations of Muslims in the United States today, circulating in various publics, the different spaces of "political life of a citizenry" (Nagel and Staeheli, 2011, 443), such as those of different media outlets, NGOs, networks and coalitions, and political events. One, acutely present in media, political and popular accounts, is the category of "Muslim as the Other." This Orientalist discourse and public categorization, which has constructed a "Muslim/Arab enemy" (Jamal and Naber, 2008; Qureshi and Sells, 2003), has been extensively documented and analyzed. It has also been promoted by neoconservative writers and political commentators on *jihad* and Islamic militarism such as Robert Spencer, Daniel Pipes, and Steven Emerson, active Islamophobes, who openly attack Islam. As Edward Said (1997) has claimed, Orientalism and Islamophobia are constructed by "experts" with significant influence through their ability to shape foreign policy and public opinion via means such as media and think-tanks. Much of the work of these writers highlights the incompatibility of Muslim values with mainstream American values, and the inherent violence of the Islamic doctrine and civilization. The making of the "Muslim as the Other" category has thus been upheld through the matrix of classifications suggested by Hacking (2007): a) classification ("Muslim as the Other"), b) people (Muslims and Arabs broadly defined), c) institutions (governmental institutions, think tanks, educational institutions), d)

knowledge (expert and criticize popular knowledge), and e) experts/professionals (writers, scholars, commentators). The confluences of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim are neither new nor random, but products of the history of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and ideological neocolonial strategies to maintain hierarchical power relations, as well as justifying U.S. foreign policy (Jamal and Naber, 2008). Post September 11, 2001, the political discourse of “war on terror” has produced other crude oppositional categories, such as the “good Muslim,” the assimilated, patriotic American Muslim, and the “bad Muslim,” the supporter of religious fundamentalism and violence (Mamdani, 2004).

It is in reaction to the stereotyped classification of “Muslim as the Other,” or the “bad Muslim” that another prevalent category has emerged, a *counter-category* of sorts. Counteracting discrimination and serious injustice spurred by fear and prejudice, American Muslims have through local and national mobilization constructed a religious and political constituency post September 11, 2001. That is, in Hacking’s terminology, kinds of people, classified by the category of “Muslim as the Other,” have responded to and challenged the way they have been classified—looping effect in action on both local and national scales. I have referred to this public self-representation as the “mainstream Muslim” (or the “moderate Muslim”), a politicized category that stresses compatibility with American political and social life (Mansson McGinty, 2012; Modood and Ahmad, 2007). As a direct retort to the processes of “Othering,” the “mainstream Muslim” emphasizes ordinary Muslim American lives and the reconciliation of American and Islamic ideas. As such, the categories of the “mainstream Muslim” and “American Islam” emerge from and signify *negating looping effects* of racially crude classifications and are produced by Muslim activists, NGOs, as well as integrated, mainstream Muslim American organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Society of North American (ISNA), and Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) in and through various publics such as media, NGOs and political contexts and events. This looping dynamics reflects a politics of representation that not only political and religious leaders and activists are engaged in, but also scholars within academia (cf. Mansson McGinty, 2012). Although the “mainstream Muslim” is a product of Muslim activism and identity politics, at times it appears to overlap with the category of “good Muslim.” Similarly to the “good Muslim,” the mainstream Muslim reflects prevalent politics of belonging and sameness as well as powerful notions of what represent “mainstream” and a “good” citizen in the United States.

Although public categories or representations may facilitate identity politics temporarily, they do not encompass multiple political subjectivities and the complex ways people identify as “Muslim.” Obviously, the “mainstream Muslim” is only one of the many Muslim self-representations that are formed in relation to stigmatized public categories. Nagel and Staeheli’s (2011) work on Muslim Arab activists demonstrates the diverse ways activists understand their Muslim identity and the role and place of Islam in their political activism. While some embrace

religion as a basis for political mobilization, others understand their activism as grounded in Arab belonging or other secular identities and discourse, and yet others draw on both religious and secular nationalist discourses and identities simultaneously.

Here, in Hacking's words, "kinds of people"—Muslims/Arabs/Middle Eastern broadly construed (Jamal and Naber, 2008) —are moving targets within various publics interacting with religious and secular discourses, resisting some names and categories assigned to them. I believe we as scholars need to ask ourselves in which way scholarly work may reify the moving targets themselves? Although much work on Muslims in the West today start by pointing out the diversity of Muslim identities and how crucial it is to deconstruct "Muslim," I think we ought to give further consideration to how we are participating in the political endeavor of "making-up" people and how multiple and shifting meanings emerge in the interface between names (including scholarly categories) and the named. Such an approach would examine the scholarly production of "Muslim geographies," but also further explore the lived, on-the-ground complexities that constitute the diverse phenomena we refer to as "Muslim geographies."

My interview with Dalia

In this section I want to share longer excerpts from two in-depth interviews with Dalia, a young Palestinian American Muslim woman (this is my categorization of her for now and a categorization I use in a recent article (Mansson McGinty, 2014). I do so with two intensions in mind. Methodologically, I hope to demonstrate the benefits of exploring the experiential worlds and the "subjective in-between" (Arendt in Jackson, 2008, xiv)—the "moving target" in the interview accounts. Further, I believe the glimpses of the interviews demonstrate the complicated looping effects prompted by her use and rejection of various readily available categories to convey and make sense of her own experiences (cf. Mansson McGinty, 2006).⁴ It conveys how national, ethnic, and religious categories are lived, how they gain particular personal meaning in the immediacy of everyday lives and in particular places. Throughout our conversations about her life and self-image, looping effects between representation, interaction, and self-experience emerged. The looping is intricate as it entails responses of both others and self to the self-representations.

Dalia engaged primarily with the categories of "Palestinian," "Arab," "Muslim," and "American" throughout the interviews. These categories have long, and at times contentious, histories in the United States that go beyond the scope of this article. Most important to point out here is that Arab American Muslims have

⁴ I refer to Dalia's experiences of the *hijab* in further detail in another article on the emotional geographies of the *hijab* (Mansson McGinty, 2014). In this paper I focus on the parts of her narratives where she negotiates and resists different categories with respect to identity and experiences of belonging.

formed identities around both secular and religious discourses; likewise, political mobilization has occurred around “Arab issues” and Arabness, usually influenced by secular nationalisms and a non-sectarian Arab identity, as well as a global religious Muslim identity and sense of belonging (*umma*) (Nagel and Staeheli, 2011). Scholars have documented a heightened awareness of Muslim belonging among American Muslims, and post-September 11, 2001, Arab American Muslims have become increasingly engaged in not only foreign policies pertaining to Palestine and the military actions in Iraq, but also in civil rights and immigrant rights, collaborating with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other progressive minorities (Ahmed, 2011). The relationship between the categories of “Arab” and “Muslim,” and the connection between “being Arab” and “being Muslim,” differ from person to person, and there are conflicting views on the role of Islam in public life and political activism (Nagel and Staeheli, 2011). In contrast to the young Arab American Muslims in Nadine Naber’s (2005) study, who embraced a “Muslim First, Arab Second” identity, Dalia does not identify as “Muslim first” and she does not understand Islam or Muslim identity as something public in nature. Rather, it is her Palestinian identity and belonging that has gained primary meaning to her.

I have met Dalia two times for longer personal interviews. Dalia was twenty-four at the time of our first interview. She was born in Palestine and arrived in Milwaukee with her family when she was four years old. Her father was already an American citizen as he had lived in the United States previously before he returned to Palestine and met Dalia’s mother. Dalia is a thoughtful and intelligent young woman, who has given a lot of thought to the question of identity, both to her own sense of self and to how others may perceive her. Her narrative reflects a journey throughout different social spaces of Milwaukee, between Palestine and the United States, and ultimately an introspection of herself as a young woman trying to make sense of where she came from and who she is becoming. The introspection entails engagement with various categories and identity designations to elucidate the journey to me as well as to herself (cf. Linger 2001).

Dalia started our first interview with what remained a strong theme throughout our interviews: “I’m Palestinian and I was born in Palestine.” Her self-identification as Palestinian and Arab is deeply rooted in personal memories of summer visits in Palestine with her family, but it is also an identity that speaks to early experiences of not belonging as a child in the poor suburb in Milwaukee.

So, we always saw Palestine as home; we grew up thinking that. Every few years, we saved up all of our money, and that was the goal. We never took vacation in the U.S. because the goal was always to go to Palestine. So we went every two, three years, sometimes sooner than that. So my memories of summer are in Palestine, and with my family there. And, then since we were poor immigrants, we lived on the south side of Milwaukee and we didn’t have much contact with other Arab families. Like, we were not

involved in the ISM [the Islamic Society of Milwaukee] or anything like that. I think my mom tried for a little bit. So because of that most of my friends were Latino and African American, so I was like really confused as a kid. Why am I different from them? I had no sort of access to mainstream white America at all. So that was my world, so I thought that I was like that too. Except when I went to Palestine, when I was “OK, I’m Arab.”

Anna: So you thought of yourself as Latina?

Dalia: Yes, here, yeah. And then when I would go there [to Palestine] I was “no, I’m this [Arab].”

[...]

While my family didn’t emphasize religion, they very much emphasized being Palestinian, and the cause that that carried. So my family, and my eight aunts and two uncles, are very much feminist, heavily involved in Palestinian resistance. One of my aunts was in prison for a very long time, she was a prisoner of war, she was heavily involved in terms of politics. So I grew up with those ideas. My family was into the political issues, rather than the religious ones. (Interview 1)

[...]

I think even if my parents aren’t educated in any way, but this idea of injustice, and being able to recognize it, it was very much ingrained in how we grew up. I remember when we were little I remember how we were listening to a tape that my mom had. And it was basically this recording of this guy who is very political in his music. I still love him and listen to him. He sings about war, very much the Middle East reality. But it was all part of yes, this is who we are... My mom would always tell us when someone passed away, assassinated. They would always talk about it. (Interview 2)-

Dalia’s sense of being Palestinian—her emotional ties to the people and the political commitment to Palestinian issues—were nurtured by the trips to Palestine, but also by her parents in their everyday lives in Milwaukee. Still, despite this socialization and trips to Palestine, as a young girl in Milwaukee she thought of herself partly as Latina, a self-experience that came about in a particular context. Dalia grew up in a neighborhood in South Milwaukee and went to public schools with primarily African American and Latino/a students. Her family mostly interacted with “Mexican families,” and she had no Arab friends. Since she passed as Latina, and there were no other children with Arab background that she could identify with, it appeared as a readily available category. She didn’t grow up experiencing Islamophobia per say, but rather a broader racism toward non-white minorities overall. She described the area as a segregated and poor working-class

neighborhood where many of her friends had kids in high school. “[J]ust poverty in general, kids who don’t have money and who have to work in high school just to get by on their own.” Dalia defined herself several times as an “angry” and “confused kid,” who lived and saw injustice up-close, both the political injustice brought upon her Palestinian relatives, and the racism and grave social injustice in a segregated Midwestern city (Mansson McGinty, 2014). Dalia shared grim personal experiences from her school years, observations reconfirmed later by insights gained from her current employment within a non-profit organization working to address the social inequalities in the American educational system.

I mean the school system I went through was very poor. I didn’t learn anything past middle school. I didn’t know how to study[...] I specifically remember this teacher who said that he needs someone to make his Big Mac every week so it was OK if we didn’t do well. We were in 7th grade. Like you guys can make my Big Mac. Yeah. I specifically remember him saying that. So I feel like the system is created in order to... some people are going to fail and they have to be channeled into these other areas. And the very few are going to succeed and they are the ones who are going to stay upper-class. It is just the way it works. [...]So you have these people living in poor neighborhoods and they go into this poor system. It is horrible. It is very vicious. It is all racialized. If you’re African American and you’re in the Milwaukee school system you are screwed. Your life path is already set up for you. (Interview 2)

Dalia expresses here the lived experience of the intersection of power and hierarchy and racism—a system perpetuating racial and class exclusions and predestined identity categories. Her personal childhood experiences of racism at school and in her neighborhood reflect not so much Islamophobia but rather a broader system of racial and social injustices toward minorities of color. It was first in high school, and particularly in college, after September 11, 2001, when “Muslim identity” presented itself as a possible category of identification.

Although I am careful not to treat Dalia’s experiences merely “through the lens of an increasingly ossified, post-2001 chronology, whereby ‘ground zero’ has become the temporal no less than spatial reference point” (Gale and Hopkins 2009, 2), 9/11 appears to constitute a moment in thinking about, writing about, and even experiencing “Muslim identities.” Dalia reminisces:

[I]t happened at the first months of my freshman year in high school. So I was at a point when I was confused, yeah, I’m Arab but everybody I knew were different. So I think I was still in that period when I was confused about who I was exactly in terms of background. I actually remember exactly... I was sitting in a classroom and they mentioned it and I was “Oh no!” But I never thought “Oh it is my group, Arabs, who did this.” But then when

this was coming out I was very confused about a group that I connected with... Something like that... So I got very defensive like “you don’t know that it was Arabs who did that.” I was defending that a lot. And I remember my mom who was wearing the scarf was getting yelled at on the street, stuff like that. I have those memories. I just became a very defensive kid. You can’t bash the group that I felt like I belonged to [Arabs]. I think that really solidified the fact that I was Arab and not anything else. I really think it solidified that, and then it also really pushed me to be more interested in what that meant. Especially in terms of religion. Because you didn’t really hear Arabs, you heard Muslims. I guess the majority of the ones involved were Arabs, but you heard primarily Muslims. It is such a big category. It was a pivotal point, I think. (Interview 1)

At least in retrospect, September 11, 2001, signifies a critical moment when Dalia began to reflect more on her own background and identity: “I think that really solidified the fact that I was Arab and not anything else.” She started to read more about Islam and she remembers asking her mother to teach her how to pray. The reasoning behind and meanings of the veil for Dalia derive from two key personal quests and yearnings: a need to *defend* and represent an unfairly targeted and stigmatized group, “Muslims” and “Arabs” broadly, and an urge to *belong* to something. Interestingly, for Dalia the *hijab* is primarily a “means of protest” with social and political meaning, as it demonstrates belonging to and solidarity with a discriminated-against group, and protest against anti-Muslim sentiments. It does not have religious meaning but rather signifies her Palestinian and Arab sense of belonging.

I have elsewhere described Dalia’s decision to don the *hijab* as a personal and spatial journey from passing as a “Mexican girl” in an impoverished neighborhood to a “Muslim”-looking woman attending a white affluent private university in downtown Milwaukee. The visibility of the *hijab* served as a means to embody a new way of being and presenting herself (Mansson McGinty, 2014). This was also the first time she was around Muslims and Arabs, and although she knew they had common affiliations, she did not know how to interact with them as they had more class privilege and had life-experiences different from hers. The last couple of years at the university she felt more comfortable with her new self-representation as a veiled young woman and became politically active in the Arab Student Association, devoting much time and effort to organize political events about Palestine and the conflict.

In the end of the first interview I posed more direct questions about prevalent identity categories and classifications (maybe so directly that it can be read as imposing).

Anna: I’m assuming you see yourself as an American Muslim...

Dalia: I do (laughing)? See those titles are so weird to me. I don't think of myself in that way. I guess here, because people categorize us like that. So I guess I would say I'm Arab American.

Anna: So if you had to use labeling, what would you say...

Dalia: I wouldn't say... I wouldn't define myself around religion. I would not. I feel like religion is just one part of my life, it is not everything. So if I would define myself it would be around ethnicity.

Anna: OK. So Palestinian...

Dalia: Palestinian American, Arab American... I don't think I would define myself around religion. Muslim American... No! I just feel like that is too broad of a category...

Anna: I think that speaks to the personal dimension of the faith.

Dalia: Yes, exactly. The idea of religion as being something outside the personal makes me very uncomfortable. Because I think that definition of religion is dangerous. (Interview 1)-

Dalia reacts to, and, in some moments, resists, the imposed categories. She indicates that “those titles are so weird to me” and then alerts me to the gap between her own personal sense of belonging, evidently not easily articulated with the categories at hand, and society's categorization of her. The category “Muslim American” resonates poorly with her own sense of self due to its emphasis on religious belonging as well as its generalizing tendency to overlook ethnic belonging, which is much more salient to her. Further, it is, in her own words, “too broad of a category,” failing to represent personal particularities and sensibilities. While in both interviews she frequently refers to herself as “Arab” and “Palestinian,” the categorization of “Arab American” comes about first as a result of my question and suggestion of the label. This was confirmed in the second interview:

Anna: You talk about U.S. as a foreign country, and you did that in the last interview too. Is that how you see it?

Dalia: Yes, I think I do when it comes to being Muslim, and when it comes to *me thinking about myself as Palestinian*. But when I sit at home and watch American TV, I feel more at ease. The main society is just not friendly to them [Muslims and Arabs]. So if they are not [friendly], it will feel foreign, *it won't feel like my own*. I don't feel at all a connection with mainstream, white America that is mostly conservative. Not at all.

Anna: I was thinking about what you said about the conflict to reconcile your meaning with the prevalent Islamic meaning of the veil. I think you said it was not a part of yourself...

Dalia: I think it is a part of me, but I don't think of it in those terms. Like if I hear the term Arab American, I don't identify with that at all.

Anna: And, Palestinian American?

Dalia: No. *Just Palestinian*. And my friends are not like this, they identify themselves as Arab American and whatever. I have a huge problem with that. I was telling my friends like if I were to have kids I would have to have them in the Middle East. (Laughing). I don't know. I have a huge issue with it. I really do value Palestinian culture, and just all that comes with it. I like it, I enjoy it, and I value it. And I think to add something on to it, takes away from it. (Interview 2, my emphasis)-

In contrast to other Muslim and Arab American youth I have interviewed, Dalia rejects not only the "Muslim American" but also the hyphenated or hybrid "Arab American" or "Palestinian American" categories in the second interview. She does not feel "American," rather she feels excluded from mainstream America. Placing the label "American" next to "Palestinian" would dilute the personal meaning of the latter. Further, although she in the first interview rejects the religious label of "Muslim," she refers to herself as Muslim in the beginning of the above quote, maybe reflecting the recourse to the categories available to us, although their meanings keep shifting.

The "white mainstream society" is an important category and theme in Dalia's narrative. It is a term she refers to several times in both interviews, which links back to her upbringing in a segregated city along intertwined racial and class lines, a place in which she felt alienated and excluded from the rest of the society (cf. Mansson McGinty, 2014). Stresses Dalia: "Milwaukee is so segregated, South Side is Latino, North Side African American, and then the richer parts with only white people." If mainstream society does not treat you well it will be "foreign," "it won't feel like my own." It becomes a social place in which you cannot be yourself:

I *always* feel like I have my guard up. It is tiring. It is exhausting. Because every time I interact with somebody I think about "OK, what do they think about me?" "What do they think of Muslim women based on the way they are talking to me?" Maybe it is all in my head, but I do it a lot. And it is very tiring. Like I don't feel like I can just talk to somebody without thinking about how they are viewing me. So, in terms of physical places and letting my guard down it is at home and with my friends. And only a few friends who I really, really trust. (Interview 2)

The conflict of self-representation is distressingly brought to surface, prompting various kinds of looping. The *hijab* visually and publically communicates a

“Muslim identity,” triggering a wide range of responses and associations. For both mainstream society and the Muslim community it is a symbol with primarily religious meaning, meanings that do not sit well with Dalia for whom the *hijab* symbolizes political protest and belonging (Mansson McGinty, 2014). In social interactions, particularly at work, she is constantly preoccupied by what she may symbolize and represent to others. Dalia’s public self-representation (veiled “Muslim” woman) to the surrounding world resonates poorly with her self-identity. In an effort to become someone, to belong, she donned the *hijab*, but it has paradoxically removed her further from both the Muslim community and mainstream society (although I am uncertain this is an aspiration of hers). What is home then? On my question about where she feels mostly at ease, she replied:

This is a huge conflict for me. Because to be honest I never really feel... I’m always here and there. I never completely feel like I am at home in one place. When I am here I feel like home is Middle East, and when I go there, and there is something missing. There is always a conflict. I feel like it is very...it mixes both but I don’t know which one takes over the other.

Anna: Is this home?

Dalia: Really for me, home is my family. It is not so much a space anymore. Because, if you ask me what space I like better and enjoy and feel like I’m happiest in, it is probably Middle East. But because my immediate family is here, there is an issue there. I probably feel most comfortable where my family is despite the location. (Interview 2)-

The importance of Arab and Palestinian identifications reflect Dalia’s specific upbringing, salient summer memories, her strong connection to her relatives in Palestine, and her personal passion and investment in political issues, “the Palestinian cause.” Similar to many of the Arab-American activists interviewed by Staeheli and Nagel (2006), Dalia’s “understanding of home is firmly rooted in the Middle East” (1607). It is of interest to note here the common reference to the broad geographical category of “Middle East,” which is very likely to be a product specific to the identity-making in the United States. I believe, similar to the category of “Arab,” Middle East is a prevalent category used by some Arab-Americans to “signify a connection to a home and a heritage that is outside the West” (ibid, 1604). Further, in the case of Dalia, “home” refers to both specific places as well as social relations. Dalia’s self-identity as “Palestinian” is intimately place-based; to Dalia, Palestine is a grounded place linked to emotionally laden memories (cf. Staeheli and Nagel, 2006). But Dalia’s sense of being Palestinian is also connected to her relationship with family and a few friends with whom she feels like she can be herself, a feeling free from dissonance and tension between people’s categorization of her and her own self-identity. In Rapport and Dawson’s words: “There is also the paradox that it is perhaps only by way of transience and

displacement that one achieves an ultimate sense of belonging” (1998, 9). Feelings of not belonging to the United States, have primarily triggered a sense of home as intimately linked to social relations—her family and close friends. Here, living life in movement and transition, home to Dalia is where she best knows herself (Rapport and Dawson 1998, see also Linger 2001), that is, with people who know her and with whom she can be herself. These experiences resonate with postcolonial geographies of hybrid identities and shifting meaning of home, the practice of “making home” (Dwyer, 2003), and I think the processes of looping described here may further illuminate such identity formations, but also the on-the-ground contestations of grand narratives and social categories. Although Dalia does not identify as a Palestinian-American or an Arab-American, she is a Palestinian in America—“being Palestinian” gains personal and political meaning in the particular context of her life, as well as the socio-historical context within which her experiences of racial segregation, poverty, and racialization of not only Arabs and Muslims but minorities overall take place.

Drawing on large-scale, formal and legal attributes and public representations of belonging such as national and ethnic identities, citizenship, and visible symbols, one could identify Dalia as a “Palestinian American Muslim woman.” However, her life story indicates a more complicated picture. The looping of meaning is triggered in the “subjective in-between,” to return to Arendt’s term, the transitional space and relationship between external conditions and the human capacity of reflection and agency. Dalia rejects Americanness, and she does not tap into the discourse of belonging and sameness mentioned earlier; the category “mainstream Muslim,” produced by activists and scholars alike, resonates poorly with her own sense of self. On the contrary, Dalia does not feel like she belongs to American society, which to her signifies “white mainstream society,” and it was in reaction to September 11, 2001, and the category of “Muslim as the Other” that she decided to don the *hijab*. Similarly, she negates the category “Muslim” as she does not feel comfortable with the prevalent religious connotations and meanings of the *hijab*. Ironically, she is against public manifestations and dimensions of religion. Thus, there is further looping of the meaning of the *hijab* in social interactions. Dalia’s sense of who she is and her experiences of belonging can first be fully understood in the context of her own biography and are communicated in the subjective in-between space of the interview. If we assume the salience of identity categories in personal lives, we risk reifying meaning and reproducing gross and misleading generalizations (cf. Linger, 2005). Further, understanding Dalia’s life experiences and identity exclusively in the context of Islamophobia makes little justice to the larger multifaceted social context in which she grew up. Her Palestinian identity gains meaning and provides a sense of home in the face of concrete place-based experiences of racial segregation and injustices toward minorities and people of color in general (which, no doubt, anti-Muslim sentiments build upon and perpetuate further).

Looping in-between

It is not that terms like culture, nature, history, society and mind are fictions: rather that they are all too readily entice us into the trap of subverting or eclipsing the events we want to phantom with vocabularies that glibly substitute the complexity of existence for the parsimony of theory (Jackson, 2008, xxx, n. 2)

Drawing on Ian Hacking’s work on looping effects and moving targets, I have intended to demonstrate the dynamic interaction between categories and those categorized, and the looping of meaning that occurs within such interaction, both in public and personal realms. I also hope to have shown the specific looping in place in the particular interpersonal encounter and interaction between Dalia and me. The looping reminds us about the inevitable and shifting meaning of categories in personal lives and in different places, and the intersubjective nature of the interview. Dalia’s narrative demonstrates that it is fallacious to assume that she self-identify as “Muslim” because she dons the *hijab*.

In this paper I have also argued, influenced by Ian Hacking, that scholars participate in the “making-up” of “kinds of people” through the categorization of others in our writing. As I have shown, drawing on my interviews with Dalia, interviewees or “human subjects,” as they are called in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) forms, are “moving targets,” reacting to the categories placed upon them and sometimes altering the meaning of the categories themselves through collective and individual initiatives. They are moving targets in a double sense: they are literally moving in and through various social and public spaces; they are also metaphorically moving across a complex universe of meaning, making the project of trying to pinpoint them in neat boxes of analysis a thorny one. While I believe this is an important observation for all scholars working on various identities on different scales, I hope my argument here in particular serves to contribute to our analyses and theorizations of “Muslim geographies,” and how the people we broadly categorize as “Muslim,” “American Muslim,” or “Arab” may resist these as well as challenge the meanings attached to them. I think we need to be more cautious in our analysis of Muslim geographies and appropriation of the category “Muslim.” As geographers, as well as other social scientists, become further immersed in the research on Muslim lives and identities, it becomes increasingly important to examine “Muslim” as a category and to ask whether or not it is the most appropriate one to use. Furthermore, despite many scholars’ political endeavor to write against Islamophobia, the backdrop of Islamophobia seems to be the most prevalent one through which we write and understand Muslim experiences. How might this kind of scholarly knowledge production and contextualization unintentionally reify “Muslim otherness”? If we bring our attention to the messy looping effects of meaning and the way the people we study understand the various categories, maybe we could further broaden the lens and the questions we pose in our research on so-called “Muslim geographies”?

Human existence is, in Jackson's (2008) words "a struggle between contending forces and imperatives" (ix), a struggle, which entails "endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived *decisively*, on one's own terms" (xii). Through Dalia's narrative I believe we can get a glimpse of the urgency of her negotiation and making sense of given political, social, and geographical factors on her very own terms in a non-predictable way—a kind of looping which makes me wary of assuming the meaning and importance of any identity categories *a priori*.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the fellowship from the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2012-2013, which offered time and space to start a new project on Muslim American youth. I would like to thank all the participants in the fellow seminar for their thoughtful comments and feedback. Dan Linger has always provided intellectual guidance—I thank him for pointing me to the work of Ian Hacking. I am also indebted to Dalia for her time and willingness to share her experiences and thoughts with me. Last, but not the least, I want to thank the reviewers for their generous and constructive comments and Sarah Hunt, *ACME* editor, for her reading, editing and helpful suggestions in the end.

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