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BOOK REVIEW: MIR, S. (2014). Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. 224 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4696-1078-8.

Aziz Fatnassi
Indiana University - Bloomington, fatnassa@indiana.edu

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Abstract

As I was recently reminded after listening to an imam repeatedly reject ISIS on Vermont Public Radio, the 'long shadow' cast upon the religion by the events of 9/11 and subsequent acts of terror remain scarlet letters that must be expunged from the chests of each individual Muslim. For the past 15 years, Muslims as a whole have been at the forefront of a discussion of 'modernity' in newspapers, television shows, and digital news feeds; in a sense, Islam has been subject to a sort of asynchronous 'digital labor' that serves to construct the identities of Muslims in absentia. Within such an environment, Muslim Americans have continued to participate as productive members of society, "with 40 percent holding a college degree or higher, compared to 29 percent among the general American public" (Mir, 2014, p. 3). Indeed, as Shabana Mir demonstrates in *Muslim American Women on Campus*, even within the most pluralistic spaces, Muslims are negatively stereotyped, marginalized, and essentialized; in the same spaces, however, Muslims work to positively self-define, seek out compromise, and sensitively negotiate infringements on personal autonomy.

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Aziz Fatnassi[1]
Indiana University, USA

As I was recently reminded after listening to an imam repeatedly reject ISIS on Vermont Public Radio, the 'long shadow' cast upon the religion by the events of 9/11 and subsequent acts of terror remain scarlet letters that must be expunged from the chests of each individual Muslim. For the past 15 years, Muslims as a whole have been at the forefront of a discussion of 'modernity' in newspapers, television shows, and digital news feeds; in a sense, Islam has been subject to a sort of asynchronous 'digital labor' that serves to construct the identities of Muslims in absentia. Within such an environment, Muslim Americans have continued to participate as productive members of society, "with 40 percent holding a college degree or higher, compared to 29 percent among the general American public" (Mir, 2014, p. 3). Indeed, as Shabana Mir demonstrates in *Muslim American Women on Campus*, even within the most pluralistic spaces, Muslims are negatively stereotyped, marginalized, and essentialized; in the same spaces, however, Muslims work to positively self-define, seek out compromise, and sensitively negotiate infringements on personal autonomy.

In an acute reading of this 'long shadow' upon Muslim American women on university campuses, Mir seeks to present the "multidimensional identities—with religious, ethnic, racial, and gendered aspects—that fly in the face of the identities expected of [Muslim women] both by many within Muslim communities…and by those outside their communities" (Mir, 2014, p. 4). In her fieldwork with Muslim undergraduate women at both Georgetown and George Washington Universities, Mir elicits ethnographic data that gives life to the identity struggles and strategies used to diffuse tensions regarding perceived differences. In exploring these strategies, *Muslim American Women on Campus* presents us with a very acute reading of the extensive identity work required to participate as even a 'peripheral' member of what Bourdieu

[1] *Correspondence:* Aziz Fatnassi, Indiana University, 130 Student Building, 701 E. Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, Indiana 47408; Email: fatnassa@indiana.edu

(2002) might describe as 'dominant Americanism.' Mir questions the nature of inclusive sociality, inquiring as to whether partial participation in contravening group's social rituals can be considered full membership in either.

The introduction to *Muslim American Women on Campus* provides contextual information regarding the experience of researchers and informants during the heightened awareness of Muslims following 9/11 and the global War on Terror. Mir skillfully illustrates the ignorance that prevails in popular media, with "much of this so-called information…based on little but opinion (at best) or xenophobia (at worst): much of the content, like the *Princess* books about the Saudi royals, addresses readers' thirst to 'know' the Muslim Other but serves merely to strengthen Westerners' sense of superiority to Muslims" (Mir, 2014, p. 11). Setting up the subsequent case studies nicely, Mir introduces the concept of footing (Goffman, 1963; 1981) as it applies to a *cultural* positioning. Mir's focus on the articulation between Muslim women's identities and diverse spaces of contact serves to underline the importance of participation in peer cultures as a means to negotiating the self. Drawing upon her informants' narratives, the next chapter serves as a bridge from these outwardly perceived identities to the individual negotiations of character necessitated to correctly position one within the correct communities of practice.

In the second chapter, Mir expands upon her discussion of campus peer culture, focusing almost exhaustively on the numerous ways in which Muslim women are beset by the 'psychological strain' familiar to minority individuals. Her discussion of choosing an open performance or relegating the religious and social to alternate domains is illustrated effectively by a dialectically divided table, which outlines the basic repertoire of performative responses used to counter stereotypes. With regard to the question of agency, Mir notes that the construction of oppositional [and informational] identities draws power from the realm of *Orientalizing*, imposed stereotypes accorded by peers. In this sense it is not a false consciousness, rather, an acutely aware, "'third space'…[where] Muslims construct hybrid identities that are neither stereotypically American nor stereotypically Muslim but shed light on the reified nature of those descriptors" (Mir, 2014, p. 41).

The third chapter, and first case study, focuses on the role of alcohol culture in shaping the way that Muslim American women "conform, resist, and construct authenticity…in their social interactions and identity construction" (p. 45). In the pluralist, liberal spaces of American academe many Muslim youth are introduced to a highly surveilled performance of peer culture, whereby, "college seemed to *mandate* craziness…and religious Muslim American women were asked why, when college bestowed freedom from their parents and communities, they would not choose to fit in, become insiders, become normal, and have some crazy fun" (p. 50). As Mir shows, the construction of 'American,' 'Muslim', or even seemingly innocuous 'peer' culture is based on a set of "interlocking narratives, myths, rituals, norms, and expectations" (p. 51) that seek to subsume idiosyncrasies within groups. Leaning heavily on her informants' experiences, the author draws out how some teetotalers' anticipated, forecasted, and portrayed affinial sociability, while still attempting to remain aloof from the stigma associated with alcohol.

In one of the more powerful sets of narratives from the book, Mir draws upon Muslim American women's ideology and praxis toward alcohol culture and extends this to construct a realm or praxis to obscure the seemingly religious choice of abstaining from drink. For some, the impact of home life had shaped their understanding of what it meant to respect the limits of Islamic mores (in terms of drinking, clubbing, dating, sexual promiscuity, and other social activities). For others, the seemingly complex interconnection between sartorial choices and perceived morality was daunting; in such cases, the tensions between multiple peer cultures came into play and featured prominently in informants' constructions of identity. Mir writes of one

particular woman: "As she grew in religiosity, the Muslim refuge and mainstream alcohol culture appeared to be mutually exclusive…so [she]…adapted to the expectations of the Muslim enclave, and became relatively liberate from the wrenching, awkward performances that semi-peripheral participation in leisure culture required" (p. 81).

While Mir certainly finds these kinds of performances of liminality crucial to her understanding of contemporary college campus life, she also finds in her interviews connections between visible religiosity and informant confrontations of ascribed identities. Quoting from one of her informants in chapter four, she notes how the presence or absence of hijab could assist in constructing or affirming stereotypes, "weird, outlandish, and antifeminist as hijab was, non-Muslim peers *expected* Muslim American women to wear it. The absence of hijab signified nominal Muslim affiliation at most" (p. 94). For those seeking to speak for the religion, absence of hijab allowed them to engage with others as a sort of 'liminal' other, while presence of a hijab almost certainly brought perceptions of alterity and difference. Within the George Washington and Georgetown Muslim communities during the time of Mir's work, decisions to wear the headscarf were invested with the sense of *da'wah* (or teaching non-Muslims about Islam); wearing the scarf meant 'representative Muslim' by dint of the iconographic associations members of the campus communities presumed of hijabis. While hijabis could 'blend in' to the campus leisure culture, they similarly had to impose limits on how far such blending should go; this, it seems, was determined largely by an aspirational self that finds power in either Islamic or secular notions of success (i.e., domesticity, education, business, and so forth).

In the last case study of campus, Mir addresses sexualized campus culture, bringing out what might be the most important point of the book (and an acute reflection on policy versus practice in American universities): namely, "the core spaces of campus culture are in fact culturally exclusive and *not* equally open to all groups…campus leaders must also actively attend to the interface between (youth) culture and campus guidelines, and to the majority cultural power that inundates specific policies" (Mir, 2014, p. 171). In a sense, Mir's work in understanding these 'secondary classrooms' of identity construction reflects statements made by Erving Goffman in his 1961 work *Asylums*, whereby he notes, "our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull…our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks" (Goffman, 1961, p. 320). Negotiating these cultural differences can provide anxiety for young Muslim Americans, especially given the uncertainty they may have surrounding their role in being good members of either peer culture. The concern with how Muslims are perceived extends beyond the confines of campus life and enters into a more volatile mix of various gatekeepers' interests, informant concerns, and available selves.

Overall, Shabana Mir's work is effective in providing the reader with an alternative understanding of how identity is negotiated in spaces of intense cultural pressure and how stigmatized individuals actively seek to engage with and transform that pressure into an aspect of their identity matrix. Furthermore, her reading of contemporary life for Muslim American women in American universities gives important insight into the day-to-day lives of a group not often portrayed as 'fully human,' that is to say agentless beings at the behest of a domineering and restrictive religious mandate. In opposition to this, Mir effectively shows how Muslim American women attempt, and in many cases succeed, in transforming their immediate social spaces into fields of negotiation, where identities can be brought into or out of focus. Mir's expansion into these external classrooms provides yet another important contribution to the anthropology of education. It forces us to question whether any of the pedagogical improvements made to our systems can exist detached from the social context within which they take place.

Indeed, as her final lines note, we must seek to contest tropes of othering whereby "we may come to see the Other as a complex work in progress, rather than as a finished product perpetually engaged in warfare against us…we may also realize that *They* are really part of *Us* [emphasis in original] (Mir, 2014, p. 183). *Muslim American Women on Campus* is an excellent addition to any discussion of Islam, plurality, and identity, especially as they relate to American leisure cultures; it is sure to be a book that makes a significant theoretical and ideological impact for years to come.

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About the Author

Aziz Fatnassi holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology (2015) from Indiana University and serves as Communication Director for the In Light Human Rights Film Festival. His research focuses on the intersections of mimesis, digitization, and social revolution in emergent youth cultures. Presently, he is publishing a book based on his dissertation research entitled, *Markets of Aspiration*, which deals with the rapid transformation of youth activist culture following the Tunisian uprisings.