



ANTI(HIJAB)BODIES: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

I had never felt as watched as I did in the compound of the US embassy when I went for my visa interview in Accra, Ghana. The experience reminds me of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptical design which, as Simone Browne explains, is an unrelenting, ever-present, and all-seeing Eye, that constantly stares, guards, and monitors those deemed social misfits and invalids (2015: 33–5). This experience also reminds me of Karma R. Chávez’s “textual stare,” in rendering non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, and differently abled bodies highly visible by putting them perpetually on the spot for scrutiny. There were cameras (or Eyes) all over the place, including outside of the walls. We, the interviewees, were not allowed to enter with our cell phones, nor were we allowed to carry any kind of bag. We were allowed only clear bags for our documents, and we had to be as clear as our bags.

These measures were an attempt to keep the act of watching one-sided. The United States should be the watcher, not watched or recorded through devices such as the cellphone, a situation that Browne describes as “McVeillance” (2015: 20). All interviewees had to go through this regardless of who they were in terms of identity, origin, or social status. What was different for me as a *hijabi* was being asked to remove my hijab for the visa photograph. I was devastated but chose to comply because I had too much to lose otherwise. Though I had been compelled to remove my hijab before as a young girl to access institutionalized education before high school, this was different for me: I was a full-grown woman who thought she had agency over her body, at least. At that moment,

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I wasn't just stripped of my *mayaafe*, I was stripped of my dignity as well! And this was just the beginning. On my journey from Ghana to the United States and in my time living in the United States, I am constantly reminded of my foreignness and unwanted status; I am constantly policed by the US antibodies.

Ronak K. Kapadia explains that “[g]overnments repeatedly scapegoat ‘outsiders’—whether undocumented Central American migrants, trans and gender-nonconforming people, sex workers, the homeless, the seroconverted, Muslim refugees, and so on” (2019: 19). Using the metaphor of the biological organism fighting foreign invasion with its antibodies, I analyze some of the problems associated with the scapegoating of ‘outsiders,’ especially visible Others, in the US context. In biological organisms, protecting the body against foreign invasion through the strengthening of the body’s defense mechanisms is what antibodies do. However, this becomes a problem when antibodies can no longer distinguish between what is harmful or beneficial to the body. Antibodies, which are supposed to fight against harmful foreign bodies, become harmful to the body when they eliminate every case of non-normativity deemed a threat, which exposes the destructive nature of the self/Other binary.

My intention for this paper is to assess the portability of the analogy between antibodies and US citizens who police racialized foreigners not only in the sites associated with US security or surveillance like the airports and other ports of immigration, but also in sites of everyday interactions/transactions like the streets, stores, and classroom. I use auto-ethnography (as in Anzaldúa’s *autohistoria-teoría*) in mapping out my own experiences with surveillance in sites beyond the ports. This everyday surveillance can occur when “good citizens” of the US call the police on or take the law into their own hands against groups targeted for surveillance and scapegoating by the US empire (think of Craig Hicks, George Zimmerman, Teresa Klein, Amy Cooper). Such surveillance antibodies are ordinary citizens who are passionate, uncompromising, and proactive nationalists that would leave no stone unturned in their quest to keep the US great.

The problem of racism cannot be overlooked in this conversation, as targeted surveillance does not emerge from a vacuum

in the US empire. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain, “[r]ace is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (123). More specifically, and better suited for my purposes, Philomena Essed defines racism “[...] in terms of cognitions, actions, and procedures that contribute to the development and perpetuation of a system in which Whites dominate Blacks” (181). However, my being deemed a threat by the US antibodies transcends my appearance or phenotype: it results from what my appearance *signifies* in the US. It results from racism: structural, systemic, and everyday racism faced by people of color in the US. As Essed elaborates:

‘Race’ is called an *ideological construction*, and not just a social construction, because the idea of ‘race’ has never existed outside of a framework of group interest. [...] racism is a *structure* because racial and ethnic dominance exists in and is reproduced by the system through the formulation and application of rules, law, and regulations and through access to and the allocation of resources. [...] racism is a *process* because structures and ideologies do not exist outside the everyday practices through which they are created and confirmed. (2002: 185, italics in original)

Essed’s term of choice, “Everyday Racism,” encompasses ideological construction, structure, and process, which she explains as “involv[ing] only systematic, recurrent, familiar practices. The fact that it concerns repetitive practices indicates that everyday racism consists of practices that can be generalized” (2002: 177). Further, Black feminist scholars, including Kimberlé Crenshaw and Sharon Smith, have dwelled on the term “intersectionality” to explain the multiple oppressive sites faced by Black women. Smith explains this term as “[...] encompass[ing] in a single word the simultaneous experience of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women” (2013–4: 3).

Before I critically examine the link between surveillance and racism within my lived experience, here is a little background about my hijab. I am Ghanaian and Muslim and my community is called Zongo. Muslims in Ghana are not Arabs: we are predominantly from the northern part of Ghana, we co-exist with Muslims from other West African countries, and Hausa is our contact language. Our usage of the Arabic term “hijab” signifies “veil” in English.

We use it to connote either the Muslim woman's head covering or her dress as a whole. The Hausa term for the hijab is *mayaafe*, loosely translated: "what is used in covering (the body)," which has come to mean a piece of cloth designed to cover both the head and the upper part of the body. Depending on a woman's marital status, there are different ways of wearing *mayaafe* in terms of the size of the cloth or the degree of coverage. In addition, there are women who choose to wear the 'complete hijab' irrespective of their marital status.



On the left is my sister, Samira, wearing the bigger *mayaafe* in a complete hijab, and on the right is my cousin, Kubura, carrying her *mayaafe* as an accessory. Both are dressed as married women.

The 'complete hijab' means complete covering from head to toe and some even go further to cover the face; this is called *burqa/niqab*. Wearing of a *burqa/niqab* in the Zongo community is relatively new. In the case of the incomplete hijab, women choose to wear just *mayaafe* without much attention to the rest of their dress, or simply carry the *mayaafe* along as an accessory to symbolize their status as married women, or sometimes, divorcees. Here, I use *hijab* to mean the act of covering, *hijabis* as women who cover, and *mayaafe* as the piece of cloth meant to cover the head and upper body. Because of the visual rhetoric—I use this phrase to signify the strong multilayered communicative

potential of dress—surrounding the hijab in Zongo, hijabis are deliberate about what they wear in order not to miscommunicate. I remember that as unmarried girls back in the day, we were very careful to not wear any bigger than necessary *mayaafe* in order to avoid being mistaken for married women. To this end, I have been conditioned by Zongo to regard dress as a powerful communicative and rhetorical tool.



These are what an unmarried Zongo girl would wear as a complete hijab, left, and an incomplete hijab, right, both with a small *Mayaafa*.

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It is a misconception that all Muslims are Arabs and that all Arabs are Muslims; both identities are separate, though they sometimes overlap. Islam is a religion open to every human being regardless of identity or origin. My ancestors were Muslims long before the introduction of Christianity and British and French rule in West-Africa, because Arab Muslims had arrived there first for trade and to spread Islam. This is not to say that I have only known Islam all my life. Unlike countries like Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Gambia, and Senegal, where Muslims are the majority, in Ghana Muslims are in the minority. This means that I have encountered many different cultures and Christianity outside of my community. Because the Muslim community in Ghana, Zongo, is a minority community, I have been regarded with similar suspicion in Ghana because of my hijab (due to British colonial rule that others non-normativity) as in the US; hence the experience in the US is not particularly new to me, just more intense. The major

difference between my experience back home and my experience in the US is that I am only a Muslim hijabi in Ghana but a hyper-visible Black hijabi in the US/Mexico border region. This location is particularly relevant because, unlike the East or West Coasts, where there is a visual presence of African and African-American hijabis, I live in the US/Mexico border region where I am a rare occurrence: surveillance of foreign bodies here is centered on the Mexican body. For this reason, my experience in this region is a little unique: given my hypervisibility, I become the perfect target.

AIRPORTS/PORTS OF ENTRY

Of particular importance in discussing US airport security in relation to the antibody analogy is the problem of selective surveillance, where certain bodies are rendered hyper-visible for surveillance (Browne 2015; Selod 2018). Since 9/11, Muslim bodies have been rendered hyper-visible by surveillance programs in the US; the notion that Muslims are a potential threat to the nation leads to perpetual suspicion (Selod 2018: 50). To identify Muslims, security apparatuses often attend to dress that includes the hijab (Selod 2018; Singh 2019). As explained by Balbir Singh, TSA officers' training includes posters with pictures of head coverings for Muslims and Sikhs and information concerning how to respectfully search them as part of the US airport protocol (2019: 669–71). In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Browne shares disturbing stories of people of color who have been harassed by airport security at various spots across the US and Canada just because they are not White: Black women get their afros searched, and Muslims get yanked off the plane because of their names. Foreigners get stuck, or even imprisoned for fraud, in their home countries. All of this goes to show the extent to which racialized foreignness has been made synonymous with a threat that has to be flushed out. The ports utilize antibodies in the form of TSA officers working in service of the US “forever war” on terror which was reactivated after 9/11 (Kapadia 2019: 5).

One chapter in Saher Selod's *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror* (2018) reads very much like Browne's chapter on surveillance in airports and on planes. Both of these works expose how targeted groups are criminalized,

I, myself, have been through several of the airports mentioned in both books, and many more that were not. I have been through the anxiety and the sleepless nights and the post-traumatic stress of it all, therefore, I was “interpellated” (Althusser 2006; Butler 2006) in reading about them. I know what it is like to feel alienated and have my body and hair patted down and groped. I have felt the invasion of and disregard for my privacy as I go through checkpoint after checkpoint whilst checking and re-checking my travel documents as they are extensions of who I am, my prostheses and objects of validation and authentication in the eyes of the custom officers. In my foreignness, I have encountered the US antibodies, firsthand.

From the outside, my experience in those spaces looks pretty much like everyone else’s because everybody has to go through the same security checks. However, what is different for me as a Black hijabi is the anxiety: Will I get through without incident? I hope I don’t lose my document along the way! I hope my documents check out! I hope the antibodies don’t ‘perform security’ on me! I hope I wouldn’t be made a scapegoat of by the TSA at the checkpoints in order to put the minds of the good citizens at rest. These are some of the thoughts that keep me awake for days before traveling.

STREETS AND STORES



My friends and I after grocery shopping (we’re all smiling!).

From my experiences as a foreigner in the US, I have realized that the US border and the logic of antibodies stretch far beyond the airports and checkpoints. This hyper-surveillance is compounded with the fact that I am a Black woman with hijab in the borderlands region. At the same time, surveillance contributes to the flattening of identity as postcolonial scholars including

Raka Shome and Gloria Anzaldúa have theorized. Additionally, because of my hijab and complexion, I tend to be an enigma to people on my US university’s campus.

My experience in the streets and in stores have been that of “Look, a strange looking person.” This experience reminds me of an instance that Browne relates early in her book, “Fanon’s often-cited ‘Look, a Negro!’ passage in *Black Skin, White Masks* on the experience of epidermalization, where the white gaze fixes him as an object among objects and, he says, ‘the white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me’” (2015: 7). Because I live in Las Cruces, I have had to endure stares from people while walking on the street, shopping in stores, or running in the field. I wouldn’t mind the stares but these are coupled with an awareness of the potential danger I am in, just for looking like me. There are stories of Black people being attacked and killed, just for being Black (Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor), Muslim women being attacked and killed, just for wearing the hijab (Yusor and Razan Abu-Salha), and foreign “aliens” being attacked and killed just for not being citizens (Adolfo Cerros Hernández, his wife Sara Esther Regalado, and the 20 others that died in the El Paso shooting of August 3rd, 2019). I belong in all three categories! For these reasons, it is a matter of urgency to discuss the lethal conditions faced by racialized foreigners deemed threats by the antibodies of the US.

The US antibodies are not confined to the airport/ports of entry. Selod also demonstrates how surveillance undergirded by patriotism spreads from the airport security agents to the ordinary citizens on the street. Here, surveillance can include acts that are intended to cause harassment, harm, or even death to the hijabis since they are the most visible Muslims. Selod outlines how some citizens’ attitudes changed dramatically after 9/11; and also how violence against Muslims heightened, spurred on by Islamophobic rhetorics. Apart from the “textual stares” I have had to endure, I have been honked at, sworn at, or almost hit on the streets, while walking to campus. I have always tried to avoid walking alone or at night for fear of being attacked. The most traumatic for me was being stopped by the police. I was stopped once and I couldn’t help panicking! I wasn’t stopped for being Black or hijabi, but at a random checkpoint. The officer was very friendly and treated me with respect, but with all the stories of being killed for being Black? Black people have historically been a targeted group for killing

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or maiming or “slow death” when it is more convenient for US biopolitics (Puar 2017).

CAMPUS AND CLASSROOMS

Being on campus has not shielded me from the surveillance antibodies. I expected that being a university, my school would be diverse enough to make people like me less visible but I was wrong. I have been stared at subtly but incessantly, which makes me feel monitored, scrutinized by antibodies who I thought I had left behind at the airport. In my first class in the US, peers came up to me, seemingly friendly, to ask where I was from. They then proceeded to tell me how beautifully I dressed and how good my English was: I have spoken English all my life! I was constantly asked if I was from Africa or the Middle East and if I was a Muslim by those who got close enough. I have had fellow students ask where I was reading from when I made a contribution in class, and been told by peers how smart and eloquent I was after class. None of these comments came across to me as compliments—they came across as surprise that I had exhibited traits that defied my watchers’ biases. This scrutiny is not limited to the classes I take; it follows me to the ones I teach.

The issue of power dynamics in the Composition course I run has been one of great interest to me. In the classes that I teach, I have noticed a resistance from students merely because I look and sound different from their expectations. As a Ghanaian woman who wears the hijab, I discovered that I need to do more work in terms of delivery to enable my students to see beyond my different culture and listen beyond what I sound like, to what I actually have to offer. I have had students who expressed wonder at how clear my English was, and asked if I was British. I have had students who have questioned my approach to teaching Composition and emphasized how different it was from their high school experience: they went as far as to say that I didn’t know how to teach English. In their minds, as a person unlike anybody they’ve met before, I must be wrong to do things differently no matter how effective my methods are.

To address the problem of resistance and scrutiny mentioned above, I turn to scholars of feminist pedagogy such as Laura

R. Micciche. Micciche argues that resistance in the classroom entails various intersecting issues that include gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. She addresses these issues from both the student's and the teacher's perspectives in the classroom, and beyond. In her writing, Micciche shares how other feminist scholars have addressed issues including how to empower the female student in the classroom; how to better educate all students on difference and foreignness; and how to help students see beyond their teacher's different body to learn from her. This was particularly instrumental to me in my quest to divert the antibodies' attention away from policing me and toward the course I am facilitating.

Equipped with this knowledge, I make the reality of difference as explicit as possible in my classroom. I start this from the very first meeting with students in order to create an environment where discussion of difference is encouraged. I also incorporate the issue of culture and diversity in designing my syllabus and lessons, all in the effort to make my classes as difference centered as possible. Though I struggled in my very first class with strong resistance from students, I have since learned from the mistake of overlooking the topic of difference and making the consideration of identity, culture, and diversity in technical communication and design the core of my lessons. By so doing, I have been able to create communities out of my classrooms that last long after the course is over. I still have students who retain and maintain the strong network that I establish in each classroom, who also contact me from time to time for advice, or just to chat. I feel so proud that students are comfortable enough to confide in me, even with personal matters, during and long after each semester.

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CONCLUSION

To cope with the ever-looming danger, I become even more self-conscious of both my appearance and behavior in public. In other words, I perform self-surveillance in order to evade the antibodies. Mind you, when it comes to belonging to either the Muslim or the Black community in Las Cruces, I belong to both and none. This is because the majority of the black women in Las Cruces are not hijabis, and the majority of the hijabis are Arabs, which

is a major difference in the experience of full members of either community. When it comes to coping in the streets and stores, I fall back to the use of visual rhetorics, as mentioned above. I achieve this by simply dressing up: I make sure to dress formally on my way to class or to shop in order to at least communicate respect and respectability—this works for me most of the time. In addition to dressing up, I make sure to avoid any sudden movements that could flare up the already tense environment that sometimes happen to surround me, and make it a point to smile more, keep calm, and volunteer help. Even when using the self-checkout machines at the store, I am hyper-aware of the security cameras surrounding and shooting gazes at me. More than the cameras, I'm hyper-aware of the Eyes of the antibodies ready to use me as a scapegoat for the minutest mistake. I am not the only one with these strategies. According to Selod, whilst some women participants avoid harassment by removing the hijab altogether, others choose to resist through the modification of their dresses, or by becoming more visible through social participation and engagement.

As Anne Cheng puts it in *The Melancholy of Race*, “There are still deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be” (2001: 7). Being different is one thing—living in a world that brands you as inadequate or a threat because you are different is another. This is made worse when the dominant system tags you with stereotypes. The dominant system dictates your behavioral system and you become obsessed with trying to navigate it, you internalize it. Your world, your entire existence could revolve around this stereotype. Because you cannot be adequate enough for the imposed standard, you develop an inferiority complex. According to Cheng, “The ‘stereotype threat’ that haunts African American students and inevitably accompanies and hinders their performances” is a psychological implication of structural racism (2001: 6). Of course, this sort of inferiority complex leads to depression, the sort that transcends you, the sort that, according to Cheng, is “pathological,” is “melancholia” (2001: 8). As Cheng writes, “Melancholia thus denotes a condition of endless self-im-

poverishment [which] does not simply denote a *condition* of grief but is, rather, a *legislation* of grief” (2001: 8, emphasis in original).

In effect, my body, being Black, hijabi and foreign in the US, has been framed by the US security and surveillance apparatus to be received as a triple threat to national security and should therefore be eliminated by the US antibodies for the safety of the citizens. In order to stay alive, I must devise means of evading the antibodies by internalizing the same stereotypes used to frame me, so as to perform self-surveillance. By so doing, I have mastered a few coping mechanisms, as mentioned above, in an attempt to prove to the unrelenting Eyes that monitor me that I’m no threat—I’m just trying to live. However much I try though, I can only keep trying to stay alive. I will never be able to prove or change anything because the problem is beyond the now, it’s tightly woven into the fabric of the US empire itself, it is systemic.

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