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Virginia Carter Spinks March 30, 2017

The Silence of Narrative Echo Chambers: An Analysis of College Students' Perceptions of Islam's Connection to Terrorism

by

Virginia Carter Spinks

Kristin Phillips Ph.D.

Adviser

Department of Anthropology

Kristin Phillips Ph.D.

Adviser

James Hoesterey Ph.D.

Committee Member

Rkia Cornell Ph.D.

Committee Member

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Abstract

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A narrative conflating Islam with terrorism remains pervasive in the American public sphere in the twenty-first century. Despite many attempts by scholars and other public figures to dissociate the two, this narrative persists through continual repetition and re-leveraging by power entities such as community leaders, religious figures, and politicians. This study investigates how students at Emory College of Arts and Sciences perceive Islam's connection to terrorism, given this pervasiveness. More specifically, it investigates narrative processes in the particular space of a liberal arts college campus. Through an analysis and synthesis of semi-structured interviews and a qualitative survey, this study seeks to provide a working map of how this issue is understood among college students, as well as how it is discussed in the college environment. This study assumes that students' perceptions will necessarily be influenced by their lived experiences, a contemporary media world of globalized information, and by their existence as agents, capable of complex thinking and speech production.

This research finds that on the whole, these students' perceptions are more nuanced than the more essentialist narratives dominating the public sphere. It also finds that students' perceptions are heavily influenced by the sub-culture of the liberal arts college campus space. Conversations around Islam's connection to terrorism are heavily shaped by national political tensions and by the argument over the place of free speech, political correctness, and identity politics. Moreover, this study finds that in the space of the liberal arts campus, there is a cultural emphasis on the creation of safe spaces to protect the diversity of identity and create an inclusive atmosphere. It appears though, that this language, together with the ability of students to exist within information worlds of their own choosing, has caused people to refrain from discussing politically-contentious topics like this one for fear of offending or seeming ignorant. Despite students' nuanced outlooks about Islam's connection to terrorism, they feel bound by unspoken rules which inhibit discussion about it in public spaces.

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Introduction

The past fifteen years, there has been a pervasive narrative in the United States of the impending threat of Islamic terror. It appears everywhere. It is not just in the news, but in other forms of material production. It is explicitly and implicitly in the films we watch and the books we read. It informs our politics, identities, and communities. This project is an investigation of how narratives concerning Islam and its relationship to terrorism take form and compete with one another.

Part of the reason for this investigation lies in that 9/11 remains significant in the cultural memory of what “terrorism” means to American society, other Western states, and to many other areas of the world. Most Western area studies of the Middle East, and scholarship concerning the West’s relationship with Islam, must necessarily nod to the force of 9/11 as a temporal marker in the cultural memories of Western and non-Western societies alike. However, 9/11 is certainly not the only historical event that informs how people understand Islam in connection to terrorism. This research seeks to understand then, more about how narratives about Islam’s connection to terrorism are created and repeated. This investigation is important, because of these narratives’ immense resonance in our social and political worlds. During the 2016 national presidential election in the United States, “radical Islamic terrorism,” was a hotly debated topic that profoundly resonated with some American citizens and that others did not think twice about. Two months after Donald Trump’s election, narratives about Islam’s connection to terrorism are still highly present and contested in public discourse. A number of political developments have kept this particular issue in the “hot seat,” as the Trump Administration has placed increasing travel restrictions on people traveling to and from particular Muslim-majority countries.

Many scholars have examined the perceptions of Islam in the West, as well as theorized about how these perceptions are maintained in the public sphere. This study aims to investigate these processes of narrative perpetuation within a more microscopic cultural environment: the four-year liberal arts college. Undergraduate college students are interesting research participants, because almost their entire socialization and identity formation happened in a world in which “terrorism” is public enemy number one. I am interested in what characterizes a connection between Islam and terrorism in the individual and collective consciousness of millennials pursuing a liberal arts education at Emory University. This study will attempt to map these perceptions through personal narratives of students from a wide range of personal histories and subjectivities. Moreover, this study analyzes how different narratives are shared and discussed in the socio-cultural space of Emory’s campus at this particular moment in time.

The first chapter of the study will present the theoretical frameworks and bodies of scholarship that profoundly influenced the design, conduct and analysis of the study. It will outline theories of narrative production, which are crucial to the analysis of college students’ perceptions about a connection between Islam and terrorism. This is because these students actively provided their own narratives about this topic, and provided insight to the way the college environment shapes processes of narrative production (i.e. politically-loaded conversations about identity). It will also briefly outline how scholars have historically chosen to approach the topic of perceptions of Islam in the West.

The second chapter will introduce the context of this research, Emory’s liberal campus, providing a framework to understand what it is about this space that shapes public conversation about Islam and terrorism. The third chapter will quickly outline my research methods, the key questions I set out to study, and my positionality in the study as well as how my research evolved over time.

The next three chapters are increasing levels of ethnographic analysis. Chapter four explores students' differing experiences at Emory and their nuanced views about how Islam is (or is not) related to the concept of terrorism. It also examines the context and causes of their non-essentializing views. Chapter five presents a cross-analysis of students' perceptions with literature on narrative production and perpetuation. It discusses how students often leverage counter-narratives either to what they see/hear through national media, or to what narratives exist in their immediate cultural environments. Chapter six provides insight to how this particular study revealed broader processes of political socialization on liberal arts university campuses. It examines how both national politics and a university culture interact to create a unique set of opinions about Islam's relation to terrorism, and a somewhat contentious environment around any conversation that seems to be "politically-loaded." Chapter seven discusses the limitations of the study, and offers questions for further research.

Chapter One: Situating and Framing

In November 2015, more than 130 people were killed in Paris when attackers opened fire on French civilians. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks.[1] This event shocked the Western world, for it was one of the largest "terrorist" attacks committed by "radical Islamists" against a Western nation since 9/11. There was immediately a massive outpouring of sympathy and support from the United States and other Western nations for the victims in Paris. Facebook even created a feature that could filter your profile picture with the French flag, and the trending hashtag on social media platforms was "#WeAreFrance." Americans in particular sympathized with how Parisians must have felt, given the memory of 9/11.

Just a few days later, two suicide bombers detonated explosives in Beirut, Lebanon, killing over 70 civilians. Many Emory students shared news coverage of this bombing, because they felt that it was being ignored by mainline news outlets, in favor of the more "relatable" attack in Paris. Sareena, an undergraduate student at Emory University, remembers when 70 people were killed and over 300 were injured in Lahore, Pakistan, in March of 2016.[2] Sareena's father is Pakistani, so she often pays particular attention to news concerning Pakistan. She remembers having a discussion about these attacks with another Emory student:

> I actually had a conversation with someone, where all those attacks were happening and one happened in Pakistan and I put up a status and said "there's no #WeArePakistan and when this happens in Muslims countries we don't stand up" and that person said "that's because it happens every day, and that's normal for them." Does that make it worse? How is that an excuse? It's like even that in itself is an anti-Muslim sentiment, because it's dismissive. But if you bring it [Islam] to a country where [it's] not the prevailing religion, it's suddenly bad. Why? It's still terrorism.

---

[1] See http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/08/europe/2015-paris-terror-attacks-fast-facts/

[2] See http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/deadly-blast-hits-pakistan-lahore-160327143110195.html

Sareena’s story raises several questions surrounding how the connection between Islam and terrorism are understood and talked about on Emory’s campus: How do students with differing subjectivities share stories about Islam’s connection to terrorism? How are students’ opinions on this topic shaped by their access to different ways of remembering terrorist attacks? How can we understand media’s differing representations of Islam’s connection to terrorism?

“Narrative” is the primary concept I use to frame this research. “Narrative” is applicable not only because of its pervasiveness in the broader discourse about Western/Eastern interaction, but “narrative” also is crucial to understanding students’ perceptions. When students share their opinions on this topic, they offer stories. They contribute to a field of narratives surrounding Islam and terrorism in America. The stories they share have been influenced by the narratives they grew up with and that they hear every day, but they also are influenced by students’ existence as embodied agents in this world. Therefore, this study assumes that the stories and opinions students share are shaped by their own subjectivities and not just by the narratives they consume. In the above example, we can understand what Sareena told me as a site of narrative production. She makes meaning from her past lived experiences as Pakistani-American, and uses these cultural memories, observations, and knowledge of other public American narratives to then say something *else* about her understanding of the connection between Islam and terrorism in the world.

“Cultural memory” is also crucial to frame this research, because of its role in explaining how certain narratives become pervasive and are passed on through generations of a particular social group. I use “cultural memory” here as Astrid Erll does in the introduction to a volume on *Cultural Memory Studies* (2008) to mean, “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (2), namely, how does our understanding of history inform what we know about present events? In the above vignette, we see the way two students talked about terrorist attacks in France and in Pakistan, in light of a working knowledge/memory of attacks that have been significant in the past. We see also that certain events are more or less significant to different people, depending on which cultural memories they have shared access to and participate in. Sareena is more likely to talk about terrorist events that affect Pakistanis, because she has more shared access to that field of cultural memory than another student who has no personal link to Pakistan. A discussion of *cultural memory* necessarily involves power. How particular narratives are passed on is highly related to which social groups have the loudest voices in shaping more public narratives.

"Media" and media reception studies are related to the concept of narrative, since we live within a globalized information system. Our understanding of global events is not just contextualized with the stories people tell one another face-to-face, but also in how people produce, absorb, and redirect narratives through media technologies. Media and reception studies also provide insight into social consciousness that exists external to and part of individual subjectivity. I emphasize the individual perspective, because I see it as necessary to understand how narratives concerning Islam and terrorism are created and compete with one another. Individuals comprise social collectivities. Analyzing how individuals differentially leverage narratives offers a unique point of entry into these collectivities.

Lastly, I consider *echo chambers* as a part of understanding narrative perpetuation. In today's information-saturated world, it is possible for people to exist in worlds of their own choosing. Any person can shut her or himself into worlds in which they only have to hear and respond to the narratives that they already agree with. This is especially true for a college student, who is geographically isolated in a very particular cultural environment.

The Role of Narrative/Myth

"Narrative" is a highly contested term within a developing literature on the subject, particularly given its relationship to similar words such as "myth." "Myth" is a concept often utilized within scholarship on the relationship between the West and Islam as well as scholarship on cultural memory. James Ferguson, a post-colonial scholar, sheds light on the issue of usage in studying cultural "myths":

> The term myth is useful for my purposes here, precisely because of its ambiguity, because it is often used in two quite different senses that I wish to bring into relation. First, there is the popular usage, which takes myth to be a false or factually inaccurate version of things that has come to be widely believed. Second, there is the anthropological use of the term, which focuses on the story's social function: a myth in this sense is not just a mistaken account but a cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meaning for the organization and interpretation (Ferguson, 1999, 13).

I employ "narrative" here in a similar manner; that is to mean a method of cultural understanding and meaning-making. I understand narrative as Paul Riceour does, "as a central act of configuration, the way in which human experience is made meaningful" (Bassett, 2007: 10).

In the West, and in the United States specifically, there are narratives concerning terrorism that are privileged over others individually and collectively, as well as publicly and privately. Moreover, which narratives are prevalent in which spaces, depends on who and what have *power* in that particular space and time.

It is important to research how narratives about Islam and terrorism are discussed in smaller sites of narrative production, because they comprise the whole. This is crucial work, because cultural myths concerning Islam and terrorism remain powerful in shaping both culture and politics in America. However, these narratives do not exist in a vacuum. They are leveraged and re-framed as new historical events become engrained in cultural memories. They are also not un-contested. The details and relevance of narratives like "Islam as enemy/other," always exist in dynamic tension with other competing narratives.

The Role Cultural Memory in Narrative Perpetuation

Cultural memory has been a growing interdisciplinary point of research in the past two decades (Erll 2010: 1). It can be considered a component of narrative perpetuation, because remembering is the action which carries memories, the content of which are stories: "Memory…has always been the home of narrative" (Rodriguez, 2007:9) "Cultural" memory is used rather than "collective" memory, as was used by Maurice Halbwachs (1925), precisely because the term acknowledges that memories and their formations are highly dependent upon their socio-cultural contexts (Erll, 2008: 4). The particular *cultural memory* theory discussed by Erll takes into account that "culture" is three-dimensional, and involves three distinct, yet interconnected levels: the social, material, and mental:

> …Understood in this way, 'cultural memory' can serve as an umbrella term which comprises 'social memory' (the starting point for memory research in the social sciences), 'material or medial memory' (the focus of interest in literary and media studies, and 'mental or cognitive memory' (the field of expertise in psychology and neuroscience) (Erll 4)

Cultural memory should be understood as an operative metaphor, because a culture in and of itself cannot engage in the individual cognitive process of remembering. However, cultural memory necessarily operates at the individual and collective levels, as well as the public and private levels. Cultural norms and practices always inform what we individually remember, just as there cannot be a disembodied cultural memory that exists without the amalgam of individuals' memory (Erll 2008: 5).

Rodriguez notes in the first chapter of her book, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity*, that memories “cannot be understood apart from social forces. Religious, class and family affiliations that form in cognitive and affective deliberations help construct the manner in which a memory will be interpreted” (2007: 8). She goes on to say that *cultural memory* is the bank we collectively draw from to teach ourselves how to organize our present (and future) experiences in relation to past events, also how we position ourselves inside of those experiences to inform, or perhaps justify, how we should feel about them (2007: 7-8). Thus, differing social groups within a society choose different memories to collectively draw from in order to orient themselves inside their unique realities. These chosen memories then reinforce a group’s particular identity and orientation within the world to both insiders and outsiders to the group: “They explain a group to itself, legitimate its deeds and aspirations, and provide important benchmarks for nonmembers trying to understand the group’s cultural identity” (8).

Rodriguez says also that, “cultural memory may emerge from a catastrophic tragedy. In fact, many cultural memories often arise out of events that prove transformative, igniting recognizable shifts in the world of meaning for a people...They are not bound or limited to the past, but continue to give meaning to the present” (12-13). For example, 9/11 can be seen as such an event in the United States, even though different people may perceive it and remember it differently. For some it is an event with a poignant affective resonance. For others it may be perceived as a purely anomalous event in American history. Either way, it is a significant event that continues to actively frame conversations around both terrorism and Islam. 9/11 also exists on a historical continuum of interactions between the West and the Middle East. So, although it is a significant marker of the relationship in many people’s memories, it does not exist absent from a consciousness, a cultural memory if you will, of a historical relationship that also influences how Islam and terrorism are talked about. Rather, 9/11 can be seen as one of many events that exist coeval to peoples' present understandings of Islam's connection to terrorism.

However, the many different identities and social groups within broader American society privilege different memories and narratives in relation to Islam and terrorism. This is part of *power* in cultural memory: the ability to decide which memories persist and are capitalized upon because of their emotional and formative content (Rodriguez 2007: 12). Of course, there are some people in a more advantaged position to decide which narratives are perpetuated i.e. those with more public platforms like, politicians, news producers, journalists, etc.

Much of the literature around *cultural memory* discusses not only what is remembered, but what is forgotten by social groups. This "forgetting" can be systematic or unintentional. In the past twenty years or so, discourse around the memory debate has been influenced by a "crisis of representation" (Mockel-Reike, 1998: 7). One example of this fear over representation is manifested in the social anxiety (in the West) with the death of the Holocaust generation. Human rights advocates worry that the memory of such atrocities will be erased, allowing for the repetition of "similarly fatal political developments" (1998: 6).

Power necessarily plays a hand in what is remembered and forgotten. In examining how specific events come to hold their place within cultural memories, we must also examine the specific power processes involved. Post-colonial scholar Adam Hochschild describes this process in his chapter "The Great Forgetting" in *King Leopold's Ghost*. He provides evidence for King Leopold's explicit demand that all records pertaining the violent "rubber terror" during the colonial era in the Congo, be destroyed by fire. And they were, mostly. Restoring memory of this era is what made Hochschild's work so revolutionary. He notes that "the collective memory" of the rubber terror in the rural areas is fractured, because of the systematic "forgetting." The

Congolese had no writing system at the time, so everything had to be remembered by oral tradition (300). However, oral tradition and *cultural memory* change over time, and the Congolese did not have the power to preserve their own memories in the textbooks; Belgians did.

Cultural memories are flexible and dynamic entities, shaped by historical events, yes, and the march of time, but Hochschild's work shows how they are shaped by power: Who is telling the story? To whom? For what reason? Although the passing of generations is something inevitable, there are ways to ensure that the memory of historical events lives on in a *cultural memory* beyond, but part of individual memories. Power, social or financial capital, is needed to do this though. In the case of the passing of Holocaust survivors, human rights advocates call for power entities to help preserve the memory of the Jewish diaspora's suffering. For example, in a recent wave of anti-Semitism in the United States, members of the Jewish community called for President Donald Trump to legitimize their identities and personal histories by publicly speaking out against their suffering[3]. In the case of the rubber terror in the Belgian Congo, Hochschild uses his positionality, as an author signed with a major commercial publishing house, and as a white male in America, to bring to light white Europeans' largely forgotten abuses upon black Africans.

In applying these concepts about *cultural memory* to the study at hand, we can note two ways of thinking about power in cultural memory and narrative perpetuation. On the one hand, we should consider how *cultural memory* interacts with the personal memories of college students. These students do not have personal memory of events such as the Iran hostage crisis, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, or the Ayatollah Khomeini *fatwa* against Salmon Rushdie, etc. Most of their personal memories of terrorism begin with 9/11. And yet, previous generations have access to this personal memory and have the ability and *power* to transmit, or not, the memory of those events. Older generations have access to a historical contextualization of a complex relationship between Islam and the West that millennials do not have. This historically fraught relationship continues to resonate in how all Americans, including college-aged millennials, view Islam's connection to terrorism. As generations pass on, memories do unintentionally get lost, and it is up to individuals in the present to decide whether or not they want make an effort to pass along certain memories and narratives.

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[3] These events included multiple bomb threats made on Jewish Community Centers as well as the vandalizing of Jewish graves in cemeteries in St. Louis and Philadelphia in February, 2017. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39037666

From another angle, we may say that there are also powerful structural entities that have the ability to shape memory in the American public sphere. This occurs when one individual, or a small group of individuals has the power to control the information received by large masses of people. Media plays a significant role in how narratives are produced, received and re-produced. This becomes even more complicated with issues such as Islam's relationship to terrorism, because it is one that is contentious, multi-faceted and produces many counter-narratives. Those who have the largest public platforms in the United States to speak on this issue, specifically President Donald Trump and members of his administration, are not necessarily the most "informed" on this subject, either through personal experience of Islam, or intentional study of it.

In a report published by the Center for American Progress Fund (2011), investigators identified the structural components of an "Islamophobia" network in the United States. This network has been made possible by a small number of donors. They intentionally fund a few "misinformed experts," who publicly espouse Islamophobic rhetoric that reaches millions of Americans and those abroad. Altogether a group of seven foundations and charitable trusts provided "42.6 million [dollars] to Islamophobia think tanks between 2001 and 2009" (Wajahat et al 2011: 3). Such Islamophobic think tanks include the oft-critiqued Robert Spencer of Jihad

Watch and Daniel Pipes at the Middle East Forum (Wajahat et al 2011: 4). They have also identified an "Islamophobia echo chamber," which consists of leaders of the religious right, media outlets such as Fox News, politicians, and grassroots organizations. Members of this echo chamber bounce Islamophobic rhetoric off of one another, amplifying it, and all the while broadcasting it to the public misleadingly (Wajahat et al 2011: 5). This report confirms that there are indeed parties who benefit from the perpetration of a narrative that separates an "us" from a "them," to generate a public fear of Islam on the grounds that it breeds terrorism.

Despite this finding that a dividing narrative is systemically backed by power entities, there do exist counter-narratives to the ones leveraged by those with power in the public sphere. But these counter-narratives often do not have the financial or political resources to become pervasive. Yet, identities are multiple and constantly in fluctuation as they relate to cultural environments and lived experiences. It is useful in this case to understand that students' experiences and memories will differ necessarily. Part of the goal of this research is to investigate how different students from many different backgrounds may have some shared understandings of terrorism. All students are necessarily members of the liberal arts university sub-culture. These institutions represent structural power entities just like any other, and they do intentionally shape culture and public space according to their own set of values. When young adults come to Emory, they both influence and are influenced by a new cultural space. Perhaps it is one that collectively holds a very different set of shared values than what students have experienced in cultural spaces before coming to Emory.

A problematic component to discussing the prevalence of any narrative counter to more hegemonic ones is whether or not people recognize their own agency in sharing those counter-narratives. By this I mean that they may privately share narratives counter to a pervasive narrative about "Islam as enemy/Other," but their public narrative practices could be confined by what spaces they are in. They also may not consciously realize the choices they make concerning what stories they share, in which contexts, or how they have come to know what they know about Islam's connection to terrorism. In the sixth chapter of *Cultural Memory*, Rodriguez identifies this concept as reflexivity or, "the conscious ability to ground the everyday with the interpretation of the meta-memory" (2007: 14). It will be interesting to see how reflexive students are about their own opinions as well as the agency they believe themselves to have within in a national political contestation about Islam and terrorism.

The Role of Media and Individual Perceptions in Narrative Practices

Media are necessary in a discussion of narrative reiteration, because media technologies provide techniques for the transmission of narratives. In response to Jameson's anxiety that the information age will mean the end of narrative as a cultural construct, Carline Bassett contends that "narrative remains central to what we do in an information-saturated world. Narrative is at the heart of operations of everyday life and everyday culture within a world where digital technology is becoming pervasive" (Bassett 2007: 8). The information age has not ushered out the use of narrative in our everyday lives, but has reconfigured it.

Scholars of religion and media, often engage in "reception studies," which stress the view of the human being "as a moral agent, as a being capable of choice and concerted effort directed by ideals, reason, feelings, and imagination" (Morgan 2008: 3). In other words, media do not so much define cultural reality, but reflect it. They also provide platforms for contestation around representations of differing subjectivities and identities (Spitulnik 1997: 296). These scholars reference Aristotle's idea of *aesthesis* which is humans' ability to perceive, experience, and create knowledge about the world simultaneously through physical sensation. Perception and cognition are grounded in the bodily sensorium, so it is necessary to give attention how bodies are involved in processes of mediation (Meyer 2015: 18-19). Following from this re-situation of moral thinking in the sensing body, Meyer offers the concept of "shared imaginaries," whereas an "imaginary" is how an individual makes sense of their world according to a moral subjectivity. This subjectivity operates within "a historically constituted phenomenological world of lived experience and its social categories and power structures" (Meyer 2015:13). Meyer says also that imaginaries are personal and social. They play just as much of a role in shaping reality as reflecting it:

> So an imaginary is an assemblage of mental images that is grounded in the material world and takes part in reproducing it as a phenomenological lifeworld that is experience and vested with meaning. Therefore, an imaginary is not just a visual representation that stands apart from the world; it is a world-making device with its own reality effects. Imaginaries can only be powerful devices for world making (and hence be understood as real) under the condition that they are shared. An imaginary is shared—and thus made social—by gathering people who imagine in synchronization (Meyer 2015: 15).

It is necessary then, to acknowledge individual agency in shaping social reality, especially when it comes to media, for individuals have a significant hand in creating shared imaginaries (and the cultural memories) that produce the narratives disseminated by media outlets. Narrative perpetuation operates not just macroscopically, but microscopically "among ordinary citizens" (Helbling 2012: 1).

Within the topic of perceptions of Islam in the West, the attitudes and perceptions of individuals have hardly been studied at all. Sociologist Marc Helbling identified this gap in scholarship and oversaw an edited volume of different sociological studies measuring the phenomenon of Islamophobia (2012). Helbling says the problem with this is that Islamophobia is such a complex phenomenon and it is difficult to quantitatively measure, or to be sure that one is actually measuring it (2012: 8-9). He says also that quantitative research alone cannot provide information about the nuanced ways people understand terms such as “Muslim” or “Islam” (or “terrorism” for that matter). It is necessary to investigate individual attitudes, allowing that individuals have complex points of view about Islam’s connection to terrorism. As a general example, people can fear the violence of terrorist attacks without thinking all Muslims are terrorists. Most students who participate in my study population will not have an “essentializing and universalizing” (Helbling 2012: 7) view.

The Narrative Echo Chambers

Paolo Massa, in his chapter from *The Reputation Society,* writes about inter-personal trust metrics for online exchanges. He says that there are “two extremes of society that can be induced by the basic assumptions behind the two different kinds of trust metrics: tyranny of the majority and echo chambers” (2011: 157). In the former, he says that in “a system powered by a global trust metric,” we are in danger of assuming that anyone who does not conform to the majority or “norm” is malicious. In applying this extreme to this study, those who challenge hegemonic narratives about Islam’s connection to terrorism may be perceived, at best as “apologists” for terrorists, and at worst, as threatening Americans’ safety themselves. It is important also, given the above discussion of power, to consider that it may not matter whether or not the “majority” holds a particular opinion. To say that the majority of Americans conflate Islam with terrorism, because Donald Trump was elected President, is a logical fallacy. But in reality, powerful individuals, like those exposed in CAP’s “Islamophobia Report” do have the ability to drown out all other counter-narratives besides the ones they consider personally-advantageous.

Massa also relies on C. Sunstein to discuss the ramifications of a “total personalization” of one’s trust network (158). Sunstein says that “technology has greatly increased people’s ability to ‘filter’ what they want to read, see and hear’” (Sunstein 1993, as cited in Massa, 2010: 158). We are able to surround ourselves with only like-minded people in both physical and online social words. Massa continues, “In this scenario, there is a risk of segmentation of society into micro groups that tend to adopt extreme views, develop their own culture, and not communicate with people outside their group” (158). When we have the ability to exist purely within worlds of our own making without any want or need to confront opinions different from our own, we are constantly victims of our own confirmation bias. We risk narratives spiraling out of control, and we never have to encounter narratives that challenge what we know about the world.

How Islam is Perceived in the West: Review of the Literature

There are many ways scholars choose to examine Western narratives concerning Islam, terrorism, Arabs, and the Middle East and here I will provide a cursory glance at some of the most pervasive frameworks, all of which inform and interact with one another. These frameworks influenced both my initial research question, and the way I approached asking specific questions during semi-structured interviews. Much of this scholarship does examine and critique the hegemonic narrative of “Islam as enemy/Other.” Although most students did not offer such theoretical critiques of this narrative, they often grounded their own counter-narratives, either explicitly or implicitly, with the language of these theories. For the purpose of mapping this body of scholarship, I identified three interrelated dichotomous frameworks within which many scholars choose to engage the topic of Western/Eastern relations: The Clash of Civilizations Self/Other, and Islamophobia/Islamophilia.

The Clash of Civilizations Theory

Samuel Huntington first published his *"clash of civilizations"* theory in 1993 (Perry, 2010: 242). Huntington argued that the world was divided along civilizational fault lines and that, "the fundamental source of conflict will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic...the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (Huntington 1993: 22). Perry argues against many critiques of Huntington's thesis. He notes that Huntington did not claim that there was currently a clash of civilizations, but that there may be one if states decide not to "tolerate Western arrogance" (Perry 2010: 226). Perry maintains that Huntington did not mean to imply that Islam was an inherently violent religion, but rather that there could be many causes of increased violence in the Muslim world (231), particularly given the fact that it has long been subordinated to Western powers (243):

> The Gulf War left some Arabs feeling proud that Saddam Hussein attacked Israel and stood up to the West. It also left many feeling humiliated and resentful of the West's military presence in the Persian Gulf…and their apparent inability to shape their own destiny (Huntington 1993:32).

Perry contends that Huntington advocated for equal but separate societies (Perry 2010: 238), "each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others" (Huntington 1993: 49). Scholars have criticized Huntington though, for creating this very separation.

Scholars like B.S. Turner assert that such a separation has never existed and does not exist today as evidenced by a global economic system with free-flowing human capital (Turner

2002: 115). Bottici and Challand[4] criticize the over-simplification of complex realities in Huntington's analysis, and they contend that this over-simplification now exists as a successful "political myth" (2010: 2). For them, the *power* of myths, lies not in whether or not they are "true" representations of reality, but in "the fact that [they] cannot be falsified, because [they] create the condition for [their] own realization." Additionally, they argue that narrative production around the West's relationship to the Middle East is quite related to identity politics:

> a political myth exists in the common work on a narrative that answers and reproduces a need for significance for a given social group. As a consequence, political myths are not only the result of an already existing identity but also the means for producing a reality and an identity yet to come as means for producing a reality and an identity yet to come. Otherwise put, they are potential self-fulfilling prophecies" (Bottici and Challand 2010: 2).

So, if before we had cause to say that there is no way in which these societies are diametrically opposed to one another, these authors suggest that by voicing theories like Huntington's clash, we are shaping a world where this may in fact become reality, or at least a world where most people in both societies perceive it as a reality. "People perceive such a clash and act in the world as if it existed, but in this way they also make it real" (Bottici and Challand 2010: 3).

Self/Other

Karim H. Karim is a leading scholar theorizing about this insistence on a West/East dichotomy by both societies, through a framework of Self/Other. He believes that the Self and the Other have more in common with one another than not, and exist interdependently However, he offers a bit more insight into why we now seem to be caught in a “clash of ignorance” (Karim 2014: 11).

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[4] See Bottici, C. & Challand, B. (2010). *The myth of the clash of civilizations*. Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York, NY: Routledge.

This terminology was originally coined by Edward Said in a 2001 magazine article published six weeks after 9/11. This article examined possible reasons why there has been continued conflict between Western and Muslim societies, one of which was the proposition that it was a “reformulation of the Cold War conflict model” (Karim, 2014: 11). He says that the division of the world into categories of Self and Other is inherent in humanity’s cognitive way of organizing sensory perceptions, “engagement with the Other occurs according to the ways in which it is imagined by the Self” (Karim 2014: 3). Often, the Other performs the complementary foil to the Self, but when the Self view the Other as a threat to the Self’s existence, it can take an aggressive stance toward the Other (Karim 2010: 162).

For example, during the Cold War, Westerners were suspicious of communism and those in Eastern Europe were suspicious of capitalism. Propaganda techniques reinforced these suspicions, explaining to the public why the Self had a duty to eliminate the threatening Other, all the while demanding a conformity to this purist collective identity (Karim 2010: 162). The collective identity of the Self is presented as fundamentally “good” and the Other as “evil” whereby:

> …such essentialization helps set up a situation in which the faults of the Self, particularly, the elites, tend to be hidden under the veil of goodness as those of the Other are magnified. In this absolute scenario, the Self can do no evil and the Other can do no good. Indeed, in the most extreme cases, they become personifications of good and evil. When this happens, it becomes easier to carry out and justify massive harm to the Other (Karim 2010:163).

Karim goes on to argue that Muslim societies were already staged to take the place of the evil "Other" even before the end of the Cold War.[5] The reportage of Middle Eastern wars along with "confrontations of Western powers with state and non-state Muslim actors seemed to prepare the way for Islam to become a post-Cold War Other" (171). He mentions that this state was also religiously pre-dispositioned by the Western view of the Self as a Christian Self pitted against a Muslim Other (171).

In these ways, Karim lays out the mechanisms for how a "clash of ignorance" is perpetuated. His book, written with Mahmood Eid, *Reimagining the Other*, presents extensive evidence which supports the interdependence of a Western Self and Muslim Other, and yet, by all appearances, the "clash of ignorance" continues on as a hegemonic narrative in much public discourse. In keeping with a discussion about power, he likewise says this ignorance is perpetuated by a group of powerful individuals from different stripes of the social order whose "motivations are not clear but they appear to include fear and hatred of the Other as well as a profound lack of understanding about how the conflict harms the respective Self's fundamental interests in an interdependent world" (Karim 2014:10).

Islamophobia/Islamophilia

Islamophobia is a term of "recent vintage" (Shryock 2010: 12), which has generally come to shape the conversation around the American and European phenomenon of demonstrated hatred and fear of Muslims (Shryock 2010: 2). The Islamophobia in America and Europe is an effective tool of political mobilization (Shryock 2010: 3). This is evidenced not only within the report on the American Islamophobia network (Wajahat et al 2011). We can also see it within the increased resurgence of far-right nationalist parties in Europe which are in a way a response to an increased Muslim immigration and integration (or at least a perceived increase) (Rodriguez-Aguilera 2014) and in the election of Donald Trump in the United States, who used fear-mongering tactics about Muslim immigration in response to the recent Syrian refugee crisis.

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[5] This argument is not original to Karim. Huntington and Said similarly made this argument.

Shryock notes that the phenomenon of *Islamophobia* is contextualized in a reality where "high-profile enemies in the war on terror have been defined, and have defined themselves, as Muslim," (Shryock 2010: 1). So, we can understand that this phenomenon indeed arises from the experience of real physical violence that threatens the integrity and continued existence of a group (Shryock 2010: 8). Shryock makes the distinction though, that *Islamophobia* arose because of the close proximity of Muslims' and non-Muslims' "cultural and political spaces" (Shryock 2010: 8). It was born of interaction, conversation, and contestation of shared space, not through separation.

The problem with characterizing Islamophobia, though, is that it universalizes and essentializes complex socio-political and cultural phenomena (Shryock 2010: 8). Conversely, we must also be skeptical of attempts to off-set Islamophobia, which he calls "Islamophilia." There is a danger in identifying some Muslims who practice "real" Islam as "good" and in harmony with the Self, and some Muslims, whose practices "misrepresent" Islam, as "bad," because this too does not allow for the existence of a multiplicity of ways to validly practice Islam (Shryock 2010: 9):

> The traits that define the good Muslim are just as likely to be based on wishful thinking and a politics of fear. If we persist in portraying Islamophobia as an irrational force of misperception, or the result of malicious stereotypes, we might render ourselves oblivious to its ultimate causes and consequences, and the corrective imagery we develop in response to it might, in the manner of a bad diagnosis, end up reinforcing the very syndrome it was meant to counteract. In our rush to identify Muslim friends who think and act like 'us,' we turn those who think and act differently into political enemies (Shryock 2010: 10).[6]

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[6] For more on a good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy, view discussion in Ch. 5 pp. 67

This new discussion of Islamophobia/Islamophilia questions the ways we counter hegemonic discourse that conflates Islam with terrorism. It suggests that "essentializing" counter-narratives are just as misguided as narratives like "Islam as enemy/Other."

Chapter 2: Emory as Place

When recent high-school graduates arrive on campus at Emory University as first-year students, they are greeted with open arms, quite literally. Emory employs hundreds of students on a volunteer basis to help move new students into their dorms every year. As soon as new student and their family steps out of their jam-packed vehicles, a swarm of smiles, neon colored t-shirts, and khaki shorts whisk students' belongings up to their dorm rooms, all before the student even has time to check-in at the front desk. Soon after new students get settled into their rooms, they are asked to meet on the Quadrangle, hallowed ground of knowledge and academic excellence, to toast to their four years at college and say goodbye to their families. They then immediately split off into their smaller Orientation groups, consisting of around twelve other new students and led by a student peer mentor, to learn just what it means to be at college. More importantly though, these Orientation groups teach incoming first-years how to be an Emory Student their very first day on the space of Emory's campus.

Each year, around 1500 new students enroll in Emory College, meaning that for an institution of higher learning, it has a relatively small number of undergraduates, compared to larger, public state-affiliated colleges. Emory is also more expensive to attend. It costs upward of sixty-thousand dollars a year to get at education at Emory, meaning that students have to be in relatively unique financial circumstances to attend Emory. According to a recent study[7], Emory is an "Elite College" where many students from the top 1% (in socio-economic status) of Americans attend. On the flip side, only 15% of Emory's student body is comprised of students from the bottom 40% of earning Americans, which is ironically the second-highest amount among American "Elite Colleges." This means that students from the highest socio-economic bracket in America are over-represented and exist together a living/learning environment with one of the larger, comparatively, populations of students from the lowest socio-economic bracket, who are typically under-represented in elite colleges demographics. Not only is Emory diverse socio-economically, but it has one of the most racially diverse populations among comparable colleges. While 40 percent of the population is white, 18 percent are Asian-American, 16 percent are international students (mostly from India, South Korea and China) 10 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 7 percent are black and 4.6 percent are Bi-racial. The ratio of male to female students is approximately 57:43[8].

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[7] See https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html?_r=0

Because of Emory's size, diversity, and expense, there is a large emphasis on community-building by Campus Life professionals, whose job it is to make sure that the student body has a healthy and happy college life. It is important to the University and for the overall wellness of the campus, that these students from many different backgrounds get along with each other. In order to create this sense of community, Emory students are required to live on campus their first and second years, and they do not get oriented to the campus until they move to Atlanta in the fall.

Emory's Orientation program aims to make sure that every single new student feels welcomed and at home on Emory's campus, in addition to providing students with key information about academics and resources. Campus Life professionals know that in order for as many students as possible to feel well-adjusted and at home at Emory, they must make as many strides to set the tone for students' four years at Emory within the first few days—even hours. Orientation Leaders immediately start to do this work of creating community by facilitating a group of new students where everyone feels more or less comfortable to be themselves and get to know one another while they are learning about how to get around campus. They play games to “break the ice” and help everyone lighten up during a time of transition that can be highly anxiety-ridden in students’ lives. This is many students’ first time living on their own, without their families, and Orientation Leaders are mindful of how exciting and nerve-wracking that experience can be.

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[8] See http://apply.emory.edu/discover/fastfacts.php

Students go through about five days of acclimation through Orientation programming before they start their classes. One hallmark of Emory’s Orientation program is called Creating Emory. Every single student in the first-year class is filed into a large assembly room, and a student acting group called “Issues Troupe” gives a performance. The trick is that no student knows that this performance will happen, let alone what it will be about. Issues Troupe starts by making jokes that are slightly off-color with their use of stereotyping language. However, the jokes quickly turn incredibly offensive, and the students realize that perhaps this is not about joking around anymore. The performance is meant to demonstrate to students real-life discriminatory and hateful statements that are said with incredible frequency to students from all backgrounds and identities. The idea is to emphasize how real and hurtful stereotyping can be, and to humanize people who may be perceived as very different from yourself.

There is always a discussion after this very heavy performance, in which students are invited into a “safe space” where they may feel comfortable to discuss their reactions to the performance and its repercussions for creating a community at Emory that is caring for every person. The vision is to create a community in which students support one another, rather than allow differences to divide them. The final two sessions of Creating Emory include discussions about integrity and values as well as the reality of sexual assault on college campuses. Students learn that Emory as an institution values integrity, the strength of diversity, and the provision of a space in which students feel free from harm (or at least feel free that such harm is taken very seriously with disciplinary action). Thus, the tone is set for the students' next four years at Emory. They are encouraged to anticipate and believe it will be a place where they feel that their voices will matter, and where they will be treated with respect and care by other students, faculty and staff.

The problem arises when this ends up not being the case. Students expect for Emory to be a place where they are cared for, because this is the vision Emory espouses, in the hope that it will become reality, but despite this amiable goal, this has not been the experience of every student at Emory. From my observations of Emory's culture, Emory is not the ideal place that it presents itself to be, and to be fair, aspires to be. Many students, from many different social groups have continued to be the victims of hate speech and acts of discrimination. Many minority students do not feel that their voices matter, or they feel that other students and faculty perceive them to be "token" minority students, who don't really deserve to be there. In essence, Emory's space does not in actuality feel like it belongs to everyone. It was created as a white institution; made from whiteness to benefit whiteness, and despite Emory's best efforts to overcome its history as a predominantly white institution, the atmosphere and culture on campus continue to create barriers between students' expectations and reality. This is not to say that Campus Life professionals, or other Emory bureaucrats do not have good intentions, or that they don't care to make Emory a better place for more people. It is rather that achieving this level of idealism is a lot more complicated than willing it into existence by telling students it is already like that.

In recent years, Emory's Orientation program has changed its rhetoric from "community of care" to "community of conversation." The aim now is to promote dialogue at all costs around issues that are contentious and around the diversity of experience at Emory, and before coming to Emory. In recent years there have been many campus protests around Black Lives Matter, and more recently, issues concerning the 2016 national presidential election. Despite students' diversity of political opinion and interests, a sizable portion of the student body is seen as very politically liberal, which is legitimized and given preference by like-minded faculty and staff. The Dean of Campus Life, Ajay Nair, recently reflected that the feeling on campus on November 9, 2016 (the day after the popular election of Donald Trump as president) was similar to the melancholy he felt on the University of Virginia Campus after 9/11. He did not say this to mean that students believed the two events to be equal in magnitude, but rather that many students felt so threatened and saddened by the rhetoric of Donald Trump, and were in such disbelief that he won, that there was a felt heaviness looming over campus. He was not wrong in this regard. The day after the election, students wore black and gathered together at noon to walk peacefully in silence through campus in solidarity with one another. As this group walked through campus, Emory College Republicans laughed at them, ridiculing their display of sadness and taking pictures of the "liberal snowflakes."

This is the environment in which I commenced my research only a week later. Political tensions and emotions are high after months—even years of protest and debate around free speech, and the role of identity politics on the college campus. There is a very potent tension that exists. On the one hand, there are students who believe that liberalism's identity politics and political correctness espoused by the Obama Administration and affirmed by Emory as an institution have gone too far. Conversely, there is another camp of students who believes Emory as an institution has not done enough to protect and stand up for everyone's identities and experiences, despite saying that it would. Of course, there are many people who fall between these two extremes, but the extremes are the most vocal and have made this opposition public and contentious. It has gotten to the point that the students in the middle do not even know how to participate in this debate, because of how charged it is.

On Emory's campus, Islam's connection to terrorism can be considered one of these politically-charged topics. Discussing Islam and terrorism generally means that you are discussing the identities of other Emory students. The most vocal Emory students mentioned above either find these identity politics too taboo to bring up, or they find that they are willing to offend anyone with their words as long as they don't have to use the guarded language of political-correctness that Emory socializes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Purposes & Questions

In the broadest sense, the primary research question is “What are college students’ perceptions of the connection between Islam and terrorism?” This research aims to not only answer this question, but also examine how these perceptions are created and shared through processes of narrative perpetuation and cultural memory. It aims to discuss how college students come to their nuanced understandings of how Islam is connected to terrorism, through their exposure to a plethora of cultural narratives in America about this connection, as well as their exposure to liberal arts university political culture. It examines how differing narratives about Islam and terrorism are privileged and perpetuated within different sub-cultural contexts. More specifically, this study provides a working and dynamic map of how cultural narratives are leveraged on college campuses to create a meta-narrative structuring the conversation of Islam’s relationship to terrorism. My aim in studying this microcosm of American culture is not just to discern how this particular space defines how Islam and terrorism are talked about. It is also meant to question the consequences of power, representation, and identity politics on processes of narrative production about Islam and terrorism within national political culture.

I designed research questions to understand what students’ perceptions are, and to observe how students come to their understandings of Islam and terrorism. The three main questions I used to discern this were formulated from a synthesis of many academic discourses and disciplines, particularly concerning narrative perpetuation and embodied agency. Because of the study’s focus on the creation and sharing of individual perspectives, I found it more helpful to frame the study theoretically with scholarship about cultural memory and narrative than with any prominent scholar, who studies the West's relationship with the Middle East specifically (Said, Karim, Huntington, Shryock, etc.).

The questions are: How are students' perceptions shaped by their identities, beliefs, and lived experiences of their social worlds? How are these perceptions shaped by media, processes of mediation, and a globalized information system? And lastly, how are these perceptions shaped by students' subjectivity and embodied agency—how are they actively producing thought about this topic and contributing to the public discourse through what media they share and what conversations they choose to have?

These are the primary, broadly-framed questions the study aims to answer. However, as the research evolved, the data appeared to answer other questions that were not intentionally asked, such as: What are the cultural memories college students have shared access to, and how are college students' perceptions shaped by and shape these cultural memories? How does the setting of a liberal arts university create a political socialization from which students then frame politically-contentious issues like Islam's connection to terrorism? What is the meta-narrative around how students talk about Islam's connection to terrorism?

Evolution of the Research

I should note that I originally intended for the study to specifically to look at how the narrative of "radical Islamic terror" persists in the Unites States, despite many scholars' work to de-mythologize this narrative. I soon discovered after preliminary analysis that this was a flawed way of looking at this issue, because there are multiple narratives competing for prominence in both public and private discourses. Additionally, the narratives that compete for discourse on a college campus are often more nuanced, and are more grounded lived experience than the hegemonic narratives present in national political discourse.

I found that I originally hesitated to consider identity politics and power structures in this research, but their presence became unavoidable. The study soon became about, not “the Islamophobia narrative” in the singular, but the multiple narratives that compete for prominence in American society broadly, and particularly within the subculture of liberal arts universities. The study also analyzes which narratives are most pervasive in the specific space of Emory’s campus, and why this may be so on both institutional and personal levels. Not only will the study examine the variety of narratives pervasive on this liberal arts university’s campus, but how *power* impacts which narratives are privileged over others. For example, this study looks at how people on all points of the political spectrum view the issue of Islam’s connection to terrorism, but it also looks at which opinions are held with more import on a liberal arts university campus. It looks further then, at how the cultural memories of liberal arts institutions shape this discursive field.

Research Methods

The methods I chose to research the overarching question and sub-questions were semi-structured ethnographic interviews and a qualitatively-focused survey, which were both framed by theoretical discourse about narratives, cultural memory, and power.

I chose the methodology of semi-structured interviews, because I was primarily interested in getting at a more nuanced qualitative explanation of not only what students think about the connection Islam and terrorism, but *how* they come to think what they think. The interviews were aimed and *topical*—i.e. they asked about a particular issue—but they also could at times be considered *life history interviews*[9]. Interviews lasted about twenty to forty minutes each, and they took place over a two-month span, from November 2016 to January 2017. I asked students to share personal experiences about themselves in order to gain a better understanding of how their memories and past lived experiences shape their present understandings of how Islam is connected to terrorism. Additionally, given the sensitive political nature of this topic on college campuses, I inferred students would be more forthcoming and direct with their opinions if they were in a private, confidential setting. In order to gain the richest data, I knew it was crucial to establish rapport with them, through genuine, non-judgmental interest in who they are, and what they have to say.

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[9] See Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman. pp. 66.

In general, I structured interviews to first investigate who the participant is, what they value, and how they identify. The conversations then delved deeper into what students believed "terrorism" to be and whether or not they perceived this as different from "religious violence," before asking about how they understand Islam's connection to terrorism. I also investigated students' media and narrative sharing practices, publicly and privately, and within the Emory community specifically. As the study progressed, I allowed the interview structure to become more open and fluid, investigating points that seemed the most pertinent or resonant for a particular student. As I have mentioned, the research questions evolved and became more focused as I spoke to more students. I discovered that I was able to develop a richer ethnographic picture when students talked about where they live and work every day, rather than trying to uncover how a narrative of "radical Islamic terror" is perpetuated in the United States broadly. I asked more about processes of narrative production and privileging on a college campus, and how students share these opinions.

I also constructed a more qualitative survey for two purposes. The first, was to investigate broader trends within students' perceptions of the connection between Islam and terrorism. I did

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this through first asking five basic short answer questions about student's perceptions of terrorism, Islam, Islam's connection to terrorism, and how they came to their perceptions. These questions were designed to mimic qualitative interviews, but of course did not allow for the same amount of nuance and depth as the interviews. In order to further investigate broader trends and themes that arose within initial interviews, the second part of the survey asked students to rank how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about Islam's connection to terrorism, and how students contextualize that understanding in their social and political worlds. Again, I crafted these statements from thoughts, expressions, and questions that arose within initial interviews. In order to maintain some level of nuance, I asked students to rank the extent they agreed or disagreed, with 1 being "strongly disagree," 7 being "strongly agree" and 4 being "neutral." In order to allow for the fact that students may not feel comfortable ranking certain statements, I also included a "N/A" option.

The second purpose of the survey was to recruit a second group of interview participants who represented populations, groups, and opinions that I did not get to investigate in depth during the first round of interviews. In addition to asking students about their opinions, as in the initial interviews, I asked students how they identified, religiously, politically, racially, ethnically, nationally, etc. In order to recognize that identities are multiple and complex, I asked about identity in a very open-ended way. For example, instead of asking for "race," or "gender," with options from a drop-down menu, the question was set up as a short-answer phrased as "What is your racial/gender identity?" If students were interested in participating further, I simply asked them to enter in their email address at the end of the survey.

The final type of methodology I relied upon implicitly throughout the research process was participant-observation. This was inevitable in a way, given my own positionality as a college student at a liberal arts university. I have participated in the same sub-cultures I observed in the study: as a millennial voice participating in conversations in the national political sphere, and as a student who has been politically socialized at an elite liberal arts university. I relied on my experiences as a student to understand how to best reach and interact with my study population, particularly regarding politically-sensitive topics. I also implicitly relied on my positionality to interpret and ground the self-reported experiences of other students I interviewed.

The Study Population: Sampling and Demographics

In order to gain results that offered a complex picture of how different college students perceive the connection between Islam and terrorism, I relied on purposive sampling, meaning, I targeted certain student groups to add complexity and depth to the study analysis and in order to bring the different interviews and opinions in conversation with one another (i.e. students from different political affiliations, students who practice Islam or come from Muslim-majority environments, and students who have studied the Middle East). I recruited participants through social media posts, emails in academic department list-serves (namely anthropology, MESAS, and psychology), and through word-of-mouth. So, I recruited participants on a self-selected basis. At first, I relied on convenience sampling, and network sampling. However, these methods yielded a group of students that was mostly homogenous in demographic and in response. I then used maximum variation sampling in order to talk to students who differed from these more homogenous opinions. I particularly looked for variation in religious identity, racial identity, and political identity.

All participants were undergraduate adults (over 18) in Emory College ranging in age, experience of and involvement on campus. The pool of participants included first to fourth-years, academic majors from math to religion, students from minority and majority groups, and both international and domestic students. There was no limiting factor to participation in the study except that students be undergraduates in the college, in order to get at the diversity which heavily contributes to opinions and opinion-sharing within this particular subculture.

There were sixty-four participants in all. There were twenty-two interviewees and fifty survey responses, eight of which participated in both the survey and semi-structured interviews. Forty-three of the participants identified as female and twenty-one identified as male. Thirty-nine participants are seniors in the college, ten are third-years, six are second-years, and nine are first-years. Racial, political and religious identities are a bit harder to quantify, because they are often complex. Over half of participants identified as white, but among those, several identified as LatinX or ethnically Jewish. Other students identified as Asian-American; a few identified as Black or African American, and the rest were international students from various European or Middle Eastern countries. Politically, the majority of students said that they were “liberal,” “left-leaning,” or “Democrats.” About ten identified as “conservative” or “Republican,” and about ten said they had no political affiliation. Religiously, about twenty students identified as Christian, ten identified as Jewish; about twenty more identified as agnostic or atheist; and seven identified as Muslim. In all, there were definitely groups that were more heavily represented than others, and students of color definitely could have been better represented in the study. Additionally, fourth-year students were over-represented in the study, however I do believe they were able to provide more in-depth information about the college environment, because of their longer immersion in it. Otherwise, the group of participants was not too different from Emory’s undergraduate population.[10]

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[10] See Chapter 2: Emory as Place pp. 28

Conducting the Analysis

I analyzed the data as the research went on over a two-month period. This constant reflection and analysis allowed my research questions to change, and opened up the structure and sometimes, topic of interviews. I recorded all interviews and listened to them to transcribe notable moments of insight and narratives explained and employed by students. At first, I coded the first ten interview transcripts to identity themes and opinions that emerged across several interviews. In this initial coding, I searched for moments related to Islamophobia and reflections on processes of perpetuating a narrative of Islam as “enemy/Other” in the Unites States, and I also looked for ways in which students countered this narrative in their own opinions. I also coded students’ language about media and media practices. In this early analysis, a dichotomy between emotion and reason as well as a privileging of education emerged as students discussed their understanding of Islam’s connection to terrorism, so I began to code for this as well.

As mentioned, I used this information to create the survey, which asked very similar but more pointed questions about how students perceive Islam’s connection to terrorism and how it is talked about in their environments. To analyze the survey results, I used word/phrase frequencies to analyze the short answer questions, and I used quantitative “means” to identify particular statements that elicited very distinct and patterned responses in the ranking section. After considering the survey results along with my initial interview transcripts, I interviewed twelve more students who represented perspectives not yet included in the data collection. I allowed the second round of interviews to be guided by the more interesting patterns and observations that emerged in the initial data analysis. I focused more on students’ observations of the college environment rather than their observations of the broader American environment. I also relied more on the political framing within which many students increasingly conceptualized their opinions. My last level of analysis involved a synthesis of what appears in academic discourse about narrative perpetuation and students' self-reported narratives. I put these narratives in conversation with one another to reveal a story of how different students from different backgrounds talk about Islam and terrorism[11], and how this conversation is shaped by the power of a liberal arts institution of higher education to privilege certain narratives over others, and therefore creates rules around politically-loaded conversations.

Researcher Subjectivity

Thomas A. Lewis is the author of a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, entitled "On the role of normativity in religious studies." I find this work to be quite relevant, because he asserts in this chapter that actually, no scholarship is void of making normative claims. He means that all scholars in some way make claims about how something should be, in the arguments they make, the questions they choose to research, and the way they go about conducting their research (171-177). This is because all of us are people with identities, backgrounds, subjectivities. Therefore, scholars reveal what they value, implicitly making normative claims about these values, which is inevitable in the process of research. He notes that the inevitability of normative claims should not be something to agonize over. Rather, being aware of our normativity encourages us to provide better justifications for the claims that we make, while also opening ourselves up to argument and rational discussion over these claims (183).

In light of this text, I reflected on what my normative claims may be in pursuing this research. I know that I have chosen to study how Islam is perceived and portrayed in the West, on the assumption that I will disagree with it, or posit that this is not how it *should* be. I am not alone in this regard, for as the first chapter demonstrates, many other scholars have done this as well. However, I cannot provide justification for this stance, because I soon discovered that my bias in this regard was disallowing me from seeing the complexity of the environment at my fingertips. This assumption also disallowed me, at first, from being critical of my own stance with regard to this issue. My data soon showed me that I was overlooking how power can be construed in different contexts and how narratives actively compete with one another all of the time.

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[11] I should note that the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms in order to protect students' identities, for part of many students' agreement to participate in the research was contingent on their ability to remain anonymous.

Another normative claim I make in this research is my privileging of personal narrative over more public discourses. My justification for this is that although public narratives hold a lot of power in our society, the agency of the embodied individual cannot be overlooked. For if we ignore how narratives are perpetuated on a microscopic level, we may ignore the narrative complexity that actually exists in our worlds. If we only pay attention to broader narratives, in news media for example, we only see simplified broader social narratives, which are important, but they reflect a social "reality" that is not as complicated as the individual perspectives that make up that collective. And "complicated" narratives seem to better equip us for having difficult conversations around solving problems that are often more complicated than not.

My last piece of normativity, which I know impacted my research more implicitly, was my identification with many students' opinions. I am a college student with opinions about Islam and terrorism, and I too have been shaped by the narrative production rules that govern Emory's campus. I identify more as a "white liberal" than I do with some of the conservative students I spoke to and before I conducted this research, I too may have fallen into an unintentional judgment of those I think I disagree with. I now see how flawed this stance is, and how it actually hinders the active debate that, as Lewis points out, is so crucial to all scholarship.

Chapter 4: Disconnecting Islam and Terrorism

Islam has become almost synonymous with terrorism in the present American political and social climate, if not explicitly, at least implicitly. Whenever terrorism is mentioned, Islam is implicated. However, I wondered the extent to which this may hold true for college students in my study population. I found that students' opinions regarding the relationship between Islam and terrorism are notably complex. One question I intentionally tested was the extent to which Islam is implicated in students' thoughts about terrorism. This was tested by asking about terrorism specifically, first, without any mention of Islam or related words or concepts. No reference to Islam, Muslims, Arabs, or the Middle East came up in students' definitions of 'terrorism', either in the fifty survey responses, or in the twenty-two interviews.

In examining the fifty-two survey responses, about half (twenty-four) used words in their definition synonymous with "fear," "intimidation," and "scare." Twenty-five and fourteen respondents used the words "violence" and "act," respectively, and seventeen respondents used words like "political," "ideological," or "agenda." In sum, these trends indicate that these students believe that terrorism is violence intended to provoke fear, or intimidate, in order to achieve a goal (either political, or ideological). Nowhere in this general definition is an association with Islam implicated. However, when a different question was asked of survey respondents, "What comes to mind when you think of the word terrorist?" a different picture emerged. Twenty-four (again, about half) of the respondents used words that were associated with Islam or the Middle East, including words specifically such as, "ISIS," "Muslim," and "9/11." Other responses primarily referred to the means by which terrorist attacks are carried out including "explosives," "guns," and "suicide."

However, we cannot yet say whether or not this group of students truly associates Islam with terrorism, or what the nature of their associations may be. The data above demonstrate that Islam is not so conflated with students' concepts of terrorism that it is actually *synonymous* with it per se, but many students demonstrated an association of terrorism with Islam in describing *who it is* that commits terrorist attacks (ISIS and Al Qaeda) and *what* "terrorist" attacks are (such as 9/11).

How students responded when asked what they thought causes terrorism, was even more interesting. While words like "religion," "hate," "dogma," and "extremism," were not insignificant responses (10, 10, 6, 6 respectively)**,** more often, students described processes of disenfranchisement, power differentials, or societal problems, as the primary causes of terrorism. Specifically, many respondents indicated they believe that terrorism occurs in populations that are deprived to such an extreme extent that violence is a natural eruption from such difficult living circumstances. Some students mentioned "belief" as a cause of terroristic violence, but they also acknowledged that unfavorable circumstances can cause "hate," "anger," and "extremism" that fuels the violence we label "terrorism."

Additionally, when asked, over ninety percent of all students reported that 9/11 was their first memory related to global terrorism. However, while 9/11 marks the beginning of the personal understanding and narrative of terrorism for the vast majority of participants, for only a couple of participants does this event have any affective resonance. Thus, students remember 9/11 as a significant temporal marker, but it does not seem to exist with either the affective tinges of fear or sorrow in the cultural memory of this particular population. The few students who deviated slightly from this pattern were students who were personally affected by 9/11 (i.e. they had family members who worked at the World Trade Center, or geographical proximity to the attack). Even in these cases though, the majority of students had not developed any strong opinions about the attack itself, but often had more to say about the aftermath of 9/11, and how this event frames a contemporary understanding of terrorism.

A majority (64.7 percent) of survey respondents “somewhat to strongly agreed” that “9/11 is the precipitating event in our current understanding of the connection between Islam and terrorism.” The students who disagreed with this statement often considered the longer history between Islam and the West, but a simple majority of students indicated that 9/11 was not just an event contextualized in a broader history, but that it fundamentally changed the trajectory, so to speak. Students were more likely to talk about the consequences of 9/11. 76.6 percent of survey respondents “somewhat to strongly” agreed that “the nature of global terrorism has changed significantly in the last fifteen years.” 84.3 percent of survey respondents “somewhat to strongly disagreed” that “America has done the best it could with its foreign policy in the Middle East.” Not much can be extrapolated from this data, for the interviews did not focus on these questions specifically, but it seems that students believe “terrorism” as it is understood today, to be a newer ideological concept, and a large percentage disagrees with U.S. military interventionism in the Middle East after 9/11.

It seems then that the conflation, or automatic connection between Islam and terrorism, either is absent, or at least is questioned, in the minds of most participants. It is necessary, though, to turn to more qualitative interview data in order to truly understand all the complexities characterizing how students conceptualize this connection, and how this differs among students from different backgrounds (positionalities) and with differing outlooks on the world (subjectivities).

Despite the given nuance and complexity of students' perceptions, there are noticeable, significant patterns in how students described their understanding of a connection between Islam and terrorism. It is helpful to think of students' opinions as a vast web where there is no real center, but there are ways in which parts of each students' opinions resonate with others'. I noticed students' opinions about this issue are not only connected to how they exist within the broader social group of college students, but also seem to be correlated to their positioning on other issues as well (i.e. religion, race, privilege, politics, economic outlook, etc.).

It will be helpful to examine these patterns and resonances within individual students to understand what these points of view are, and what kinds of subjectivities and positionalities from which they arise. These patterns often are intentionally politically-framed, for students often contextualized their understanding of this particular issue within broader conversations that are considered politically-contentious at both the national level and on a liberal arts university campus. There are at least five identifiable patterns of framing, or ways of looking at Islam's connection to terrorism, which resonated across the twenty-two participants' opinions on this topic: "hyper-liberalism," "liberal pragmatism," "the learned approach," "conservative skepticism," and "the emic perspective." One student each was chosen to represent an investigation of each pattern here, but there are many ways in which other students' opinions concurred with the representative's opinions, and most students actually leveraged multiple of these patterns in their speech. These patterns are not meant to serve as air-tight categories, but rather attempt to map and organize the range of responses students gave, in order to try and comprehend broader cultural trends impacting the conversation around Islam and terrorism on Emory's campus.

Hyper-Liberalism

Maggie is a fourth-year college student from what she describes as "the whitest of the white communities in New England." She went to a Catholic high school where the number of people of color could be counted on two hands. She says that she barely remembers 9/11, and even though her birthday is September 11, she feels the need to tell people who might comment about the significance of this day to her that, "it's just another day." Terrorism was not a topic that was talked about at any length or frequency in the environment in which she grew up, because "it wasn't something that really happened to [them]." She asserts that her environment was so isolated, privileged, and homogenous, that terrorism was not an issue for her community, because presumably, there was no diversity to be threatened by. Maggie did not meet a Muslim or have any exposure to Islam until she came to college.

She came to Emory with an open mind and ready to learn, making many Muslim friends, and learning from them what it means to be Muslim. Regarding what she believes about a connection between Islam and terrorism, she asserts that there is no connection:

> "Islam is one of if not the most peaceful religion in the world and people especially kind of uneducated Americans will associate Islam automatically with terrorism. People that I've met who practice Islam are so adamant about the fact their religion is peaceful and not something that's meant to inspire terror"

She insists not only that Islam has no connection to terrorism but that it is the media that props up this connection in a way that is non-reflective of reality.

What is more telling about her, and which made me use Maggie as an example of hyper-liberalism, is her coinciding insistence of her understanding of white privilege. Maggie mentioned she was in the lower bracket of her high school's socio-economic status, but she still understands that she is "privileged automatically because of [her] skin color." She came to a discussion of privilege on her own accord, without any provocation, by first mentioning that before she came to college, she had had no basis for understanding how some people were so personally affected by this particular issue (of Islam and terrorism). It awoke her to realize how some of her friends have been "demonized because of the color of their skin or because of their religion." Along with this observation though, she discussed how empathizing with this life experience is difficult for her because her experience of privilege has so profoundly distanced her from being able to truly know and understand marginalization. On the other hand, she kept mentioning all of the friends she had who were people of color, or who were Muslim, as if to justify that she, as a white person with privilege, would never discriminate against or hate someone with a different identity, because she knew better than that.

I mention her tendency to justify herself, because it seems to very much characterize a hyper-liberal viewpoint on many issues. For Maggie, she cannot see any connection between Islam and terrorism, because she knows that it does not exist in the personal experience she has had with some of her Muslim friends. It is the performance of an often white, hyper-liberal narrative that refuses to associate a problem with any facet of identity, for fear of seeming judgmental or biased. Even further, this white, educated hyper-liberal narrative not unlike the one Maggie shared, often includes an insistence that they have been so enlightened to the societal implications of their own identities, to the point that they do not have bias toward any group. So for Maggie, there is absolutely no connection between Islam and terrorism, because she feels that it is not really her place to really discuss it: "I've been exposed to so much more but I still have so much to learn like I've never been to a service."

Maggie also framed her own "true" understanding of there being no connection between Islam and terrorism by setting herself and her view in fundamental opposition to what she perceives that “conservatism” in America espouses. She mentioned that most Americans view Islam as foreign and therefore were liable to make a connection where one does not exist, and followed with an anecdote:

> “I read this study in my psychology class…it essentially proved that the more conservative you are the more likely you are to have a disgust reaction to something that’s considered an out-group.”

So not only is a white, hyper-liberal view on this issue one that is based in an awareness of one’s own power and privileged position in discussing it—and therefore hesitates to admit any bias—but it is one that sets itself up in fundamental opposition to what it considers to be conservatism.

Liberal Pragmatism

Sam is a fourth-year Indian-American student from New Jersey. Because of his environments’ proximity to New York City, he remembers that 9/11 really shook his community:

> “It was sort of like shock and awe…We can’t believe that something that grave and that serious was able to happen to New York City…but after that, it’s okay now. Let’s come together and try to figure out how it happened and rebuild; move on from this, because we can’t let it harm us for years to come”

But, overall, Sam reported that terrorism has not been a big part of his life, although he does believe that the nature of terrorism has changed since 9/11 in the sense that now “terrorism is in our rhetoric.” He says “I feel like we can just call minor acts terrorism when they’re not necessarily.” Although Sam has had more exposure to the Middle East and Islam than many others from his “white-washed” liberal background in New Jersey, he still seems a little wary of the instability he understands to exist in primarily Islamic countries.

Sam grew up relatively detached from his Indian heritage. He said that it was not until he came to Emory that he really felt connected to it. He always knew that he had family members and family friends who are Muslim. “Everyone I know who is Muslim, are just peaceful, very generous, very sweet, warm-hearted people.” However, when it came time for his sister to study abroad in Jordan during college, he and his family definitely had their concerns. “I was terrified,” he told me, “I mean we all have that underlying fear of the Middle East.” He and his family actually decided to accompany his sister to Jordan to help move her in, and he was surprised at the experience he had. He saw a beautiful city, beautiful people, and felt incredibly welcomed into that community. He was happy to have had that experience, because he no longer felt that going there was not a possibility for him.

However, Sam revealed a bit more moderation than liberalism in is viewpoints concerning this issue, because while he has had many positive interactions with Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East, he still feels a bit wary about Islam’s connection with terrorism. He feels that terroristic groups like ISIS are “rooted in religion.” This is not to say that he believes all terrorism is connected to Islam, but for him, Islam can be interpreted in a way that can lead to violence:

> “I just think Islam preaches certain values that some people get their hand on, don’t know how to use them properly. And I’m not even an expert on Islam, but I feel like, from what I’ve heard from third party sources, I just feel like Islam in particular preaches certain things that can potentially be dangerous”

So Sam sees that Islam is not inherently violent, but has the potential to lead to terroristic ideology, particularly in a context where people “have been mistreated for so long, and who are angry.”

Sam self-identifies as liberal and presents a moderate viewpoint that is critical of how Islam is portrayed in American media and how Islam and Muslims are scapegoated in American society, but he also feels that we can and should be critical of the aspects of Islam that may give rise to terroristic violence. Other self-identified liberal students also adhered to this pattern of acceptance, but with a critical lens. Sam, not unlike other students interviewed, expressed to me a general dissatisfaction with all organized religion, feeling that it predates on people, who then become victims of it and brainwashed by it. He, being a student who privileges rationality, prefers to aim a critical lens at all sides of this issues.

The Learned Perspective

Robbie is a white third-year student who grew up in Washington D.C. He was homeschooled by his mother until he was high school-age, when he began taking courses at the local community college. He describes his upbringing as one wherein he was encouraged to talk about things from an intellectual standpoint (both his parents attended Dartmouth and went on to get master's degrees) and as one that exposed him to religious and racial diversity. He learned a lot about Judaism growing up, because his neighborhood was roughly 30 percent Jewish, and although his father was a practicing Catholic, Robbie grew up adhering more to a "secular humanism" rather than any typically theist religious belief. When he started taking classes at the community college, he was enrolled along with students who came from over 100 countries. He says, "I always had friends who were from other continents, other religions, so it was almost normal. It's just how it was."

Although he grew up in the political focal point of the United States, terrorism was never something talked about in his immediate environment "outside of academic discourse," and when it was discussed, "it was always wrapped in the study of history and current events," and it certainly never had the affective color of fear. He also has had a fairly high exposure to Islam, compared to many of his peers. Although he would not say his knowledge about it is as high as his personal experience of either Judaism or Christianity, he has studied and lived in Morocco, Jordan, and Oman. Robbie, like other students reveals a more "learned" pattern in his view of the issue at hand in the regard that he has had years of personal experience and intentional study of both Islam and terrorism.

Thus, to him, there is even more complexity and nuance to the reality of any connection between Islam and terrorism:

> "I do think the connection is there because people who commit terrorist acts do so often, not exclusively, but terrorist acts are often committed in the name of Islam and justified with Islamic doctrines. I think ISIS is a good example of that. You could say 'oh ISIS isn't Islamic' but they think it is and they justify their actions with the most fundamental sources of Islam; the Qur'an, the Sunna, the hadith...I don't think there's a connection between Islam and terrorism so much that Islamist movements have employed terrorism…It's a tactic employed by many groups, many of whom today happen to be Islamic."

Additionally, Robbie's points of view on this topic are often framed by the broader academic literature about the nature of Islam and terrorism. He echoed the sentiment that Said presented in his final years, that terrorism has replaced communism as enemy in the American political sphere. He even argued against Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, in the fashion that many scholars are doing today[12], saying that "My main problem with the argument is that it implies that there's a monolithic West and a monolithic East and a monolithic Islam, and it's not the case; it’s never been the case, and I don’t think it’s helpful to frame it in those terms.” Instead of Huntington’s clash thesis being used to frame how we think about Islam and terrorism, he presented an alternate understanding:

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[12] See Bottici, C. & Challand, B. (2010). *The myth of the clash of civilizations*. Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York, NY: Routledge. and Houston, C. (2009). The Islam of anthropology. *The Australian journal of anthropology, 20*(2), 198-212. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org

> “Some other people have argued and I’m inclined to agree that what you see is civilizational conflict, but the West is not party to it. It’s a civilizational conflict within Islam and the big question there is who is Muslim? What is Muslim behavior? What role should Islam play in modern life? And I would argue the most important of those questions is who gets to decide that?”

So Robbie, through all of his research and study, has come to the conclusion that the issue of terrorism, or rather Islam’s relationship to it, is not a conversation that the West should necessarily be a part of. He believes the majority of Americans do not have enough education and/or personal knowledge to take part in that conversation in an informed and constructive manner.

Conservative Skepticism

Thomas is a first-year student who grew up in what he describes as “a pretty average middle class neighborhood” just outside Atlanta. He grew up in a neighborhood that was mostly white, but went to public school with students who lived in other neighborhoods who were from differing socio-economic statuses and who were non-white. He is not explicitly religious but he says that he prefers to “live life as if [he] might be judged for it.” His mother is a Democrat and his father is a Republican, but his parents wanted to let him formulate his political beliefs on his own. He says that once he began to lean more conservative, his father began to nurture his learning.

Regarding his exposure to Islam, and his view on its connection to terrorism, his experience with Islam has largely been positive, and he had many friends in high school who identified as Muslim or came from Muslim families. He sometimes had some "uncomfortable talks with Muslim friends," but in general he reports there was open dialogue about religion. Nevertheless, Thomas says he grew up in the "specter of 9/11" and therefore, for him, there's always been some sort of inherent link between Islam and terrorism. He says he frequently learned about and talked about terrorism growing up in the form of a "political education." He believes that just like other religions, Islam has its extremists and "it's just that Islamic extremists perform higher profile attacks generally; that's what leads to a higher profile on Islamic terrorists" He makes the point though, that people who carry out violence in the name of Islam are legitimate Muslims.

Despite Thomas' personal experience with Islam, and his acknowledgement that terrorists represent a small minority of Muslims, he remains skeptical of Islam on the whole, because of what he has read of the Qur'an and from how he sees Islam in practice in Muslim-majority countries:

> "Some of the countries with the worst human rights violations in the world are Islamic countries where the clerics are the highest class (like in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen) so when I see these countries being governed by Sharia law, which I've read many versions, and there's an ultra-conservative one currently in place in these countries where women are forced to cover up, not allowed outside without some male relative. In Saudi, if you get raped, no one gets charged and I think that's antithetical to things we hold dear in Western society…The oppression that is carried out in the name of Islam is horrifying to me"

Thomas on the whole describes himself as a Republican who is socially liberal and fiscally conservative. He is an example of a patterned narrative touched upon by other self-proclaimed conservatives I spoke to. Even though he may know that not all Muslims are terrorists, he remains skeptical of the compatibility of what he perceives as Islamic and Western values. For him, there are legitimate problems with the way Islam is implemented in some contexts, including those which give rise to terrorist ideologies. He also points out the faults of liberalism in its extreme attempt to ignore this conflict of values. In particular, he criticizes the liberal media for "glossing over" terrorists' Islamic motives in the name of political correctness. He cites the Orlando shooting saying that "Omar Mateen is a Muslim. When the recorded police call came out on the news, they censored out the word Allah in it. I don't understand that. I think that is relevant."

The Emic Perspective

Amina is a fourth-year Muslim American student, who spent the first twelve years of her life in Alabama, and the next several years in Saudi Arabia. She identifies as "culturally Muslim." She is not practicing at the moment, although she says all of her family members do practice Sunni Islam. She has an insider view on both Muslim culture and American culture, but she says, "I don't feel like I belong fully in one place. I have access to many worlds, but in both worlds I feel like an outsider." Sometimes she feels more like an outsider when she is in Saudi. Her view of Islam is necessarily complicated, but she feels more critical of aspects of Saudi culture that she sees as unrelated to Islam as a religion:

> "I'm generalizing but I see a lot of cloudiness in 'what is Islam and what does Islam teach?' vs. what is patriarchal practice that existed in the region before Islam but now exists under the umbrella of Islam so those issues I have to deal with…What is a Saudi interpretation of Islam? In Saudi if you don't follow Islam in the traditional way you're seen as a non-practicing Muslim."

On the contrary, she definitely sees an underlying disrespect of Islam in the United States. She said that she had no conception that she was in any way different from her peers until after 9/11. Then, she felt the weight and implications of her identity in an American context. She remembers, "a little black boy essentially alluded that I was responsible for the terrorist attack because my family was from Saudi. I said ‘well that’s not true’ but he said ‘my parents said so, so it is.’” She understands that there are extremist elements in Islam, and that there are even Muslim extremists who are non-violent, peaceful people. However, Amina has access to a cultural world with an entirely different notion of terrorism. She notes that in Saudi and in other Muslim-majority countries, Hamas is not seen as a terrorist group and the Israeli Defense Forces are. She notes that “terrorism in the name of Islam is largely denounced and seen as non-Islamic, and not okay.” She believes the issue of a divide between East and West is often blown out of proportion in both cultural contexts and that both sides are guilty of “othering” one another. Additionally, she believes that the issue of terrorism in America is “blown out of proportion,” stating that statistically, there are only a small portion of Muslims who commit terrorist acts.

Yet, the conversation around terrorism has certainly impacted Amina’s experience as a Muslim-American woman. When she reveals that she is from Saudi to Americans, she says she doesn’t feel as if she is revealing her identity as much as her identity politics. She says two things usually happen. First, “I become politicized and I feel like a target, especially in airports,” elaborating that she has developed defense tactics to keep herself safe in this environment. She tries to seem as American as possible and she keeps her green Saudi passport concealed until she reaches the desk. Secondly, in a more social setting, she notes that there are always a lot of questions. Once people know where she is from, her body becomes a questioning ground for all of the things that Americans “know” about where she is from and what the culture is like:

> “There's often questions about my name and a lot of questions about what my life is like. Why do I not wear hijab? Why do I do XYZ? They think my autonomy is in the hands of my parents. A fellow person of color asked me if I had to marry a Saudi man. It happens on dating apps… ‘Is that your real name?’ And then I'd have to have a conversation about it, but I don't want to have to answer your assumptions.”

So, although people tend to avoid talking specifically about terrorism with her, she finds that her Saudi identity always prompts conversations that serve others' assumptions about who she is and what she believes, based on what they've heard. In this way, people do not really care what her opinion of Saudi or Islam is, as long as they get to ask their questions, to reaffirm a narrative that, in Amina's opinion, lacks complexity or context.

Chapter 5: Cross-Analysis with Narrative and Cultural Myth Theories

Throughout this study, my hope is to examine processes of narrative perpetuation and cultural myth. To reiterate, I was interested in investigating the extent to which a collective American narrative of "Islamic terror as the enemy" affected personal viewpoints among college students, and in turn how their thoughts, actions, and lives as embodied agents affected conversations around this subject in their immediate environments. Narrative perpetuation and cultural memories were evident in how students talked about Islam's connection to terrorism, but in a way that was wholly unexpected. I found less about what perpetuates a narrative of "Islamic terror as the enemy," but uncovered more about the particular narratives and cultural assumptions that affect and operate within this particular population of college students in the liberal arts university spatiotemporal context.

Reflection about a Narrative of Islamic Terror

Despite years of distance between 9/11 and today, and the lack of any further foreign terrorist attack on American soil, it is clear that the cultural narrative of Islam's connection to terrorism persists and still holds strong in weaving together some of America's cultural fabric. The political developments that occurred in the U.S. throughout the course of my research increasingly made that clear (from Donald Trump's election to his "travel ban" in January). Although the students I spoke with generally did not adhere to such a simplified narrative, I was interested in investigating the extent to which students perceived the processes of perpetuation of this particular narrative throughout their lived experience. Despite all of the students' more complex understanding (as will be elaborated), many students had much to say about why they believe this simplified cultural narrative of "Islamic terror" has such a strong foothold in the United States.

In considering the work of Karim H Karim (2014) and the authors of Fear Inc. (2011)[13], we see that power is implicit in what narratives are told by whom and to whom. Many students clearly pointed out that power; interests both financial and political are heavily intertwined with the narratives news media sell concerning Islam and terrorism. For example, Aziz, an international student from Jordan, mentioned that he would not follow "Brookings" too closely, "because of who the donors are." He follows by saying that news in general is "a lot of personal agenda." Laila, a Muslim-American student, said she feels that in today's political landscape, "terrorism is synonymous with Islam… and that definitely has to do with who's on top in America…the majority of the country is white and non-Muslim." Amina, the Saudi student, sees that the media has one of the largest roles in shaping public perceptions of Islam in America, and it is "run by people in power, the same as people in government."

And while the media can be influenced by any political agenda, it so happened that the government that came to power in the U.S. during the process of my research was the Trump Administration. It became clear that the narrative that won nationally was one that did conflate Islam with terrorism. Marianna, a first-year student commented on the prevalence of this particular narrative in popular news media:

> "They [voters] have been told [terrorism is] something to fear and they also sort of mystify the Middle East…in order to create more fear and using that fear to generate political goals and ends and keep the masses ignorant and afraid, because when people are afraid is when you can influence them the most…a lot of linguistic choices and coded language of 'foreign terror' or 'radical Islamic terror' and the prevalence of that as a stance for Trump and Cruz and Rubio…narratives about Syrian refugees being terrorists just kind of perpetuates this idea that terrorist attacks are so immanent and so linked to religion and Middle Eastern people in general."

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[13] See Ch. 1, pp. 14 for lengthier discussion

Other students similarly noted that more conservative-leaning media news outlets often push a narrative of Islamic terrorism. Chase noted that it may be completely logical to adhere to a narrative of terrorism as being a specifically Islamic issue, if the news outlet you consume always reports it that way. He says, “If it’s right-leaning, it’s quick to say, these were radical Islamic terrorists…It’s always ‘Islamic violence’ and you get conditioned to associating violence with this group of people.”

The question that follows, given the theoretical assumption presented in Chapter 1 that people have agency in shaping social reality, is why do people play into this simplified narrative? I asked students, “why do people consume this media?” The most common answers were that people: 1) have an abnormal obsession with violence and spectacle; 2) fear what they do not understand; 3) want to have an enemy/other; 4) find it is easier to live without considering complexity, and; 5) consume what they already know to be true. The consistency of these answers is significant and is reflective of the common media, social, and intellectual environments these students exist in.

Sam synthesizes how the first three tenets relate to one another:

> They put it on the news because we’re different… You get to see this human being that’s different and you get to blame him…The Arab Spring was so fascinating to watch, but it doesn’t bother us…But when they attack us, we get to blame a whole group of people and say they’re not American—they’re not like us so we get to put it on the news and not feel bad about it

This quote expresses thoughts that resounded across all interviews. One component expressed by several students is that violence brings viewers and fuels ratings. Another is that it is natural to fear what we don’t understand, and as another student pointed out, “Americans on the whole do not understand Islam,” usually on account of a lack of actual, positive exposure to it.

Sam in the above quote also notes the incidence of scapegoating, which harkens back to what Karim (2014) and others call “othering.” Many students named this process outright as “othering,” indicating both its pervasiveness in the discourse, and how pervasive the process is in our culture. Students consistently noted that this “othering” is a relatively natural process. Sareena said that when something is different from us, “it’s bad automatically.” Why is this process so natural, though?

Karim (2014) and Bottici and Challand (2010) in particular describe “the Other” such that it is necessary to define the Self. Students confirmed this theoretical claim that there is an inherent “value in a common enemy” (Johnathan); it helps to “rally people behind a flag” (Robbie). In other words, students felt that having an “Other” was useful in advancing a populist political agenda to create a more coherent definition of the Self. Marianna talked about how this rhetoric and framework was often leveraged by Donald Trump and Ted Cruz during the election. From this point of view, terrorist attacks on Western countries get covered more often by media “because there’s more cultural significance when a Western country’s attacked,” says Thomas. He cites the Charlie Hebdo attacks in as an attack on freedom of speech, or “an attack on Western values itself.” By focusing news stories on attacks committed mostly by “others” on the “self,” American values become reified, creating a cohesive, nationalistic feeling of “Selfhood” where such a feeling did not exist before.

Alternatively, many students also said that it was simply *easier* to “otherize” and to fear the unknown, which resonates with Bottici and Challand’s “Reducing complexity.”[14] Katie, a Korean-American student, expressed that if people were too lazy to learn anything about her own identity, she doubted people would ever educate themselves about Muslims or Islam, because she says that the Muslim religious identity is definitely more taboo than her own. She implied that there is just too much effort involved in not thinking in essentializing terms. Martin, a Norwegian international student, said, “It’s easier to sell something that’s less complicated…A lot of people just don’t want to think about it, and that’s true for the whole Western world… It’s an easy belief to go around having.”

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[14] See Bottici, C. & Challand, B. (2010). *The myth of the clash of civilizations*. Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York, NY : Routledge. pp. 55

Despite the seeming dominance of this narrative in the national American political culture, as Robbie pointed out, “the broader narrative is so fragmented… [there are] competing narratives and they’re competing for discourse in the West.” Johnathan, another student said, “Some people call it ‘a war between the West and Islam’ I see it as a war as between ‘those who see it like that and those who do not.’”

Several students also pointed out that even though liberal media outlets may attempt to counter the narrative of Islamic terrorism found in more conservative media outlets, the liberal media often fall into the same trap of over-simplification. George, a Brazilian international student, talks about the kind of ‘political-correctness many liberal media outlets fall into, “The more liberal side of the news is like there’s so much Islamophobia and you can’t say bad things about Muslims.” Darya, a first-year student who criticized hyper-liberals for saying there is no connection between Islam and terrorism, said about liberal media, “Just today I’m sure there were three Buzzfeed videos, where they interview Muslims to prove that not all Muslims are terrorists, which is in good spirit, but it’s kind of feeding into the formation of a view that that’s not Islam.” Either way then, students reported that most media outlets over-simplify and de-contextualize complex issues by showing only one side of the story.

A Field of Counter-Narratives

On the whole, even though these college students provided testimony of the fact that all news media tend to sell simple narratives, their testimonies served as a nexus of contention of this reality. All students provided counter-narratives to what they perceive to be the un-complex societal norm of looking at the issue of terrorism. Students provided a plethora of ways to reconsider how we think about terrorism in the West, and about how it is represented in the media. Many students provided alternate understandings of the word "terrorism" in order to disconnect Islam's conflation with it.

A primary tactic students used was to contextualize terrorism and point out the causes of its incidence in Muslim-majority countries. Robbie brought up the notion that "ninety-percent of terrorist attacks happen in countries with gross human rights violations from government." We may recall that Thomas used this fact as evidence to purport Islam's supposed incompatibility with Western values, however Robbie presents this fact as a way to humanize the concerns of people whose governments disempower them. Martin similarly said, "groups have a reason to be skeptical of the countries they are in…when the state is working against you at every level." "I just don't know how material conditions couldn't have possibly created that scenario [of terrorism]," said Mark, "I feel that Islam is accidentally positioned in an extremely abusive geo-political scenario." Many participants expressed this nuanced position, that violence and corruption often erupt from environments in which people themselves are the victims of violence and corruption. This resonates with the results in the survey responses that disenfranchisement or lack of agency seemed like a primary factor in causing terrorism rather than religious ideology.

In addition to providing contextualization of the incidence of terrorism in Middle Eastern states, some students noted that the vast majority of victims of terroristic violence or "Islamic terrorism" are not white people. Rather the attacks of brown on white people are over-represented in American media, because they serve to benefit the narrative perpetuation of the impending threat of Islamic terror. Katie expressed that what bothers her about liberal media is "what bombings are reported. It's always brown on white and never been brown on brown bodies, which isn't representative of reality," which agrees with Robbie's insistence that the vast majority of terrorist attacks occur within countries like Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria, meaning that the majority of the victims of terrorism are non-white. He states that people don't realize that "the vast majority of the victims of terrorism have also been Muslims in Islamic countries, and yes they are condemning it."[15]

My conversations with Muslim-American students confirm this sentiment. They insisted that terrorism was extremely frowned upon in their religious and cultural communities and actively rejected terroristic violence as falsely representing Islam. Akash, a first-year Bangladeshi-American student said that "Dad would always tell me, when I would go to prayers, if I ever hear something radical, to tell him. We're Muslim, but [my parents] are very against terrorism." Most other non-Muslim students, like Maggie, similarly disassociated Islam with terrorism by citing their non-violent personal experiences with Islam and Muslims. Sareena is a half-Pakistani woman who struggled reconciling her identity growing up, because she was raised Catholic, looks white, was raised in a very white environment, but has a Muslim immigrant father:

> "It was very hard for me to find how I would like to define myself, especially due to all the Islamophobia, because there was a period of time where I myself rejected the fact that I was half Pakistani… I thought that the strict rules that my parents had were because of my dad, even though they largely were not. Once I came to college, I started to open my mind a little bit…My dad is very liberal and empowering, all of these things…Then I started identifying more as a half brown person, but society kind of rejects that…but even

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[15] See Global Terrorism Database to see, which countries have been most effected by terrorism. It has also been evidenced that Muslim leaders are indeed condemning this violence: https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/

> if I've had twisted views because of the rest of America's view on Islam and terrorism, about Islam in general, the connection between terror for me has never really been there because I see my family and those things are very separate for me."

Not only did students provide counter-narratives to the association of Islam and terrorism through situating it geo-politically and citing personal experience, many students countered the narrative of Islamic terrorism through offering alternative understandings of "terrorism" itself. My conversations with students of different nationalities indicated that the definition of terrorism is very culturally subjective. Most non-American students I interviewed had a very different concep of terrorism than what it implicitly almost always refers to in an American context, namely Islam. Martin, the Norwegian student offered that terrorism as an entity in and of itself does not really exist, because what it describes is "just violent acts from whoever doesn't have the legitimacy to carry them out," implying that in America, the state's use of violence is legitimized and therefore not categorized as terrorism. Other non-American students could readily see how state-sanctioned violence could be perceived as terrorism.

Aziz, for example, reported that his identity has been fundamentally shaped by terrorism, because although he grew up in Jordan, his family is Palestinian, exiled by the destruction of their home during the 1948 war. He says, "We have all been impacted by that moment of terror." He also saw a significant fear in Jordan of American military power, particularly after the invasion of Iraq. Even though Amina notes that the Israeli Defense Forces are sometimes seen as terroristic in Saudi, Saher, another student who grew up in Ramallah, Palestine, says that she knows both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are seen as terroristic by the other side.

Another tactic used by students to reconfigure how we think about terrorism was to redirect the conversation to different issues like mass gun violence in America. "I could not tell you why the media chose to shit on those who practice Islam and not white American men who are committing way more acts of violence," says Maggie. Another anonymous survey response says "America needs to stop assuming that Muslims are terrorists and that white people who complete mass shootings aren't." Amina even asserted that police brutality against black bodies in this country is a form of terroristic violence. These students attempted to shift concentration from Islam and its connection back toward a critical look at how we view violence within American society. Hannah, a Jewish-American student, said that "It's a lot easier to just hate people than to think critically about how we're doing America."

The last counter-narrative strategy students used to disassociate Islam from terrorism was to point out that Islam is not the only religion responsible for committing violence in the name of its advancement. "There is a connection, in a form of Islam in a small subset of adherents, just like there's a connection within a small group of Christians with global terrorism, just like there's a small section of Buddhists in Burma with a connection to terrorism," says first-year student Darya. George said that although, "today when I think about global terrorism I think about Islam, if it was in the fifteen-hundreds I would say Christianity." Sareena said that even though there are components of Sharia law that are "questionable at best, if we look in the Bible, we can find similar rules about what Christians should be doing."

Thus, students actively countered prevalent narratives of "Islamic terrorism" through providing alternative ways of understanding Islam's connection with terrorism. The bottom line among student respondents is that even though we sometimes see violence justified with Islamic language or doctrines, this by no means represents the whole of Islam; nor does it mean that we aren't in just as much, if not more, danger of other forms of violence, oppression, and bigotry in our daily lives. Justin said it best, "Anybody can be a zealot, even secular people."

A Lapse in the Argument for Complexity

While it is clear that students across the board have made intense arguments for complicating the way in which Islam is connected to terrorism, they did not always make the same argument for complicating our notion of Islam, or our notion of what "Islams" and "Islamisms" (practices) are acceptable, or "good." There was not a lot of questioning about what Islam is and means to different groups of people, or understanding of it in direct association with the MENA region only. What was often not questioned was the fact there is a need to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Islam when we counter narratives conflating Islam with terrorism, or to distinguish what represents "accurate" Islam, as opposed to a "false" Islam.

Mamdani Mahmood advances an argument in his article for the *American Anthropologist* based on this accepted dichotomy of "Good Muslim/Bad Muslims" (2002).[16] He says we are

> told to distinguish between good and bad Muslims, not between good and bad persons, nor between criminals and civic citizens, who both happen to be Muslims…We are told that there is a fault line running through Islam, a line that separates moderate Islam, called 'genuine Islam,' from extremist political Islam. The terrorists of September 11, we are told, did not just hijack planes' they also hijacked Islam, meaning 'genuine' Islam (767).

We have seen that many students did very much question the extent to which Islam is actually involved in terrorism, and yet in the game of identity politics and representation in America, many students fixated on solving the problem of Islam's conflation with terrorism through better representing "true" or "good" Islam. They aimed to answer the question: How do we make people fear Islam less through making it acceptable—digestible or, as scholar of religious texts, Vincent Wimbush would say, "bleaching it" (2008: 11)?

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[16] See also Mamdani, M. (2004). *Good Muslim, bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror* (1st ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

This could be seen on the one hand in the way many talked about the representation of Islam in American news media. Sareena and others touched on an idea that we can counter narratives that conflate Islam with terrorism by showing more “people putting on these great things that are Muslim… that you would be much more likely to hear about them had they been a Christian initiative.” For some students, there was definitely implicitly some assumption that Islam had to be relatable (i.e. more secular and liberal) in order for the conflation of Islam with terrorism to be effectively countered. When Thomas talked about his Muslim friends he grew up with, he notes they were very “Americanized,” and presumably “good Muslims.”

Other students similarly fell into this idea that terrorists represent “bad,” “extreme” forms of Islam that do deserve critique, but which should be also conceptualized differently from “the rest” of the billion Muslims in the world. 72.5 percent of survey respondents “slightly to strongly” believed that “most of the world’s terror attacks are Islamic in nature.” However, respondents were much more divided on whether or not “there are forms of Islam that support terroristic violence.” About 50 percent agreed, and 50 percent disagreed and over half of respondents responded “strongly.” There seems to be some disagreement then, on whether or not the inspiration for terrorism actually lies within the teachings of Islam. We have seen already that many students believe that terrorism is sort of situationally located in a much more complex geopolitical problem, and yet many other students felt the need to comment on whether or not terrorists were “good or bad” or “true Muslims.”

Akash, a Bangladeshi-American student, rebukes any generalization of Islam as a “religion of terrorism” by making another generalized assertion: “this is based on a few articles I’ve read, but a lot of the people that are terrorists, they only have some basic ideals of Islam. They don’t have the in-depth of it. At least that’s what I’ve seen.” Maggie reiterates this sentiment saying, “People I’ve met who practice Islam are so adamant about the fact that their religion is peaceful and not something that’s meant to inspire terror.” An anonymous Muslim survey respondent similarly stated that “it’s those who fail to understand the meaning of Islam that end up terrorists. Islam is about peace, not violence.”

Other students did question what we mean by “Islam,” and allowed for a kind of multiplicity in how it is understood it as a religious belief and value system. We have seen already that one student, Robbie, allowed that the conflict giving rise to terrorism and the collapse of governments in the Middle East has to do with an inter-civilizational conflict of what Islam means in practice in both private and public life, and who gets to decide that. Amina gave us a glimpse at this phenomenon in her struggle to reconcile her own inherited identity as both a Muslim and Saudi citizen. She allows that Islam is highly interpretable and multiple as she personally struggles to separate what she believes to be Islam from other Saudi cultural tenets (like patriarchy) that she strongly disagrees with.

A few other students addressed a multiplicity of Islam through attempting to grapple with the implications that those who commit terrorism in the name of Islam can be considered “legitimate Muslims.” Darya criticizes those who insist that organizations like ISIS do not represent Islam, “that brings up the whole argument…who are we to invalidate someone’s religious associations? Who are we to deem the pseudo-believers?” Martin similarly allows that it is not unreasonable for Islam to be interpreted violently under certain circumstances: “That is also an issue about Islam that it is so vague… I wouldn’t say other religions are clearer, but Islam has always been about interpretation and trying to interpret the limited information given by the prophet.” Mamdani contends that ‘Islam’ is not a monolith. He says both Christianity and Islam

> …indeed are propelled by diverse and contradictory tendencies. In both righteous notions have been the focus of prolonged debates: even if you should claim to know what is good for humanity, how do you proceed? By persuasion or force? Do you convince others of the validity of your truth or do you proceed by imposing it upon them? Is religion a matter of conviction or legislation (768)?

He questions though, the extent to which Islam is even relevant in the discussion about terrorism, going on to say, "doctrinal tendencies aside, I remain deeply skeptical of the claim that we can read people's political behavior from their religion, or from their culture" (768).

So even though it is clear that this population on the whole has a view about terrorism's connection with Islam that is complex, and informed by a cultural privileging of research and education, it is not clear that this population's understanding of Islam is informed by the same emphasis on complication and questioning what they "know" to be true. There is a lack of multiplicity, and even a lack of questioning of my use of the word "Islam" in the overarching research question. Many students articulated a questioning of "terrorism," but not many brought 'Islam' under the microscope for speculation.

Cultural Narratives at Work and Revelation of Meta-Narrative

Another factor I was interested in investigating was students' awareness of the cultural contexts and narrative privileging involved in their idea-formation, per Rodriguez's notion of "reflexivity" in examining processes of cultural memory.[17] On the whole, I found that students were relatively unaware of some of the cultural narratives, which implicitly formulated the way they talked to me about Islam and terrorism.

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[17] See Rodriguez, J. & Fortier, T. (2007). The Concept of Cultural Memory. In *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (pp.14). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

For example, the most common theme that arose across all opinions, regardless of their stance on the issue of Islam's connection to terrorism, was the privileging of education on the matter. This is unsurprising given the population, but it is still interesting to see that most students were not aware of the bias and emphasis they did place on education when discussing this issue.

This privileging of education seemed to come out in different ways and with differing levels of intensity. Sam was one of the more adamant advocates for the use of "reason" saying, "Education will fix so many problems in the world, and terrorism in particular. Why are these people being brainwashed? Why do they not realize that religion is not…it shouldn't be taken for truth?" In other students, this privileging was subtler, and is implicated in their fundamental need to do research. Darya expressed that when the media began to become very "anti-Islamic," she "tried to do [her] own research, because I wanted to form [her] own educated opinion about it." Other similarly noted that they privilege rationality, reason, and research in all matters, particularly this one. They are wary of what they hear and feel that they must do research in order to truly be knowledgeable on the topic. They intentionally avoid news sources they don't see as reliable in declaring the raw, un-adulterated facts.

Students always placed themselves as the agents in gaining knowledge, without always understanding the power and privilege implicit in access to a "good education." Many students spoke pejoratively about those who, out of misfortune, or for lack of interest, they perceive as less educated. Darya continued, "Any opinion that is an uneducated opinion is an invalid opinion in my own belief." Hannah said, "It's messed up people are dying because other people are ignorant and stupid." Katie is similarly bothered by "how much people don't know things." Here, I am not trying to imply that emphasizing education is a good or a bad thing, nor point out that students are wrong to believe in the power of education. Rather, I am trying to make clear just how entrenched this privileging of education is in how students talked about this issue, and their relative unawareness that this cultural subjectivity existed in their opinion-formation. It sets the way they talk about Islam and terrorism apart from others that do not have the same shared access to a community that values "education" and "learning" to such a high degree.

The other cultural narratives to be seen at work here, and which were taken for granted, were underlying political narratives of broader contemporary American political culture. Students almost always identified themselves politically without always considering how politics and political narratives may be operating in their understanding of Islam and terrorism. Nor did students seem to be aware of a meta-narrative, which emerged in the research, about how we speak about Islam and terrorism on a liberal arts university campus. What I mean is that, there seems to be a particular process of political socialization that occurs at Emory, and it very much defines the specific unspoken rules that govern not only conversations about Islam's connection to terrorism, but all politically-charged or tenuous conversations.

Chapter 6: It Gets Political

It has been noted that I originally intended to research how a particular narrative of "Islamic terrorism" is repeated, and remains pervasive in American society. However, as is evidenced by students' testimonies, differing narratives actually compete with one another, particularly in the context of a liberal arts university. By focusing on one particular narrative's perpetuation, I was not getting a full picture of the cultural narratives and assumptions that do operate on Emory's campus, or how Emory's institutional memory may be differentially framing politically-charged, or uncomfortable conversations around belonging, inclusion, and identity. Despite the multiplicity of identities, and therefore, types of ways students offer narratives about Islam and terrorism, there seemed to be pervasive and particular cultural narratives that influenced students' opinions, as well as the particular language they used to express these opinions.

We have seen that the opinions students shared about the relationship between Islam and terrorism were shaped by their access to and experience of formal education, leading to an unconscious or conscious privileging of education. Students' opinions were heavily influenced and framed by not only the language and narratives that accompany higher education, but their language can also be seen to be heavily influenced by their politics. Students often related national political language to their own opinions about Islam and terrorism, and they also often revealed a type of political language that is very specific to, if not many liberal arts universities, at least Emory University. The space of Emory University filters national political rhetoric and events through a very specific cultural lens, which frames the way national and international political issues are talked about on a college campus. I.e. there is a very specific meta-narrative to how competing narratives about Islam and terrorism interact with one another on Emory's campus.

National political developments came to heavily influence how students felt about the topic at hand. As time passed, it seemed to students that national rhetoric concerning Islam and terrorism was becoming more extreme and "dangerous," from Donald Trump's campaign speeches, to his "Muslim ban" implemented just days after his inauguration. Students from all areas of the political spectrum became concerned about these changes, so they used their conversations with me about Islam and terrorism as a space to talk about their interpretations of national political events.

Justin referred to a "Trumpian" way of looking at the problem of terrorism, by which he meant "the U.S. with regard to its foreign policy should be non-interventionist unless directly attacked by foreign powers and if that is to occur then the entire military force should be used against the enemy without prejudice." Another moderate student, George, expressed concern about the types of rhetoric being leveraged in the comments section of Fox News, "'Oh we have to ban all Muslims. They're going to kill us all. They're bringing Sharia law into the U.S.' But these people are nuts." Another student, Marianna, interpreted Trump's rhetoric as using scare tactics to generate power and support: "When people are afraid is when you can influence them the most." Other students pointed out some of the unintended negative repercussions of these fear politics, saying "there has been an increased incidence of hate crimes against Muslims, since Trump became president." (Hannah)

Although most students disagreed with Trump's rhetoric (including conservative and Republican students) some students were able to shed light on why they believed this rhetoric resonated with so many people--even why, in some part, Trump may have been elected. The same student above who criticized comments on Fox News saw that there is a liberal tendency to be completely un-skeptical of all Muslims, "accepting them all… I fear that they overlook a lot of non-liberal views Muslims might have." Other students attempted to explain how the liberal and often seen as "politically-correct" rhetoric of the Obama Administration alienated those who legitimately felt fearful. Johnathan explained it this way, "The [Obama] Administration would not use those words [Islamist terrorism]. Many people felt he was being dishonest with them and wasn't willing to confront the problem. [Trump] capitalized on that frustration and growing disconnect." Nathan, a conservative student, similarly said that "outright lying about Islam is one of the major problems with liberalism at the moment." He describes this as a process wherein liberal apologists actually make a space for bigots to enter:

> [Liberals] conflate bigotry against Muslims and criticism of Islam as an idea…Liberals with reasonable concerns won't talk about this because they think talking badly about Islam is bigotry but it clears a space that can only be occupied by actual bigots: people who are motivated by their racism

While these views about "liberalism's" attempt to essentially ignore terrorism may be a bit far-fetched, these opinions hit on a real tension that seems to govern not only conversations about Islam and terrorism, but anything politically-loaded or controversial, on Emory's campus. Students describe Emory as an "incredibly liberal place," which often defines which narratives hold the most credence and legitimacy among not only college students, but by University faculty, staff, and higher leadership (i.e. liberal ones). Emory, as an institution, is publicly liberal. Liberal narratives are characterized and reinforced by the institution's need to make sure that everyone feels safe and at home in their place of learning. But students pointed out that this very well-intentioned institutional cultural norm and value may have had un-intended consequences for whether or not people are open about their "controversial" political opinions.

More conservative-leaning students may have been right about some liberals' tendency to avoid politically-charged language, or any language that could be perceived as "biased" or discriminatory toward Muslims or Islam. One liberal white male student I spoke with would not even say the words "Islam," "Arab," or "Middle East" when he was discussing how terrorism is often perceived in America. He said, "I would imagine post-9/11, the word 'terrorism' took on a particular demographic and connotation rooted in an area of the world, which conjures a particular image…do you know what I'm trying to say?" I did, but it was absolutely fascinating the extent to which he avoided actually explicitly saying what group of people were perceived as terrorists.

Students' privileging of education in confluence with the perceived institutional norm of "safe spaces" have caused a kind of fear surrounding the conversation of Islam and terrorism among students, as well as other taboo topics dealing with identity politics. Therefore, even though all students interviewed had highly formulated and cogent opinions about the relationship of Islam and terrorism, most people admitted that they rarely talked about it. When prompted about the frequency of their discussion of this topic in social settings, many students revealed that it was rarely talked about at Emory. When I asked why they didn't talk about it, students had many different responses. Mark said he didn't even realize that he didn't share things about it on social media. But he added that most of his friends are white men and they won't discuss it, because "when people don't have a stake in something, they can remain totally ignorant." Katie says though that this is a "bystander problem. For Emory students there's no way you've not met a person who's affected by this or learned about it." Other students like Hannah felt like there was a certain level of emotional exhaustion surrounding the constant need to defend and stand up for others in the face of bigotry.

More often though, students expressed that they did not talk about this subject because of its loaded content. Chase said "At Emory we would stray away from that topic, because people have strong views about that at Emory." Students either intentionally avoided talking about this and sharing their opinions for fear of seeming "uneducated" on the one hand, or as "bigoted" on the other hand. Several students noted that talking about this on a liberal arts campus is actually "not a very liberal thing to do." Mark notes that people, like himself, a white liberal male, self-aware about privilege, may approach the issue similarly to how he felt approaching this issue, "They feel something is off about it, but they don't know the whole picture, so they're apprehensive to discuss it because they are afraid they might uncover something in their own discussion… they might realize the really awful implications of the fears they have." Sareena similarly, "I think on liberal campuses we are quick to discuss a lot of things, but I think sometimes we're not as quick to discuss terrorism because I do think that a lot is implicit, so when you're on a liberal arts' campus, people are hesitant to discuss it because maybe they would fall on the Islamophobic line as well." Both of these students noted also that people may feel that they need to do more research before they can give any educated input on the topic. This emphasis on education is so entrenched that students feel if they don't have all the "facts" that they should not have any input. Katie, had a very stark response to those who have a tendency to avoid the conversation on these grounds.

> "Here [Emory] people are very aware of political correctness. A lot of people are afraid of offending people or afraid of being wrong. They know they don't know as much as they should know. People always say I don't feel qualified to give my opinion; my response to that is I think that's a shame. I think people are being oppressed by this so if you're not learning about this, or because it's uncomfortable, welcome to the world of being a minority."

So there is a very real sense in which this conversation is tiptoed around or avoided entirely, by students with all manner of political leanings. Students feel that they have entered into a space and time that is so politically-charged, and so connected to identity politics, that "your politics becomes a moral judgement," meaning, when someone disagrees with you politically, or they present any view that might be construed as mildly non-liberal at Emory, you can "shame someone into silence." Nathan said, "It's almost impossible to talk about this because there are unjustified charges of bigotry." Thomas reflected on this as well, saying that he wouldn't talk about his political identity as a Republican to his more liberal friends, because he was afraid they wouldn't want to be his friend anymore. "I have several friends who would jump to that conclusion that I'm a sexist, racist, homophobe, who hates the poor. I don't want to talk about politics because I don't want to argue with my friends and I don't want people to think I believe something I don't."

Amina, the Saudi student, describes herself as being very liberal, and has been very involved with activism during her time at Emory, but she has since pulled back her involvement, because she didn't feel that it was a positive space for her to be in anymore:

> I see it as very problematic, hyper-liberal bubble where you'll be bullied if you don't have hyper-liberal view and if you're not an activist always out there, you're disrespected as a person. I think activists at Emory are actively creating a larger divide...There's a lot of pain, and I get that, we have to try to heal it. I think activists at Emory don't understand that they have a lot of privilege and they're using it in ways that are not conducive to positive social change…Or an environment when people are too scared to ask questions and to learn. I don't know how to fix it, but it's not helping that divide that is national.

So, not only is there a fear around speaking up over this issue in person in the space of Emory's campus, but interviews also revealed that students conceptualize conversations around Islam and terrorism on social media quite differently. Some students, like Sareena, believe that you can have a more productive conversation on social media, because "social media allows for people to have a little bit of protection in being able to walk away from the conversation and come back to it." Others perceive sharing things on social media as kind of pointless in a way, because they think it will get lost in the shuffle of daily news. However, more importantly, many students do not post things on social media, because, as in the words of Johnathan, “It doesn’t change people’s minds…most often it feels like an echo-chamber with people of the same opinion…personally I don’t see the point.” Students overwhelmingly pointed to the existence of echo-chambers on social media, and in real-life narrative practices.

Multiple students implied that their counter-narratives don’t really matter, because anyone can shut themselves into an echo-chamber by finding the piece of media or narrative that reaffirms what they already think about the connection between Islam and terrorism. Martin describes this process as a “battle of information” saying that “you don’t know what to listen to anymore. Anyone can shut themselves into an echo-chamber and listen to what they want.” Said, the Jordanian student calls this “tailoring an experience for ourselves.” Darya says that “we form our opinions in a very spoon-fed way.” However, not only can these echo-chambers occur within media spaces, but students saw it happening within their social circles at Emory. People find friends who hold their same opinions and “excessively agree.” Marianna even described her group of friends as so similar in views that they don’t ever debate issues, but constantly tell each other when another student says something they perceive as wrong or ignorant, like “Syrian refugees are all terrorists,” so they can all share in their mutual disapproval. Laila, a Muslim-American student, says that this is sort of a protection mechanism for her. She makes “a conscious decision to surround [her]self with like-minded people.” Fatima, another Muslim student, noted that college students’ surprise at Trump’s win was the consequence of the liberal bubble Emory exists in. She said she wasn’t sure how she could change conservative’s minds, but acknowledged that “we need to get out of this bubble if we’re willing to change. This is hindering our progression.”

However; many other students don't care to get out of "the bubble." They don't see a reason to change their habits concerning their discussion of Islam and terrorism. They believe that people are not actively affected by the problem of terrorism, or are not the direct targets of Islamophobia, there is no urgent need to discuss it. Robbie, probably the most "formally educated" student on the subject, said that it was not something that was too controversial for him to talk to his friends about, but instead that, "I'm just not going to talk about… to be honest, I have better things to do." Some people do not feel that it is a fight worth fighting, because they believe that people are too set in their ways, too entrenched in their own echo-chambers to ever be convinced that there might be another way of looking at the issue. Robbie defends his non-conversation with people who disagree with him by explaining that doing this is like "running head-first into a brick wall over and over."

The question becomes then, what is at stake when people choose to exist in their own echo-chambers, refusing to engage or acknowledge people who disagree with them? Martin touched on what these consequences may be on a national level, "A lot of people just don't want to think about it…It doesn't cost anyone anything to go around thinking this [Islamophobia]…and yet I fear that by not caring and letting the government take care of the foreign policy that we become numb to it. It's very much in the interest of the Trump Administration to sell 'Clash of Civilizations' because it might actually be constructed."

More specifically, though, what could be problematic about the culture that the liberal arts university has created? How may these rules implemented on such a diverse population of students actually prevent conversations from happening? How do the narratives students leverage that conflate political opinions with moral judgements actually contribute to driving them further apart rather than coming together over differences? I am not sure the answers to any of these questions, but my research problematized the "inclusive," and "safe spaces" that characterize liberal arts university campuses like Emory's. Perhaps, as Amina suggests, it is not about cultivating the moralizing political rhetoric that automatically categorizes thoughts as right or wrong—appropriate or inappropriate; it's about learning how to better relate to those we disagree with: "I feel like we all need to cultivate more empathy…activism needs to make room for radical love and acceptance."

Chapter 7: Concluding Statements

Limitations

There are many limitations to this study. The first is that, given the amount of time and number of participants, this study cannot possibly account for the multiplicity of narratives about Islam's connection to terrorism that exists within Emory's student body. This is necessarily true, because the demographics of participants were not an exact reflection of Emory's undergraduate population as a whole. For one, students of color and students from the largest international populations were definitely under-represented. It should be noted also that the complexity of opinion in this study may not be applicable to Emory's undergraduate student body as a whole. The convenience and purposive sampling methods I used may have actually mis-represented how many other college students perceive this topic. The students I spoke with often had such depth in their responses, because most were fundamentally interested in the topic, and in talking to me about it. This study is at risk then, of confirmation bias. It could be that other Emory students have more essentialist views.

Additionally, this study has several methodological limitations. While there is inherent value in the richness provided by qualitative interviews, they cannot provide much insight into broader trends. Although the survey attempted to account for this, more descriptive statistics would be needed to ensure that these results are, in fact, significant. This study also could have also benefitted from more participant-observation and a longer period of fieldwork to provide a more detailed map of how Islam's connection to terrorism is discussed within different spaces on Emory's campus.

Implications and Areas for Further Research

Despite these limitations, this study does prove interesting, if not in the questions it answers, then at least by the questions it raises. This study began as an inquisitive investigation into Emory students' opinions about Islam's connection to terrorism, but it revealed much more about how the spaces liberal arts institutions create rules governing controversial topics of discussion.

In general, my discussions with students did give me a good idea about how differing counter-narratives are leveraged in such a liberal space that values education and acceptance. Students' positionalities and subjectivities certainly did impact how they talked about Islam and terrorism; their opinions were nuanced and complexly bound up with their lived experiences. Students' level of exposure to different cultural memories led them to talk about Islam and terrorism in a multiplicity of ways, and in ways that intentionally challenge hegemonic narratives pervasive in the American political sphere. Yet, all students were insiders to narrative fields that created very patterned responses. For example, all students have shared access to the cultural memory of a liberal arts institution. This study revealed a meta-narrative that problematizes many aspects about political socialization in liberal arts universities such as: What is the place of identity politics and "political correctness" on a college campus? In what ways do liberal arts institutions create their own narrative echo chambers? How may the language of "safe spaces" actually create *silent* spaces? What is the value of a four-year liberal arts education if students do not actually have to debate and defend their beliefs? How might discussion-avoidance actually lead to a de-humanizing process of "othering" anyone we disagree with?

These are questions for further inquiry into the effects of liberal arts institutions' cultural memories on how college students have conversations with people different from them. Although these findings certainly cannot be generalized beyond the specific context of this study, this research also raises questions about narrative, cultural memory, and the consequences of echo chambers as they relate to national politics. For example, until November 8, 2016, most polls predicted that Donald Trump would not win the U.S. presidency, but he did. For days afterwards, liberal blogs and news outlets scrambled to discern how they could have been so blind to how a large portion of the American electorate felt. The fact that the outcome of the election was so surprising to so many people is notable and concerning. Perhaps this research, conducted on such a microscopic scale, may be able to reveal something about the contemporary nature of highly-contentious political discussions in America. Perhaps many people are so able to choose the information they receive and interact with that they remain totally unaware of others' real concerns as based in their lived experiences. Perhaps we are so caught up with narratives amplified through many layers of mediation, that we can easily "other" and even de-humanize any person we may disagree with.

This research is far from over. This study only begins to map out how college students perceive and have conversations about Islam's connection to terrorism. Similarly, we should further investigate how liberal spaces create rules governing politically-contentious conversations. Moreover, we must do more work to understand the multiplicity of narratives surrounding Islam and terrorism in America. To do this, we must seek to understand how other sub-cultural environments privilege differing narratives about both Islam and terrorism. This study makes clear that we must examine how hegemonic narratives interact and compete with other narratives that have less power to reach large audiences. We must seek to understand how narrative echo chambers effect political discussion on a micro-level, and national political outcomes on a macro-level. Further research is necessary, because as national political rhetoric becomes more and more polarizing, citizens in a democratic society must find a way to commune on common ground.

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