

## Citizens under Suspicion: Responsive Research with Community under Surveillance

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*In the 14 years since the 9/11 events, this nation as a whole, and New York City in particular, has escalated its state-sanctioned surveillance in the lives and activities of Muslims in the United States. This qualitative study examines the ramifications of police infiltration and monitoring of Muslim student and community-based organizations. Drawing upon 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork among multiple research sites with Muslim secondary and college students in New York City, I examine how surveillance affected the relationships within communities utilizing notions of power, panoptic gaze, and governmentality. From the participatory action ethnographic study, which included this researcher's observations and field notes of meetings, forums, and workshops, and 25 semistructured interviews, key findings show that an insidious result of the New York Police Department's Demographics Unit has been an alarming rise in self-discipline behaviors amid a culture of fear and panoptic gaze as well as diminished intercommunity trust and sense of solidarity among these youth themselves. [ethnographic methods, Muslim students, identity, surveillance]*

On a summer morning in 2011, I awoke to a text message from Ishmael, a community activist in New York City. His message simply read, "Check the news yet? This is big." On August 23, in the third week of Ramadan, the Associated Press (AP) first reported on the New York Police Department's (NYPD) program surveilling Muslim communities. Although countless stories of police spying had previously circulated within Muslim communities in the United States, and more than a handful of documented cases of surveillance had been established, the AP revealed secret NYPD documents that outlined a regional program, the *NYPD Demographics Unit*, designed to "put American citizens under surveillance and scrutinized where they ate, prayed, and worked solely because of their ethnicity" (Associated Press 2012). In addition to broadly spying on Muslim communities, the NYPD specifically targeted Muslim students on college campuses. In this paper I describe and analyze how Muslim students, with whom I engaged in a participatory action research project, navigated a New York City political context in which they attempted to resist police surveillance while they inhabited a social and cultural world in which members of their own communities spied on them. With ethnographic data from my own field notes of meetings, forums, and workshops, and 25 semistructured interviews, I discuss the way young Muslim activists made sense of these competing pressures.

This study explores how state surveillance of Muslim student activists in New York City both affected the ways individuals related to one another and limited their political subjectivities, as well as how relationships shifted and questions arose around trust and political engagement throughout this community. I draw upon notions of power and panoptic gaze within this study, specifically Michel Foucault's theorization of governmentality. Through the concept of governmentality, I follow "the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1980:39) in order to illuminate some of the tensions and complex realities young Muslims face as they develop political identities within a police state.

In this crucible of antagonistic state surveillance, dynamic community organizing, and participatory engaged research, this study took shape. In turn, this paper addresses two

core questions: (1) How did the knowledge of police surveillance affect young people? (2) How did this context shift the practice of ethnography and the role of the social researcher?

### **Panoptic Gaze and the Figure of the Muslim**

As educational scholars have focused on youth political engagement over the past decade, they have often highlighted the development of youth political and social power (Ginwright and James 2002; Warren et al. 2008) or the nurturing of critical literacies through cultural and academic manifestations (Akom 2009; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2010). Understanding the experience of political contestation and police surveillance on the lives of young people is particularly important in realizing and developing opportunities for youth political education and mobilization. In this study I examine how the gaze of state security apparatus altered notions of trust, relationships, and social participation to limit the construction of political subjectivity in the lives of Muslim youth activists in New York City. In several poignant testimonials featured in this article, such as Layla's for example, youth were initially reluctant to discuss their dissent against state surveillance because this monitoring of their own campus Muslim student associations—sites often assumed to be “safe spaces”—had both muted their sense of democratic engagement and attempted to undermine their efforts of political organizing.

To complement and interpret field notes and interviews, this study utilizes Michel Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality, which is the organized construction and control of a population through mentalities, rationalities, and technologies into particular roles and relationships as citizens. For this article, governmentality means that the power of police surveillance lies not in its ability to see everything, for panoptic gaze does not simply function through the security apparatus of watching. Rather, governmentality is evident in the disciplining of individuals and groups into assuming, or believing, they are always being watched. In this manner, panoptic gaze, or the overseer's vision, creates a society where “docile bodies” self-discipline in order to avoid punishment. As Foucault elaborates, “the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection” (Foucault 1980:147). For example, the NYPD Demographics Unit employed informants, undercover agents, and close community observation to establish an overseer's gaze upon Muslim communities in New York City. Through the use of community informants, the gaze of state authority focused even more acutely. All citizens, including one's own friends, became potential overseers.

As a result, the panoptic power of surveillance functions not only on the individual level but also serves to socially control and discipline entire communities and factions of the populace in unique and precise ways. By labeling specific forms of speech dangerous and particular types of association as suspicious, young Muslims learned firsthand what forms of political, social, and cultural engagements were acceptable by the state. In the most basic sense, through individualizing the forms of social control, young people need not be watched, for they watch themselves and their peers through disciplining particular forms of engagement out of public space. In turn, state surveillance thwarted the possibilities of developing collective critiques, perspective, and viewpoints as part of a political project. Governmentality thus functions not only to regulate citizenship behaviors but also identities. The influence of governmentality is evident in the complex examples of Amal and Ibrahim, whose interviews both reveal deep suspicions about surveillance and the safety of a community center and public places, respectively. These thoughtful perspectives from youth show how the panoptic gaze of state policing limited students' ability or

willingness to confide experiences and, in turn, create a shared body of knowledge of how surveillance manifests in their individual lives.

### *Surveillance of Muslim Communities in the United States*

As this article will show, surveillance of Muslim communities is enacted upon individuals and communities deemed suspicious by the state rather than simply as a response to a specific act. This leads to the reality that although Muslims in the United States may be citizens, they are also citizen-suspects. Beyond cultural rhetoric and representations of Muslims and Islam, explicit political statements exemplify the essentialism and discrimination that influence state policies. For example, Representative Peter King (R), chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, stated there are "too many mosques in this country . . . We should be looking at them more carefully and finding out how we can infiltrate them" (Politico 2007). This highlights the perceived causal relationship between religion and state surveillance.

Historical examples of anti-Muslim discrimination provide important context for the urgency of this research about present-day surveillance efforts. The figure of the Muslim has served as a primordial enemy upon which otherness has been defined in Western culture. The fear and suspicion of Muslim bodies is not simply a ramification of post-9/11 hysteria but rather a reanimation of longstanding images of the Muslim in cultural discourse. Although the specific bodies associated with Islam may have changed over the past 500 years, the dangers attributed to them have not. Spanning the European Crusades into West Asia, the Spanish Inquisition of North Africans Moors (Rana 2011), the targeting of enslaved Africans who were Muslim in the Americas (Diouf 1998), and the numerous Muslim organizations in the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States (Curtis 2002), the Muslim has served as the template of the existential Other from which Europe and the United States have defined themselves.

In this context, the NYPD put American citizens and residents under surveillance and scrutinized where they ate, prayed, and worked solely because of their relationship to Muslim communities. Nonetheless, Muslims who change their names to sound more "traditionally American" were also investigated according to the NYPD documents (Associated Press 2012). Muslims who engaged with Muslim communities were potential terrorists, while those who attempted to assimilate into whiteness (at least with their name) were also potentially " sleeper cells." A review of the NYPD documents reveals that any aspect of the Muslim personhood can be deemed potentially seditious. So the question becomes who or what is considered a safe Muslim in the United States? In his discussion of the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim dichotomy, Mahmood Mamdani (2005) explains that a "radical" or bad Muslim is "doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent," while "good Muslims are modern, secular and Westernized" (24). Yet in New York City, even those who engaged in what can be seen as "modern" and "secularized" behaviors were still scrutinized for trying to hide their true identities. In other words, every Muslim was "bad" until proven otherwise, and even "good" Muslims are treated with continual suspicion.

Finally, the context of police surveillance requires us to rethink ethnographic research methods that could bring further scrutiny to communities already besieged by various hostile groups, from state agencies to mainstream media to individuals. Socially engaged anthropologists concerned with communities in times of political contestation are not novel. Previous scholars have situated themselves "where persons were being positioned by practices and becoming suppressed or radicalized, where powerful cultural forms were being produced and were altering subjectivities" (Holland and Lave 2001:32). Surveillance reconfigures socially safe space as no longer safe, as these communities become targets of the domestic war on terror. Such spaces of protection are where politically engaged

anthropologists have found important sites not only of research but also of service to the communities affected (Smith 1999). In the context of the NYPD Demographics Unit, the gaze of authority can come directly from police and also from individuals who are seemingly also being watched.

### Histories of Muslims in New York City

Muslims are one of the most misunderstood communities in the contemporary American imagination (Rana 2011). Over the last decade there has been a rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes, debates about mosque construction, and “anti-Sharia” legislation throughout the United States. These are examples of how the presence of Muslims across the nation has become a focal point of a thinly veiled anti-immigrant movement. Despite this backlash, though, it must be noted that Muslims have been part of the national landscape since the founding of the U.S., and Muslim communities have long thrived in American cities (Ghanea Bassiri 2010). New York City is a paradigmatic example of this historical experience, with one of the largest concentrations of Muslim communities in the United States and a place where Muslim populations have flourished for decades (Gomez 2005). In one telling statistic, Muslims were recorded as approximately 10 percent of the K-12 public school population in New York City despite the fact that aggregate numbers of all Muslim populations rank them as less than 2 percent of the total U.S. population (Cristillo 2008).

Muslim communities in New York City are among the oldest in the United States, serving as home to some of the earliest African American and Bangladeshi Muslim communities. The city’s policing agencies have had a long and tenuous relationship with Muslims as evidenced by the surveillance and targeting of the Nation of Islam in the 1960s and African American Muslim communities in the following decades (Daulatzai 2012; Gomez 2005).

This study was conducted in New York City between May 2011 and December 2012. This coincided with the 10-year memorial of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and it took place concurrently with a concocted controversy by right-wing activists over the building of Park 51 Islamic Cultural Center, erroneously dubbed the World Trade Center Mosque. It is amid these heightened anti-Muslim sentiments that the public came to know of the NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities.

#### *Tactics Employed by the NYPD Demographics Unit*

The NYPD Demographics Unit was responsible for gathering information “to identify and map ethnic residential concentrations within the tri-state area and map ethnic hot spots” (Apuzzo and Goldman 2011). Although the NYPD used the term “ethnic,” there is no clearer evidence than the NYPD’s “ethnic community” reports that only target places of worship, gathering, and business frequented by Muslims within these specified communities. The term *ethnicity* is used by the NYPD, but those targeted came from 28 specified backgrounds, 27 being national origins (although not geographically centralized) from what could be characterized as “Muslim countries” or countries with a significant Muslim population. The 28th background listed was not a national origin but rather is the “American Black Muslim” (Associated Press 2013). Thus, ethnicity and national origin serve as more politically legible criteria, although they are thinly veiled attempts to obfuscate the primary target: Muslim communities.

This human mapping included developing informants called mosque *crawlers* who monitored religious sermons. *Rakers*, on the other hand, refers to NYPD informants who spent time in local eateries, shops, or storefronts to explicitly listen in on conversations. NYPD officers, their crawlers, and their rakers spied on scores of tri-state Muslim

communities under the auspices that Muslims, as a whole, are a suspect class. The spying occurred within houses of worship, cafés, restaurants, community centers, markets, businesses, college campuses, and other public gathering places. In defining “locations of interest” for further surveillance, the NYPD targeted locations where “local populations, search for ethnic companionship, that they may find co-conspirators in, patterns of illegal activity, hang out to listen to neighborhood gossip” (Associated Press 2013). The NYPD Demographics Unit enacted an implicit connection between the search for companionship, illegal activity, and potential political violence.

### *Targeting and Surveilling Students*

NYPD surveillance specifically targeted Muslim students. In fact, the NYPD Demographics Unit was the most organized and largest known program of contemporary Muslim student surveillance in the United States (Hawley 2012). The NYPD’s “Weekly MSA Report” revealed that the police were monitoring the activities and communication of hundreds of Muslim students and groups in the Northeast, with a single week of surveillance following activities and reporting on the email communication on 16 different campuses (Goldman and Apuzzo 2012). It is poignant to note that the NYPD reports did not just include information on political actions but focused on religious and spiritual programs. For example, the report included an event organized to “elaborate on practical measures university students can take to ensure a balance and well rounded growth in both religious and academic matters in their time at school” (Associated Press 2013). In noting such events, one might reasonably ascertain that the NYPD made a causal link between the spiritual engagement of Muslim students and their potential for terrorism.

As he defended the program, NYPD spokesperson Paul Browne asserted, “Some of the most dangerous Western Al Qaeda-linked/inspired terrorists since 9/11 were radicalized and/or recruited at universities in MSAs [Muslim Student Association]” (Baker and Taylor 2012). Browne’s comments, coupled with the FBI and local police departments’ focus on Muslim youth, make it clear that Muslim college students were not seen as aspiring members of the middle class. Rather, they were treated as individuals who either work at the behest of global terrorist networks or are somehow susceptible to being brainwashed into killing their friends, classmates, neighbors, and families.

## **Participant Observation Methods**

### *Researcher Positionality*

I am a South Asian male who was actively involved with youth politics and organizing in New York City (and Southern California), within and beyond the research for this specific study. Having recently moved to New York, I did not have long-term ties with local communities in the city. Nonetheless, my relationship with community organizers and activists created the opportunities to engage in this research. In turn, the fear of NYPD spies, informants, and infiltrators affected my ability to be trusted by participants and community members because policing agencies frequently used agent provocateurs within Muslim communities. Furthermore, my ability as a social researcher to trust the youth as honest participants was also a subject that required critical reflection and that could serve as the topic for a separate paper.

### *Research Design and Background of Participants*

This article draws upon an 18-month ethnographic study of Muslim youth politics and identity in New York City. I collected data between May 2011 and December 2012. At times

I engaged as an observant community member, while other times I contributed as a participant/facilitator (Erickson 1996). The research was composed of multiple individual projects with Muslim secondary and undergraduate students in New York City at community centers, at student meetings on campus, within community locations, and in informal meetings.

The original research design was a participatory action ethnography exploring the literacy and citizenship practices in and out of school settings. The Community Activism Literacy program, which was housed at a community center in Brooklyn, is where I helped develop and facilitate a program of youth services, including a political discussion group, a youth organizing network, and a tutoring program for 12 months from May 2011 until May 2012.

As news of the surveillance program came to light (between August 2011 and January 2012), youth at the primary research site became more engaged in citywide concerns of police monitoring. Some youth involved in the community center, along with undergraduate students from throughout New York City, wanted to respond to the surveillance directly. The students began to organize and asked others and me for advice and mentorship. Out of this relationship, the study developed into a participatory action ethnography of youth activism and organizing and built on the work of Winn (2014), which calls for research to respond to, and be willing to serve, the communities they actually study. In this context, the second research site, the New York Muslim Student Coalition, emerged to document the work of two community activists and me. These community activists, whose network included the community center as well as citywide political organizing, intended for the Coalition to train students in the basics of community and student organizing in order to help them develop the tools to advocate for an end to the surveillance and increased police accountability.

Thus, the participatory action ethnographic study of Muslim student political engagement centered around two ongoing service programs: an afterschool program at a community center (Community Activist Literacy) and a community-based political action project (the New York Muslim Student Coalition). The researcher collected more than 90 hours of video and audio recordings, along with field notes from community meetings. In addition, one-on-one interviews with 25 participants were conducted. Some participants were interviewed multiple times during the 18 months, while others were interviewed only once. Five focus group conversations were conducted with youth exploring identity, political, and cultural concerns. Through extended and in-depth contact as a facilitator and participant in political communities and activities, I developed meaningful and accountable relationships with students. The trust that the students and I built allowed us to critically discuss the particularly sensitive issues of this study.

Students were given the choice to participate in the research project. If they chose to participate, the student and their parent (if the student was younger than 18 years old) were given information on the study and consent forms to sign. Twenty undergraduates throughout New York City participated, and all have been given pseudonyms due to the sensitive nature of the data.

### **Open Coding Data Analysis**

Audio and video logs of recordings of meetings, interviews, focus groups, and programming were created for the data collected over 18 months. During the course of data collection, and throughout the logging process, analytic memos were written in order to establish preliminary themes as part of the data analysis (Strauss 1987). Observational and interview logs along with ethnographic observation notes were analyzed using an open coding model in which themes emerged from triangulating data sources and reducing

broad concerns into specific thematic streams. As themes such as self-censorship, trust (or the lack thereof), and notions of race emerged, the researcher returned to the data in order to transcribe salient conversations or interactions in order to most aptly capture the nuances in communication.

Although a number of initial questions were posed early in this research project, throughout the data collection process research questions were reframed and reorganized to respond to the context and pertinent topics. Furthermore, particular questions were chosen to highlight the unique context of this study. Data were analyzed to focus on the following themes: (1) the ways young people are self-censoring in public or community spaces, (2) how young people thought about trust and relationships within their communities, and (3) the concerns young people have about participating in public campaigns or speaking out politically. Responding to these themes provided the findings for data triangulation across data sets within the study. Furthermore, addressing these themes allowed the researcher to review substantive data in order to reexamine and reflect on the methodological frameworks and tools used in the research.

Data were analyzed using tools of critical discourse analysis to examine the ways students construct meaning, interpret, and engage with discourse practices (Van Dijk 1998). Word choice, metaphors, and indexical properties of language were examined in order to understand how participants were constructing language and identity.

## Findings

### *Panoptic Effects: Self-Censoring and a Culture of Fear in Private and Public*

Reporting on self-censorship is uneasy ground for social science research. Contemporary research methods primarily focus on the things that people say, how they say it, and what they do. Exploring the lack of speech is difficult because there are no clear ways to understand why an action does not occur. Furthermore, participants may not want to discuss such topics nor have them shared publicly. Although one cannot ascertain when a participant holds back comments, particularly in an ethnographic study, there were various ways in which self-censoring was visible in the words and actions of Muslim student activists in New York City. I was able to identify these moments by being attuned to when students changed topics or subjects of conversations or explicitly stated they did not want to talk about particular topics publicly (or in group spaces). Likewise, I present some of the many comments, jokes, and quips about being surveilled as a way to move conversation topics away from what was perceived as political topics in response to fears of panoptic gaze.

I initially met Layla after facilitating a workshop on how to recognize anti-Muslim micro-aggressions for an on-campus housing staff. An engaged student and active community member, Layla was involved in a number of organizations on and off campus, but she was not actively involved in a Muslim student organization on her college campus. Noting the lack of engagement with local community politics or service, Layla stated that the organization was primarily focused on students' social lives. Although the organization was more politically engaged in years prior, Layla said her campus Muslim student organization was fearful of political and police reprisals or targeting for focusing on "things that make people uncomfortable like surveillance, Palestine, and drones." It seemed clear to Layla that her peers felt their ability to engage particular topics on campus was hindered by the watchful eye of the police state.

During the next two years I worked with Layla in multiple contexts, and she was an active participant in the New York Muslim Student Coalition. Outspoken and politically engaged, Layla said she would love to see Muslim communities utilize direct action

political organizing strategies in response to the NYPD surveillance, although she did not advocate for such actions in public meetings. When I asked her why she did not speak up within group settings Layla said, "I can't say that in front of people who I don't know—I don't know who they are." This is one example of how students' ability to even discuss forms of democratic engagement was muted and the possibility of political organizing undermined.

Layla demonstrates that Muslim student activists thought about how their words would be used against them, even in safe spaces. The surveillance of Muslim communities, and Muslim youth specifically, cultivated a culture of fear not only of the NYPD but also of community members and spaces. By disciplining members of a community without the need for the "overseer" to ever be present, this culture of fear realizes an intended effect of the panoptic gaze.

Amal was a young Arab American woman who was actively involved in her school and local community. We met during her junior year of high school, and over the course of two years Amal and I developed a strong relationship through our engagement with the Community Activist Literacy (CAL) program in Brooklyn. In spring 2011, CAL hosted a focus group for youth to discuss general social and community concerns. As the topic of the NYPD surveillance was raised, Amal claimed, "We *know* that is happening here." Thomas, a full time staff member at the community center, replied to Amal's comment, "Well yeah, we know it is happening all over the city, but do you really know you have been watched—why would *we* be?" Emphatically, Amal raised her voice and stated, "Oh, *we* know—we've seen it." As Thomas' face grew quizzical, he was ready to respond when Amal continued in a more muted tone, "But, anyway . . . I don't want to talk about that." Amal's final comment clearly signaled that she wanted to change the conversation topic, as she physically shifted back in her seat. After a brief lull, the discussion quickly turned to discussing the NYPD's surveillance of the community as a whole.

A few days later, as I walked with a small group of CAL participants in the Brooklyn neighborhood near the community center, I spoke with Amal about her unwillingness to talk at the focus group. She elaborated, "I didn't want to talk about things like that there, you know?" She was concerned because she didn't know if conversations in the center were actually private. Amal did not know who was potentially listening and was also concerned that the space itself might be bugged. She went on to discuss a man actively involved in the community who she and her friends believed was a spy. Although she had no direct evidence, Amal said her friends and family were certain he was an agent provocateur. Amal's desire to not speak about her personal experiences of surveillance in a community center in which she spent a considerable amount of time (she was there multiple days a week after school) was not particularly jarring. The police never knocked on her door, and she stated that neither she nor any members of her family were approached by any U.S. security agency. Nonetheless, she did not feel comfortable telling a relatively benign story in a space where she spent the most time outside of her home and school—the CAL program is where Amal has built a strong community of like-minded, activist-oriented young people. Yet at a community center that served as a safe space for young people, Amal did not feel safe enough to discuss her experience of being surveilled.

Similarly, young people throughout New York City often gathered in formal and informal spaces to discuss NYPD surveillance. In the instance above there is an example of the uneasiness at least one student felt in discussing how surveillance materialized in her personal life. Although there was no evidence of the NYPD spying program in the community center, the panoptic gaze of state policing limited the students' ability to share experiences and create a collective body of knowledge of how surveillance manifests in their individual lives. Thus, their ability to identify with and name macro political phenomena in their personal lives was muted.

Despite having conversations in the public, outside of a confined and defined space to avoid the fear of hidden recording devices or people listening in, students did not describe feeling more comfortable speaking about their experiences of surveillance or their political perspectives. For example, I met Ibrahim in fall 2012, a year after the initial reports of the NYPD Demographics Unit. On a Friday morning Ishmael, the community activist previously mentioned, Ibrahim, and I met over breakfast in a busy West Village diner. The three of us discussed Ibrahim's relationship with a young man who publicly revealed that he was an informant for the NYPD surveilling Muslim youth activists throughout New York. Over the course of the conversation we discussed a variety of topics, including his community involvement, life plans and goals, and his relationship to the informant. Nonetheless, when we approached the topics of state politics and which Muslims were targeted, Ibrahim stated, "I don't really want to talk about that here." Moving away from that conversation, we went on to discuss his community work. As we continued to meet, Ibrahim and I discussed history, society, and his engagement in the Muslim community. All of our conversations were in public places, including parks, restaurants, and cafés. Although Ibrahim frequently critiqued individual U.S. policies and specific NYPD practices, he changed topics when we shifted to structural critiques. I eventually asked Ibrahim about this. He chuckled and confided, "I don't know what I can say in public. I don't know who or what is listening to what I am saying." Ibrahim continued:

Really, I don't know who to trust—I mean I think I can trust you, but you never know, you know? Do you know you can trust me? This whole thing—you don't ever really know who anyone is. You can't know. I only trust you because you know people I know, but what does that mean anyway?

As opposed to Amal, Ibrahim did speak about his personal experience of NYPD surveillance, but in Ibrahim's case the spy publicly acknowledged his actions, and Ibrahim had spoken to journalists about his experience. Nonetheless, Ibrahim felt uneasy critiquing state policies in public places. He explained, "I don't want to talk about things that people might think are too . . . you know, for a Muslim to say." Whether in casual conversation or in meetings, young people actively censored themselves and the conversations of which they were a part. This theme was heard on campuses, in youth organizations, community meetings, and in informal one-on-one and group conversations. The spying program repressed the development of political cultures and subjectivities of young Muslims in multiple ways. Some students responded to this context by limiting their political speech to avoid the slightest hint that police might use to justify scrutiny.

Beyond community spaces, undergraduate students reported that they did not feel comfortable discussing political events in the Middle East in their college classrooms. Nasir, a junior who was the president of his campus Muslim student organization, asserted, "I don't want to take any Middle Eastern studies classes . . . Someone in all of those classes is a spy." Meanwhile, Malik, a senior who was majoring in Middle Eastern studies, noted, "I am definitely more careful about what I say in class; I don't want people to think I am too critical of the U.S. . . . or even too . . . sympathetic to what is happening." When asked why he has such fears, Malik elaborated, "the NYPD is watching all of us—I don't want to be questioned. I know people who have been." Likewise, Layla, who was also a Middle Eastern studies major, stated, "I don't really worry about it. I just say what I think. I'm not saying anything crazy. It's just the truth." Although students utilized differing strategies, they were each actively responding to how they were, and are, perceived due to the appearance of being Muslim. Surveillance is not only about the specific instance when it is done but also about creating the perception that it is being done at all times. This perception is what causes people to change their behavior, hide beliefs or intentions, or in other words, self-discipline.

Although I did not speak to any students who were approached by the NYPD because of what they said during a class, young people throughout the city attested that they knew this had happened to others. This form of knowledge that flows within campus communities informs and creates a culture among students to reinforce the suppression of their political and intellectual subjectivities. Although there was no clear evidence of the various types of surveillance on college campuses, students throughout the city believed they were not only being watched in their communities but that they were being observed closely on campus and in classrooms. The clandestine program of surveillance subjugated students to fear the state and forced them to carefully curate what they said and where they said it because they did not know the extent to which they were being watched. In turn, the university was not seen as a free space to discuss and debate ideas but rather another space well within the reach of the state security apparatus.

The panoptic eye of surveillance turned seemingly benign situations into unsafe spaces. During a sunny Sunday brunch with a group of Muslim students and activists in August 2012, our discussion moved to the U.S. role in supporting repressive Middle Eastern regimes. Ishmael, a recent college graduate and community organizer, cautioned the group, "Let's not talk . . . let's not talk here." After a brief pause, the conversation quickly turned to the upcoming NBA season. Later that afternoon, as Ishmael and I chatted in his home, he reflected, "Yeah that conversation got going. I didn't want to talk about that stuff in public, you know? . . . You never know."

These data show that particular topics were off limits for some young Muslims to discuss publicly. Although self-censorship differs and the choices young people make are not always evident, what is clear is that they do not feel safe speaking in community, public, or academic spaces about topics they perceive as sensitive to government ears. This self-censorship does not only come from not knowing if listening devices are present or who else is in the vicinity but also from the knowledge that members of their community are working as informants.

Ultimately, the panoptic power of the state security apparatus censors and depoliticizes Muslim student subjectivity, undermining political agency. With the growth of de-radicalization programs nationwide, young Muslims are increasingly being told that voicing critiques of the state or holding radical political perspectives is potentially a threat to the state and to freedom. The pedagogical implications of this context are that young Muslims are taught that they should not only stop thinking critically about politics and society but also that discussing their role in politics and the future they want for their world are potentially dangerous conversations as they may turn the gaze of the state security apparatus squarely in their direction. Who can young Muslims trust and which spaces can they rely on to safely discuss politics and their lives?

### *Panoptic Effects: The Fracture of Intercommunity Trust*

Together, the knowledge that surveillance was occurring, that spies and informants were within their communities, and that individuals may have been targeted for political critique destroyed the trust young people had in each other, their communities, institutions, leaders, and advocates. The fabric of political mobilization had been ripped apart, and repair was not easy. Young people cautiously approached relationships, even ones that had been established for years. As a researcher and facilitator who participated in the communities and lives of participants, I developed strong relationships with many of the youth with whom I worked. But even these relationships were not immune from the distrust that permeated the entire community. Ibrahim, whom I knew more than two years, stated, "At the end of the day, I don't know if you work with the NYPD or FBI; I have to trust, but I really don't know . . . and you don't know about me either." While trust is

central to developing political communities and identities, young Muslims simply did not know whom they could or could not trust. But, it was clear to the youth that the U.S. government did not trust them.

The panoptic gaze altered personal relationships, with young people carefully assessing who their friends were and with whom they talked. Students expressed that after the enactment of NYPD surveillance programs they changed the way they associated with friends as well as newcomers to their communities. Amal summarized, "Yeah, of course, now I just don't trust people as much." Police surveillance does not simply result in hurt feelings or alienation but also constructs its own citizens as citizen-suspects. As everyone became a suspect, the stakes of what it means to "trust" someone increased exponentially. To "trust" the wrong person was a matter of criminality, and worse, this trust made one a target of the Bush administration's war on terror. According to Foucault, the transformation of the mundane to the political is the manifestation of the coercive panoptic surveillance and state ideological and political violence.

Through this research I primarily engaged with Muslim student activists who were politically engaged and were critical of the NYPD surveillance. When a 19-year-old Bangladeshi American revealed himself as an NYPD informant, the young women and men with whom I worked in New York City were shocked, puzzled, and confused; many of them had actually spent considerable time with the informant. Ibrahim, a young man quoted previously, had introduced this informant to his local mosque and community. Ibrahim felt personally hurt, shocked, and betrayed by this violation of trust. He said that a community leader told him, "You should not bring new people around anymore. If we don't know them and their families we don't know if we can trust them." Pragmatically, Ibrahim felt responsible for exposing himself, his friends, and his community to a person who was spying on them, but he thought such cautiousness hurt communities and feelings of brotherhood. "Sure, I cannot bring people around, but Karim knew him from high school and knew his family, so it's not like he was from nowhere." Students knew that simply knowing someone's family or history did not protect that individual from being an informant. Beyond hurt feelings, the knowledge of a peer informant was a clear indication for these students that Muslim youth are treated as a suspect class in the United States. Targeting Muslim communities wholly as a suspect class creates an exceptional group who are outside the normal realm of citizenship. This type of targeting creates personal isolation, community alienation, and political apathy, all of which foster a sense of political disempowerment.

Due to police surveillance, and pressure on leadership to comply and work with the state, a culture of mistrust emerged as a wedge between students and community leaders. Thus, students were skeptical when some community leaders and established organizations attempted to engage students in antisurveillance advocacy. Students stated that they were given directives from campus chaplains and community leaders to not organize on their own. Layla explained that the chaplain for Muslim students on her campus discouraged students from engaging politically: "He said this was not something we should worry about. He said that we should let the 'leaders' take care of it and we should just focus on school." Layla, as well as other students, felt such directives were indicative of the leaders' relationships with the political establishment. At a community meeting in February 2012 at a New York university, students were admonished, "You should not organize your own campaign" and that if they wanted "to do something and be involved" they should work with the legal team bringing a lawsuit against the NYPD. Students were told that they may not know all of the details and they may cause greater harm by raising direct challenges to the city government. Many of the students with whom I worked found this disheartening but also exemplary of a larger political agenda, as they wanted to have a more direct response (as well as a larger role in the response).

Some students felt that encouraging young people to participate in less confrontational organizing was not just a political strategy. Rather, as Maya, a first-year college student from Brooklyn, stated, "I don't trust the *imams* or community leaders. So many of them work with the police." Likewise, Layla noted, "The chaplains on campus who work for the university—who knows who they are talking to about what we are doing and saying." And Ishmael commented, "We know who their bosses are." Students believed that parts of the established Muslim community leadership were connected to the city's political establishment and had ulterior motives in their advocacy. Thus, in addition to distrusting potential spies, they also distrusted leaders because of their relationship to the surveillance state. In this context we see the tension between knowing they were being surveilled and a desire to politically challenge the state surveillance within the crucible of New York City. The state surveillance program fragmented the very relationships that are key in helping young people develop and feel connected with one another, which is the foundation for a broad-based and politically engaged community.

Similarly, older activists who worked with youth were also surprised at the level of surveillance confronting the community. Asma, a community organizer and co-facilitator of the New York Muslim Student Coalition, worked in advocacy, direct action, and policy campaigns in multiple states and organizations throughout the United States. Asma said she was "shocked and speechless when I found out we were being spied on. I first saw his picture and was like 'wait, we know him!'" Although she was keenly aware of the NYPD surveillance, Asma acknowledged that she did not expect that youth would be informants nor did she expect to be spied on. "I've worked in lots of different organization and different places, but this is different . . . Yeah, it scares you and makes you wonder who you can trust." As a community activist and organizer who attempted to "build connected and powerful communities," Asma said not being able to trust the young people destroys basic notions of relationships in community organizing. Beyond personal relationships, Asma noted this limited the political space she had to organize communities.

### *Panoptic Effects: Benign Visibility or Being Invisible?*

Avoiding police gaze was a central concern for many youth with whom I worked. While their bodies themselves were suspicious, what they discussed made them suspects. Students were concerned that visibility may make them a target for government surveillance. While activists shared this concern, they also articulated the belief that political visibility provided a form of protection from law enforcement targeting. As young people wanted to find ways to engage in political, civic, and cultural life, they were keenly aware of their position as citizen-suspects in the American political landscape.

In working with youth in advocacy campaigns, media and political visibility is often a goal because it brings one's message to a larger audience. Nonetheless, visibility radically differed for Muslim students who knew they and their communities were watched by the police. At community and campus meetings, facilitators often began by noting that the meeting itself may be surveilled. At the February 2012 meeting discussed earlier, a legal advocate began by advising, "If you want to bring up something sensitive, please come see us personally after the meeting so you don't have to say it in front of everyone. We don't know who is in the room and who is listening." Student fears of listening ears were well founded. A legal advocate clearly stated there was the potential that they were being watched in that room and on that campus, simply for showing up to discuss the NYPD's tactics. This comment convincingly demonstrated to the students that they were not being overly cautious or paranoid.

The New York Muslim Student Coalition tried to prevent the presence of spies or informants by ensuring only students attended and participated. Nonetheless, the

facilitators did not consider the possibility that students themselves could be informants. In a context where police are surveilling the communities in which I was working, there was no way to guarantee that the research sites themselves were free from a security state presence. In spring 2012 two community activists, Ishmael and Asma, who were mentioned earlier in this paper, and I facilitated a day-long student organizing training in Brooklyn. Muslim students from throughout the city learned basics of grassroots organizing and discussed the NYPD surveillance. This event occurred ten months into the ethnographic study and was also the beginning of the New York Muslim Student Coalition (and research project) that specifically addressed NYPD surveillance.

At this meeting, participants pre-registered online and were told to bring their student identification to enter. When Ishmael was asked about this requirement he explained, "We want to make sure we know who's here—that it's a safe space." As a man who looked to be in his fifties tried to enter, he was asked if he was a student. When he replied he was not, the student working at the registration table asked him to wait so that Ishmael could speak with him. As the two of them engaged in a brief discussion, the conversation closed with Ishmael stating, "I'm sorry brother, it was clearly stated that this event is for students only. You will have to leave." When I asked Ishmael why he didn't allow the man in, he reiterated, "We want to keep this a safe space for students. We want to keep potential informants out. It's not for sure, but it makes it harder, you know? Does the NYPD have undercover officers posing as students?" With a raised intonation, Ishmael did not ask a question, but made a rhetorical comment that connoted that he did not believe this was a possibility. Little did he, or the other organizers, consider the fact that the NYPD did not need an undercover officer but simply an informant present. Six months later it came to light that at least one participant at this meeting was actually an NYPD informant. Through this example, the panoptic power of state surveillance directly resulted in community members distrusting each other and constructed a subjectivity in which political identities and mobilization was hindered.

Being afraid to publicly speak out about the NYPD surveillance specifically—and more broadly about U.S. politics—was a concern for young Muslims nationwide. Research from throughout the nation has shown that students feared that their words might potentially be seen as anti-American (Ali 2014; Cainkar 2009; Maira 2009; Naber 2005). Community leaders and activists were aware that this fear within Muslim communities made grassroots political involvement increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, Ishmael encouraged students to get politically involved, arguing that public visibility can potentially shield one from targeting and prosecution by the surveillance state:

I know it feels scary to talk about some of these issues, especially with all these BS prosecutions, but the best way to stay safe is to speak publicly. To go on record. People know the types of things you say and the things that don't fit. If you don't have a record of what you said, anything can be said about you.

Although such encouragement maintained an internal logic, student activists themselves feared public speaking did not offer protection. Many cited numerous cases of Muslim men who were convicted of terrorism-related activities (Aaronson 2013; Kumar 2010), such as the cases of Syed Fahad Hashmi<sup>1</sup> and Tarek Mehanna,<sup>2</sup> among others. These two cases in particular involved young men from the East Coast of the United States who are now serving 30- and 17-year prison terms, respectively. In both cases the young men were outspoken critics of U.S. policy, which young people stated made them very obvious targets of prosecution. As one young man I worked with claimed, "It's all rigged. I mean what did he (Hashmi) really do? Let someone stay at his house? Come on. He went to jail because of what he said. Because he was an activist." Regardless of the crimes these individuals were convicted of, many of the young women and men saw these convictions

as politically motivated to ideologically and financially justify the war on terror. Nasir succinctly stated, "This is just all about the money, the oil, and budgets here. Seriously, are *we* really doing anything wrong?" The students believed that a Muslim engaging in critiques of the state automatically made them a suspect within the United States.

As the NYPD surveillance continued to be a news story through 2012, the Associated Press revealed that NYPD was not just spying on "fringe" community participants but that the NYPD was also spying on individuals whom the New York City Mayor's Office considered community leaders and partners (Apuzzo and Goldman 2013). This list included *imams*, leaders of community-based and service organizations, and activists. As Layla speculated, "I guess those guys who are in meetings with the government are different, but wasn't the NYPD spying on them, too?" This knowledge further complicated how Muslim student activists felt about their political and community involvement as it revealed that the security apparatus did not even trust those individuals who were meeting with the city's top officials.

Young Muslims from throughout the city regularly asserted that the state security apparatus was going to watch Muslim communities, and target individuals, regardless of the types of political activities in which they did or did not engage. Amal, a young woman mentioned earlier in this paper, stated, "It's just like that, if you are a Muslim and active you are a target. It's like you are damned if you do and damned if you don't." Likewise, Nasir, a young man who was the president of his campus Muslim student organization, pondered, "Yeah, I don't know. I mean if they want to go after me, I don't know what I can do." For politically engaged young Muslims, the knowledge of police surveillance evoked both a resignation and empowerment. They felt there was no invisibility while being a Muslim in the United States, for their identity unequivocally made them a suspect. As the surveillance state's gaze eroded their ties and trust with one another, and as they struggled to find spaces to feel safe and unwatched, their political identities were reduced to simply affirming their humanity and presence in the United States.

### *Surveillance, Muslim Communities, and Anti-Black Racism*

It is important to note that the history, lives, and experiences of African American Muslims who navigated and built community within a context of surveillance were not prioritized as part of the student coalition. There was an important opportunity for learning, engagement, and multi-racial coalition and community building that was lost as these groups of largely second-generation immigrants from South and West Asia did not engage the lived experiences and history of African American communities in their city.

Some Muslim students began to view the state's coercive apparatus that was targeting them through a broader historical trend of silencing oppositional voices in the United States. For example, Ibrahim talked about Muslim students' experiences in a comparative manner, describing, "This is like it was in the 60s. If you speak up they come after you." Ibrahim notably evoked the history of U.S. Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) surveillance. Occasionally, other young Muslims discussed the targeting of African American Muslim communities in New York City, but this narrative was largely absent from conversations. Furthermore, overtures to history and an occasional comment are not indicative of engagement and participation in real ways. The New York Muslim Student Coalition primarily engaged first- and second-generation South Asian and Arab Muslim youth in New York City. Yet New York's African American Muslim communities generally, and African American Muslim communities specifically, have been targeted by law enforcement personnel for more than 50 years (Daulatzai 2012; Gomez 2005). As South and West Asian Muslim communities (along with African American Muslim communities) have been increasingly and more acutely targeted by law enforcement since 2001, African

American Muslim communities have faced such treatment by the security apparatus for generations. The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, Muslim Mosque Incorporated, and numerous local communities (particularly in Harlem and Brooklyn), African American Muslims in New York City have had a long and tenuous relationship with the NYPD. At a campus lecture in spring 2012, the *imam* of a mosque serving a largely African American congregation commented, "This isn't new to us—we've been dealing with the NYPD our whole lives."

## Implications

### *Methodological Tensions*

There are clear benefits for a scholar to write about surveillance. Within social science research, accessing data (or lives) that other researchers may not be privy to can potentially advance one's career. Furthermore, there is an array of intellectually stimulating areas of research within this context. Nonetheless, for concerned social investigators, simply finding the most interesting question cannot guide their research projects. They must ask the following questions: (1) Who benefits from this work? (2) What are the ramifications of this research? and (3) In whose interests is this project constructed? If these questions do not place the community and participants' needs and lives ahead of all else, both in the short and long term, then the research itself should be refocused or abandoned altogether.

Initially this study was designed to explore questions of political and academic literacies in an afterschool program. Nonetheless, as evidenced by the data presented, I reframed the research question in order to respond to the emergent context: how young people navigate social, political, and cultural institutions while knowing they are being surveilled. In essence, the goal was to examine the counter-spaces young people created. Through discussing the research project with participants, community members, and activists, it became clear that although such a focus would produce valuable data, it would not serve the young women and men who lived these experiences. Rather, it potentially increased their vulnerability. Instead, the participants desired academic research that would elucidate the struggles they faced because of the surveillance. The students wanted me to focus my work on the effects of surveillance in their lives and communities rather than how they organized to challenge it.

The heart of this concern was that writing about surveillance, as experienced by its targets, may make the participants vulnerable in multiple ways. First, it may expose the ways they attempt to maneuver around the watchful eye of the state. In addition, it has the potential to turn the gaze of surveillance even more acutely in their direction. Furthermore, such research does not serve the participants, as they already know how they were navigating the world in which they live. By focusing research on how surveillance affects youth lives, the study provided participants an opportunity to not only reflect on what they have gained and lost but also on what they wanted for themselves and their society. Such research provided a space to consider the nature of American democracy, liberalism, militarism, and cultural politics. It elucidated an aspect of state authority, power, and control, and how policing creates suspects.

### *Closing Discussion: Being Surveilled in Times of War*

Young Muslims were keenly aware that someone might be listening to their words and reporting on their actions to the security state. This study found that young people were deeply concerned about the relationships they had with their friends, community members, and community leaders. Spaces and places that should have provided safety to discuss their

viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences were simply not safe. The United States' war on terror has resulted in tens of thousands of innocent deaths and the destruction of multiple nations. The sites of the war on terror are not only overseas but include domestic theaters of war that have material ramifications on the lives of U.S. citizens and residents. This study elucidates the ways that everyday citizens, not those who have been publicly or secretly accused of terrorism, experience an aspect of the domestic branch of the war on terror.

The dangerous, violent, rebellious, and suspect figure of the Muslim continues to haunt the American imagination. This image creates the political space to assume policies enacted against Muslim communities are somehow acceptable collateral damage. This research depicts that the Muslim occupies a suspect class of citizenship in which she or he is a perpetual target of surveillance because she or he is a potential terrorist. As political tides change and individuals and parties move in and out of office, Muslim communities continue to be surveilled, watched, and remain a concern for the state security apparatus. The function of surveillance is not to know everything (although there are technological attempts to do so) but rather to create a context where anything *could be known* by the state. This is evidenced through the voices in this study. Young people were keenly aware of this reality and reconstructed their social relationships to respond accordingly. A clear effect of the panoptic gaze was to accept such a relationship with the state as normal. This raises the question of what is political subjectivity and how does it function within the context of a fear of state surveillance. This research produces real and manifest concerns for the meaning of U.S. citizenship, both in theory and in practice. If a group of citizens are deemed, and treated, as inherently suspicious, and as an ever-present potential threat to the state, what are the prospects for these communities' future within the United States?

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## Notes

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1. Hashmi was a critic of U.S. foreign policy and an activist while an undergraduate at Brooklyn College and a graduate student at London Metropolitan University. He was convicted of providing material support to Al-Qaeda—allowing an acquaintance to stay at his apartment for two weeks in London. This acquaintance carried a bag of socks and ponchos that the U.S. government alleged ended up in the hands of Al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan. Hashmi's defense stated that he did not know what was in the bags or where they were headed.

2. Sentenced when he was 32 years old, Mehanna is a pharmacist who was born and grew up in the Northeastern United States. Mehanna, who was also a community activist, translated publicly accessible Al-Qaeda documents from Arabic into English and published them online. The government alleged that translating a publicly accessible text was a conspiratorial act to support attacks against the United States.

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