JAF
AAUP JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Back to Volume Thirteen Contents

Public Memory Generates Disinformation on 9/11 in Public Schools

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Abstract

The public memory of September 11, 2001, remains contested in political and social discourse. Schools remain a prominent public institution for educators and students to come together to develop core competencies of citizenship and tolerance for others, but educators are not equipped with sufficient resources to effectively teach racial literacies. As a result, annual attempts to address 9/11 in classrooms generate anti-Muslim racism that marginalizes the experiences of Muslims in the public memory and reproduces bias and discrimination targeting Muslims and Arabs in schools. Institutions of higher education assume intellectual responsibilities in constructing the public memory of 9/11 but are limited in impact because of far-right political attacks questioning their allegiance to America. My attempt to intervene with culturally responsive teaching and learning resources about 9/11 was met with state-sanctioned censorship and an inadequate assurance of academic freedom. This essay represents a critical examination of 9/11 curriculum and pedagogy and reflects on the utility of academic freedom to protect the interests of public scholars.

On September 11, 2001, planes were flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, causing the deaths of almost 3,000 Americans. Others recount that on that day the United States suffered the worst terrorist attack on its soil, one perpetrated by radical Islamic terrorists. And twenty years later, former president George W. Bush remembered September 11 as "America's day of trial and grief[.] I saw millions of people instinctively

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grab for a neighbor's hand, and rally for the cause of one another. That is the America I know" (Miller and Lemire 2021). Although the tragedy of September 11 may be marked in the memories of those who lived to tell about it, today's young people rely on our nation's collective public memory to make sense of the complexity of that day.

Maurice Halbwachs, the "founding father" of memory studies, stressed that societies make sense of the past through the mental images used to solve present problems (Gensburger 2016, 397). Collective memory is based upon the "ideas, assumptions, and knowledges that structure the relationship of individuals and groups to the immediate as well as the more distant past" (Sherman 1999, 2). Drawing scholars across disciplines, public memory examines how societies "represent the past in ways that reflect the needs, concerns, and preoccupations of the present" (Hill 2009, 358).

Public memory is both malleable and changeable; it is not an objective rendering of the historical record of past events (Cherviatsova 2021, 677). Our nation's public memory of September 11 has changed over time. Inderpal Grewal (2003) demonstrated the new form of nationalism that US society experienced, and Sally Wesley Bonet (2011, 49) wrote of the onset of racialized religious bigotry against Arabs and Muslims, seen as transnational figures of terrorists and un-American enemies of the state. Public memory doesn't assume a single narrative of truth and objectivity of the past; instead it situates multiple, often competing views shaped by politicization and social practices (Hill 2009, 358).

Beyond the construction of public memory is its installation in public spaces and popular discourse, memorialized as "memory texts" through television programs, films, museum exhibitions, textbooks, and fashion. Public memory is also upheld through memorial sites that reproduce dominant narratives of the status quo (DeLeon 2011). In locations where the 9/11 attacks occurred, the public erected spontaneous memorials that canonized the locations as holy grounds to construct collective memories of the lives lost.

Émile Durkheim asserted that public memories are also maintained through commemoration rituals (Hill 2009, 374). Remembering significant events annually brings people together and serves to construct

public memory for communities and nations (Waterson and Haas 2011, 147). Our nation's annual commemoration rituals focus narrowly on remembering the lives lost on 9/11, less on the social or political impacts of the attack. Commemoration rituals also communicate memories for those who did not live through 9/11, creating a public pedagogy to teach others of the complex sociopolitical histories and lives lost on that day.

It is important to recognize that public memory is an "instrument of power" (Blight 2002, 1) that functions by "creating a desired image of the past" (Cherviatsova 2021, 676). This was evidenced when former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani spoke to the United Nations on October 1, 2001, and said, "The attacks of September 11th were intended to break our spirit. It has not done that. It's made us stronger, more determined, and more resolved. . . . Our belief in religious freedom, political freedom, economic freedom—that's what makes an American. Our belief in democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human life—that's how you become an American. . . . We choose to live in freedom" (United Nations 2001). Americans heard "freedom" and "democracy" in his remarks, calls that evoke a public memory where 9/11 represented an attack on the founding principles of America (DeLeon 2011). This discourse served to validate our nation's response: a declaration of war on terror as revenge against those who targeted our values. It explains why national polls in the early years of the "War on Terror" found that 49 percent of Americans felt it was "acceptable and wise to sacrifice individual freedoms to ensure national security" (Pew Research Center 2004). In 2002, this public sentiment helped enact the USA PATRIOT Act, a national policy that disproportionately curtailed the civil rights of Arab Americans and Muslims (Bonet 2011, 47).

September 11 had far-reaching impacts on the lives of Muslims, intensifying anti-Muslim bias and racism in the media (Tindongan 2011, 73). Muslims were forced to negotiate multiple identities as Americans but also outsiders, being both threatened by the attacks of 9/11 and perceived as the threat of 9/11 (Tindongan 2011, 78). Twenty years after September 11, America has yet to include the marginalization of American Muslims in the public memory of September 11.

Public schools remain a prominent state institution where young people come to understand the nation and develop their sense of belonging and citizenship (Bonet 2011, 46). But federal education policies that prioritize reading and math, including the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), often reduce classroom time for social studies and history instruction, leaving students without substantive resources to learn our nation's public memories (Kinniburgh and Byrd 2008, 33). Thea Renda Abu El-Haj (2007, 268) asserted that schools are critical sites for preparing students to be engaged citizens in a democratic society, by educating for social change. Time and resources must be allocated to teach students social studies and histories that shape our collective memories (Tindongan 2011, 84).

This essay presents a critical examination of how public memory of September 11, 2001, is instilled in schools, making the forces of power, privilege, racism, and marginalization visible in shaping the reproduction of anti-Muslim racism. This work draws on a larger empirical study of Muslim students' experiences in public schools. When I began to communicate early findings of this research in 2021, I faced vitriolic assaults and state-sanctioned censorship as I challenged the nation's public memory and advocated for antiracist revisions in schools' memory texts. This essay seeks to respond to two related questions: How can schools reproduce public memories of 9/11 that disrupt anti-Muslim racism? and How does academic freedom protect public scholars engaged in this work?

In K–12 public education, the state wields the authority to govern "memory texts" comprising school curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and leadership practices. Schools remain a perpetual site of tension for any examination of September 11, as they must negotiate multiple interests of public memory. But teaching 9/11 cannot wait for agreement on a single public memory. As one educator stated, "The attacks of 9/11 are just too important to ignore. They present the ultimate teachable moment" (Hess and Stoddard 2007, 231). Schools continue to be ineffective sites for curriculum and pedagogy of our public memory. Students do not receive meaningful guidance on critical media literacy, limiting their abilities to identify the effects of sociopolitical propaganda, and teachers are ill-

equipped to demonstrate how to interpret the effects of policy changes that impact civil liberties, a concept deeply relevant to the study of 9/11 (Diem 2002, 147).

A textbook functions as a "monument between book covers" because of both its permanency and its hegemonic instructional role in classrooms (Lewinnek 2015, 49). But school leaders have few textbook options that critically depict 9/11, since many textbooks offer scant coverage of twenty-first-century events (Journell 2011, 3). Teachers find that available September 11 curriculum resources are limited and often omit content addressing anti-immigrant racism (Verma 2005, 12). Although there is public agreement that 9/11 should be included in state curricula, social and political contention remains as to what students should learn about 9/11 and its impacts (Hess and Stoddard 2007, 231). As such, state standards may be reduced to general content knowledge with phrasing like "Describe America's response to September 11, 2001" (OSSE n.d., 75).

We need curriculum to serve as the memory texts that provide educators meaningful content related to public memories of 9/11. One nonprofit developed a text titled "(Re)embracing Diversity" (Kenan 2005, 173) to promote understanding and cultural learning with specific reference to Muslim communities after 9/11. Children's literature can also be a source for critical perspectives on historical events by bringing the past to life (Palmer and Burroughs 2002, 73). As Marsha and Tom Savage (1993, 32) wrote, "The authentic, realistic creation of events in quality children's literature can help students identify with people and events that often seem remote and dull in their social studies text." Educators need relevant 9/11 memory texts to teach students how to interrupt bias and use critical thinking to develop awareness of this event shaped by an understanding of terrorism, the racialization of religion, and global studies (Verma 2005, 16).

Pedagogy is the process by which public memory is enacted, understood broadly as the practice of teaching and learning. Twenty years after 9/11, today's youth do not share adults' and teachers' strong memories of that day (Haas and Waterson 2011, 140), so many current pedagogy practices prioritize solemn remembrance of 9/11 through moments of silence and expressions of American nationalism. This

reflects the state of our collective public memory, which emphasizes emotional responses to 9/11, with little substantive discourse about the larger contexts that informed that event (Kuthe 2011, 162).

In the days and weeks that followed September 11, 2001, teachers struggled to conceal their own feelings of shock to maintain familiar pedagogies for students who were also deeply impacted (Burns and Schaefer 2002, 77). One study that examined how twenty-eight secondary teachers used media on September 11, 2001, found that 60 percent of them included accessed media during instructional time that day, even though some of their principals said not to when students were present (Ray 2009, 305). In one school, the principal shut down the internet to prevent unsupervised students from accessing online content. In another school, teachers were directed to "teach as normally as possible" and wait for a school assembly to explain the events of the day (Ray 2009, 307). Elsewhere teacher and students constructed a memorial bulletin board to commemorate the tragedy and its victims (Verma 2005, 13). The pedagogy of teaching current events that day thrust teachers to the frontline of constructing public memory.

Twenty years later, not all educators take responsibility for teaching about 9/11 since it is primarily assigned to high school U.S. history. But even U.S. history teachers are short on time and tasked with many other curricular demands, leaving intentional 9/11 instruction to the efforts of individual teachers (Haas and Waterson 2011, 139). Others decline to teach 9/11 claiming "the material is too complex" or "I lack sufficient knowledge" or "the subject is too controversial," or even worse "I fear [public] reactions associated with teaching this subject" (Waterson and Haas 2011, 148). We know little about how teachers are responding to the social obligation to teach about 9/11; few empirical studies are available (Journell 2011, 3). But as federal and state pressure for high-stakes testing remains constant (Verma 2005, 16), and as the public discourse of 9/11 remains divisive, teachers are not incentivized to teach a historical event that remains politicized in public memory.

The lack of substantive information about September 11 in public education memory texts contributes to a widespread disinformation campaign. Although teachers serve an important role in constructing

public memory, the education resources generally available to teach 9/11 are limited and often leave out substantive content (Verma 2005, 12). If students are to learn why the United States was attacked on 9/11, they must understand Islam, the multiple interpretations of the religion, Middle East conflicts, and global politics shaped by US policies (Kuthe 2011, 161). The absence of these curricular topics in K–12 standards of instruction contributes to the lack of information available to teach the complexity of September 11.

The disinformation surrounding 9/11 is not likely to be disrupted by educators who fear negative consequences of discussing politics or politicized issues in classrooms (Journell 2011, 4). This contradicts some of the best practices of secondary education instruction, including facilitating discussions on controversial social issues. When students' opportunities for civic discourse are limited, they fail to engage meaningfully in other democratic processes (Verma 2005, 16). In public memory, this reduces September 11 to an example of "historical exceptionalism," an event is "so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis" (Kaplan 2003, 56).

Educators bear a responsibility for addressing the disinformation stemming from the single narrative of 9/11. Rather than trying to teach one story, teachers should encourage students to openly discuss multiple considerations to clarify understandings and practice collegial political conversations (Journell 2011, 5). This can be accomplished by modeling political tolerance and civil discourse through regular lessons on social issues as part of the official curriculum (Journell 2011, 7). Media literacy can also be taught as a tool to examine public messages regarding 9/11 and challenge the widespread appeal of dominant narratives (Verma 2005, 12). Teachers recognize that the best practices of social studies education are to teach across multiple perspectives so that diverse groups of students can meaningfully connect history to their emerging identities (Suh, An, and Forest 2015, 40).

Students rely on schools to create spaces for them to negotiate meanings of race and racism related to their lived experiences (Anagnostopoulos, Everett, and Carey 2013, 166). Teachers are tasked

with the important work of stimulating dialogue with students on topics of race and racism, but available curriculum resources are limited and reinforce disinformation on substantive 9/11 topics such as anti-immigrant racism. Effective racial literacy pedagogies can interrupt stereotypes and biases that marginalize others in our classrooms and across society (Verma 2005, 12).

Anti-Muslim racism spreads through public disinformation, often through negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims in US public discourse following 9/11, narrowly depicting Islam as violent and prone to terrorism. Anti-Muslim racism functions as socially constructed racism, the racialization of religious identities, occurring in Western societies as oppression that systemically targets Muslim communities (DeLeon 2011, 5). These dominant and widespread sentiments are reproduced as discrimination in official school texts and practices used to construct public memory (Bonet 2011, 51). Since 9/11, religious intolerance has been directed at Muslims, in response to political disinformation campaigns (Journell 2011, 10). The absence of substantive curriculum material describing the experiences of Muslims or foundational knowledge of Islam diminishes Muslim students' educational aspirations and sense of belonging. Anti-Muslim racism began well before 9/11, but Muslim student experiences of bias and discrimination became more acute in its wake (Bonet 2011, 49).

September 11 had far-reaching repercussions on the lives of Muslim students (Tindongan 2011, 73). Educators should disrupt anti-Muslim racism and public disinformation by providing the critical skills students need to deepen cultural and religious understanding. This can be accomplished through critical media literacy, by helping students examine how to challenge public disinformation (Tindongan 2011, 82). It can also include alternative memory texts, including curriculum guides, that address and prevent intolerance against Arab and Muslim Americans and pedagogies that promote respect for religious diversity (Kenan 2005, 173). Technology can facilitate cross-cultural conversations between classes to build bridges of understanding that disrupt anti-Muslim racism (Journell 2011, 11). This work requires improved teacher development centering accurate information about Islam and Muslims that challenges

public discourse. Schools are critical sites for preparing students as active, engaged citizens and must address the experiences of those who have been denied human and civil rights (Tindongan 2011, 78). This work is necessary to dismantle the public memories of 9/11 that continue to reproduce anti-Muslim racism in schools and their memory texts.

September 11 was also a pivotal moment for US colleges and universities, sparking postsecondary conversations on how to teach civic education, particularly the public memory of 9/11 (Giroux 2002, 57). Faculty at postsecondary institutions remain targeted by organized, nationalistic campaigns that promote a homogenous, single public memory of that national event. In its first project pamphlet, “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It,” the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) suggested that faculty, our nation’s “weak link,” failed to promote a patriotic response to September 11. ACTA included over one hundred reports of faculty and student comments to demonstrate that colleges and universities are “withholding . . . support against terrorism,” thereby questioning their loyalty to the United States (Valandra 2003, 421). These opponents of academic freedom claim that Americans must “blindly sacrifice our individual and community differences” to bolster US patriotism, particularly after 9/11 (Sayles-Hannon 2009, 710).

Since September 11, individual faculty, particularly those who identify as nonwhite or non-American, are at greater risk of being attacked for lack of national allegiance. After September 11, assaults on academic multiculturalism began to rise, with right-wing proponents claiming that it breeds social division and threatens national unity (Sayles-Hannon 2009, 709). Since 9/11, nonwhite faculty are unable to avoid the “glare or stare of suspicion” and are “especially vulnerable” to such right-wing belligerence, which demands that they clearly express their national loyalty (Valandra 2003, 422–23). A faculty member’s worldviews are subject to defamation, particularly if they are not mainstream (Valandra 2003, 426).

September 11 impacted civil liberties on college and university campuses, embodying the public debate between national security and personal freedom. ACTA’s November 2001 report contained 117 “anti-

American" statements attributed to faculty on multiple campuses, fomenting tense campus climates across the nation (Hulsey 2011). US law enforcement agencies began surveilling university students on the suspicion of threatening national security (Ali 2016). New regulations instituted after 9/11 required campuses to monitor students who were foreign nationals, contributing to a significant reduction in the number of international students from Muslim-majority nations (Palmer 2003, 20). Middle Eastern and Arab studies departments experienced hostility on campus, accused of extremist scholarship, intellectual treason, and subterfuge (Roy 2005, 148).

Despite these threats on civil liberties, many colleges and universities mobilized their intellectual capital to initiate campaigns to establish a public memory of 9/11. Dickinson College hosted the first post-9/11 symposium on the pedagogy of teaching 9/11 for educators in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. In 2007, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill held a free forum with "experts on national security, civil liberties and information technology . . . [to] explore conflicting needs and realities of the post 9-11 world." Oberlin College hosted a multidisciplinary lecture series called "After September 11th" to address civil liberties, academic freedom, and the implications of the "war on terrorism." At the University of Texas at Austin and Washington University in St. Louis, as at other law schools and schools of public policy across the nation, the departments of government began offering a course on civil rights and civil liberties in America, centering 9/11 (Hulsey 2011).

In April 2021, my early findings for a larger study of Muslim student experiences in public schools indicated that Muslim students faced anti-Muslim racism during school lessons commemorating September 11 (DeCuir 2021). To intervene before the twentieth anniversary, I developed culturally responsive teaching content to help (re)construct public memory of 9/11 that would not harm Muslim students. On August 18, 2021, the Virginia Department of Education invited me to present my research and facilitate a statewide webinar on culturally responsive teaching for 9/11. I used this opportunity to advance an equitable and just representation of Muslims in the public memory of 9/11 by creating inclusive lessons about heroism, resilience, and loss. I introduced new

terminology like "extremists" to broaden the discourse on those whose violent ideologies must be disrupted, and I dismissed false public memories of "American exceptionalism" that serve to reinforce Western supremacy. At the conclusion of the webinar, the state education equity leadership team expressed appreciation for my scholarship and posted my content on its website.

Ten days later I began to receive hate messages. Some weaponized my use of the term "extremists" as an invalidation of terrorism, accusing me of condoning the violent actions of the hijackers. Others denounced my rejection of American exceptionalism as undermining national interests. The messages came from conservative influencers and members of the public in a coordinated act of cyberbullying. Fox News and other conservative media disparaged me and my research. Republicans in the Virginia House of Delegates demanded a repudiation of my scholarship and slandered me online. I was attacked for being a Muslim woman in hijab. I was subjected to racist profanity, gendered expletives, and religious hate speech. The Virginia Department of Education removed my content from its website, the most direct experience of state-sanctioned censorship I had encountered in my work. My university assured me that I had academic freedom.

Assurances of academic freedom are an inadequate response to critical examinations of public memory. Engaging in public scholarship demands physical and emotional protections against hostile responses from far-right entities. Receiving an onslaught of hateful tweets, posts, emails, and phone calls is a devastating reminder that one's work is disparaged in public discourse. Academic freedom fails to provide the necessary securities to ensure the safety and well-being of critical scholars. Wellness is central to the construction of knowledge, and neglecting to protect the well-being of scholars will create unsustainable academic environments that cannot foster critical scholarship. As many individuals communicate publicly through multiple media platforms, academic institutions must accept responsibility for supporting scholars through all their public channels used to disseminate research. Women, people of color, immigrants, and the disabled are at greater risk of obscene attacks and racist hostilities because of their perceived weakness and assumed

inability to denounce public vitriol. When institutions fail to vigorously challenge public censorship, the results are faculty reluctance to critically examine public memory and the empowerment of public disinformation campaigns that target scholars and their work.

My research describing September 11 as a public memory reproducing anti- Muslim racism in classrooms has the potential to disrupt racism facing millions of young Muslim Americans. My identity as a Muslim woman researcher amplifies indigenous knowledges of Muslims and Islam central to this critical work. But affirming the scholarly liberties of academic freedom does little to ensure that this work will disrupt public disinformation efforts that reproduce anti-Muslim racism. Public scholars need institutions of higher education that demonstrate their commitments to disrupting racism by publicly condemning racist censoring. Academic freedom must be implemented as an external communications practice that is responsible for ensuring a free exchange of ideas and knowledge in the public square. This is what's needed to create a climate that promotes critical examinations of public discourse, which in turn can dismantle anti-Muslim racism associated with the public memory of September 11.

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