

## Can you see me now? Thirty years of Intersectional Silence in America

The current discourses about race and diversity (online and offline) are transformative. This article is based on auto-ethnography methodology to showcase a liminal space of intersectionality. Drawing on Crenshaw's (Crenshaw, 1989) concept of "Intersectionality," the author shows the commitment that drove her to write this essay. The author provides a vignette to analyze the results which she calls *intersectional identity*. Implications of this auto-ethnography suggest the necessity for our scholarship on intersectionality to incorporate racial fluidity narratives for people who exist at the intersections. On the same line of Chávez and Griffin (2012), the author aims to not only expand on the conversation between communication and intersectionality studies, but also draw Islam into the discussion (Ahmad, 2017)

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### INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will be known in history for two events: Covid-19, the pulmonic virus that shutdown more than 188 countries with 12 million infections and more than 549,000 deaths (Aljazeera and news agencies, 2020). And also the global sweep of protests against institutional racism. Those of us who are not white, placed in the category of black indigenous people of color (BIPOC) have a small window to speak up while many are still listening. This article intertwines feminist intersectionality thought (Crenshaw, 1989) with auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) to consider identities in the contemporary United States. My examination incorporates scholars who use intersectionality-- how constructed categories of difference, i.e. race, gender, and ethnicity operate in relation to each other (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981; Romero, 2011; Byfield, 2014) -- as a frame of analysis to expose systems of privilege and axes of oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016) at the intersection of these categories. Instead of the binary terms associated with power relations and oppressions "men rule women...Whites dominate Blacks"<sup>14</sup> – the intersectional model "references the ability of [...] race, class, and gender [oppressions] to mutually construct one another." (Collins, 2003, 208).

In a desire to advocate for auto-ethnography when it comes to people of color (Griffin, 2012), my own self-reflections as an “outsider within” (Collins, 1986) speak to those who may be situated in similar racial locations (Anzaldúa, 1989). My voice as a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) cannot speak for others (Alcoff, 1991). But I anticipate it can speak alongside others with similar social and racial locations (Harding 1991; Wood, 2005) to develop a richer sense of intersectionality expanding its strength within feminist communication studies (Chávez & Griffin, 2012). Auto-ethnography is “eyewitness accounts,” (Cauley, 2008, p.442) that render ‘silent voices’ (Griffin, 2012) of non-white female communication scholars (Allen, 1998; Davis, 1999) visible. Gerard Hauser (1990) defines a public sphere as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (p.61). The *discursive space* here extends beyond the public sphere to include virtual spaces (i.e. social media). Since our daily communicative experiences include mediated communication, exposing the hopeful spaces within the exclusive/inclusive discourses should include virtual spaces. My voice, intertwined with larger discursive spaces about anti-racism (online and offline) that are sweeping the country, speaks to the need of adding different voices of color to *women in communication studies*.

Theorizing from and in the flesh, argue Chávez and Griffin (2012) is about reaching out within our own silences and giving voice to the interconnected nature of being silenced. In this essay, I choose to make visible my intersectionalities through exposing my own silences in teaching, writing, and talking. Intersectionality as a theoretical lens stresses complex framing of exclusions and inclusions as they are created at the intersections of gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989) among other categories of identity, such as sexuality and class (Sorrells, 2016; Collins 1990), to expose axes of oppression and privilege (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Popular in terms of

race, sexuality, and gender, African-American feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2005) lead its use to emphasize sexism and racism at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Its expansion to disability (Thomson 1997) and minority religion (Ahmad, 2017; Bilge, 2010) is only beginning. This essay expands its value within Islam.

A central critique to intersectionality is its omnipresence globally and interdisciplinarily as the “travelling theory” leading to power disappearance in the form of its popularity (Salem, 2016). When it comes to advancing identity understanding of ascribed and avowed positioning (Hall, 1996) at the intersections of multiple axes of oppressions (Nash, 2008; Collins & Bilge, 2016), this frame of analysis can help raise awareness of malleable identities that are being created, maintained, and reproduced in today’s discourses where the personal and the political merge. May’s (2014) argument on intersectionality is instrumental in the discussion of Muslim women who still find themselves at the intersection of oppressions and corroborates the use of intersectionality analysis in this paper. Since BIPOC (including Muslim women) still have to repeat and redefine themselves, the safeguarding and repetition of intersectionality is paramount.

Therefore, against a single mode of identity based on gender (Greer, 1999), I follow current understanding of identity fluidity (de Los Santos Upton, 2019). A single mode of identity stresses the understanding of women’s experiences in a unifying solidarity of global sisterhood (Morgan, 1996), masking all other struggles under the lump sum of white middle class issues. But these types of struggles may not necessarily be shared by different women. Exposing the patriarchy highlighted by white communication feminists (Donaldson, 1951, Friedman, 1963; Smith, 1987; de Beauvoir, 1949) is fundamental. Difference matters (Allen, 2011). A single mode of identity calls attention to a sole indicator of oppression as it presumes only one facet of identity (Appiah, 2018). Instead, I conceive of identity at the intersections as disrupting to the nuanced

intersectionality of feminist scholars (Romero, 2017, Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981; Collins & Bilge, 2016) which implies (; Nash, 2008; May, 2014) of “all women are white and all Blacks are men” (Ferree, 2011, p. 55, Smith, Bell-Scott, & Black, 1982) to expand to Islam (Ahmed, 2017; Morin, 2009).

In short, as a Moroccan American woman, I analyze self-reflexively “my everyday experiences” (Griffin, 2012) as a non-hijabi, therefore invisible, Muslim woman in the larger discursive space. I investigate how intersectionality in communicative “practice” (Ahmed, 2017) applies itself in terms of social location, minority religion assumptions, and race. My auto-ethnography is discussed in a vignette of name, skin, and hair (to symbolize gender, race and religion) and the analysis is intersectional in nature. Presenting the findings in the form of a vignette of my own journey invites the reader to experience the related events first-hand (Richardson, 1999). As a silenced voice within communication studies and the larger discursive space, my voice brings a different perspective to the mix of intersectional studies within communication. You will notice during this article, the word “I” appears in multiple instances. My apologies. However, given that my religion, my culture, my race, my ethnicity have all been disregarded, discontinued, demarked, downgraded, and drained, the use of the word I is befitting. I will also use “you” a few times for conversational emphasis. For my self-reflections, I used my own journaling from corporate, academia, personal, and social media life experiences.

### **Existing in the Silence of the Discursive Spaces**

The study of women subordinations as a result of patriarchal society’s power and oppressions (Allen 1998, 1999, Young 1992, Greer 1999, Al-Saji, 2010; Oksala 2016, De Beauvoir, 1949) is undoubtedly still useful. Consider the case of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 2018. AI had already picked up humans’ societal patriarchal meanings. Scientists at Boston

University and Microsoft's New England lab, for instance, discuss how AI is learning to make associations with words and photographs in biased ways. Because more photographs of nurses are associated with females, for instance, the machine learning is picking up biases that more nurses are women and more doctors are men (Bolukbasi, Chang, Zou, Saligrama, & Kalai, 2016).

Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell-Scott and Gloria T. Hul Black edited the phenomenal book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982). These brave women point out that in addition to patriarchal oppressions, Black women struggle also at the intersections of gender and race unrepresented by either mode of identity alone. The simultaneous effects of the different systems of oppression and exploitation are not easy to establish in a hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1989). "When it comes to social injustices," focusing on a single axis is insufficient as intersections influence each other (Collins & Blinge, 2016). Critics fault the theory as downplaying the injustices within the groups (Bredström, 2006) and highlighting an additive approach to all axes of oppression (Martin, 2017). However, knowledge is produced in reference to the social, racial, and gendered position of every group and every subject (Hill Collins, 1990). As of 2019, women of color represented 18% of entry level positions and only 12%/9%/7% advanced to managers/senior managers/VPs respectively (Thomas et al., 2019). Though women of color aim high, emotional tax and the continuous feeling of being a token (Travis, Moscon, and & McCluney, 2016) prevent them from advancement. Similarly, only 20% of faculty in college settings are full-time women of color (Curtis-Boles, Adams, & Jenkins-Monroe, 2012, Corley, 2020). I maintain that as long as silencing non-normative identities still exists, an intersectional frame of analysis still matters.

In Western thought (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004) silence may be explained as an weakness, or unwelcome act (Wilkinson, Olliver-Gray, 2006) for it is categorized as refraining

from speech and failure to communicate (Sobkowiak, 1997). In contrast, an Eastern cultural perspective views silence as a sign of respect (Liu, 2002), or a higher form of thinking (Kim, 2002). Generally speaking, silence in this perspective is about the richness of meaning in what is left unsaid (Kim, 2002; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). It is this type of silence I engage here; the ‘unsaid’ behind silencing of non-normative identities at the intersections of race, ethnicity, religion, and culture. At, within, and across the discursive space of work, the silencing of non-normative identity provides a wealth of research on its own (Bruni, 2006; Gherardi, 1995). For instance, silencing non-heteronormative identities within the workplace (Compton & Dougherty, 2017) is normalized. Additionally, silencing comes in normalizing some emotions at the expense of marginalized ones. For instance, a Black woman’s frustrations are silenced into the label ‘angry Black woman’ (Griffin, 2017) but the tears of a white woman feeling guilty at work are seen as victimization (DiAngelo, 2018).

In a way, the rationalization of emotional experiences ultimately subjugates marginalized voices (Clair, 1998) to racism. Higher education, as part of the workplace, is particularly interesting for this essay. Unlike corporate America, the academic discursive space is meant to be an open space to non-normative voices. Still, the silencing is undeniable. In such discursive space the silence is within and beyond the intersections. Students and faculty of color both find their silenced identities exhausting. A study conducted (Cabrera, 2014) on whiteness exposed reverse racism claims. White male student participants minimized structural racism claiming whites are the new victims. They blamed racial minorities for racial antagonism (both on campus and in society as a whole). However, regardless of their race/ethnicity, the students of color experienced verbal and nonverbal racism on a daily basis (Harris et. al, 2019). And these students are mostly

subjected to syllabi that are packed with white scholarship (James, 2019 ) ignoring students of color's own representations.

Additionally, silences are across, within, and at the academic institutions of the classroom, student relationships, and publication. 'One is enough' is a familiar pattern (Flores, 2019) for those of us who are faculty of color. "Most faculty are White, and I remain one of very few persons of color in the classroom—if not the only one" states James (2019). Being the only woman of color is exhausting. In many ways the 'one is enough' guideline prevents the person in question from networking with others, therefore skipping the stragic ladder of climbing in these places of work. This type of 'refraining from speech' (Sobkowiak, 1997) suggests that silencing identities is about appeasing to accommodate, to compromise out of frustration, anxiety, fear so as not to offend or worry those identities in power.

I argue that *intersectional silence* is about the different oppressions and powers that operate in different discursive spaces. Silencing identities is a result of appeasing and accommodating to avoid racial frustrations. Silencing these identities maintains the status quo. For instance, in the wake of the recent 2020 protests against police brutality, the silence over white supremacy seems to be lifted. Colleges, universities, and corporate America are writing letters for anti-racism. In all the different faculty groups that took FB by storm ever since Covid-19, white faculty are promising to include diverse literature in their syllabi. But I wonder if this narrative is a different type of silence. Is writing a letter a mask for washing your hands of conversations about race. Would adding 2-3 articles to the syllabi be enough to represent these silenced student identities whose names are absent from textbooks and scholarships? Or is this another form of token representation to keep the status quo? Unquestionably, "systemic oppression materializes in a

multitude of forms” in the academic discursive requiring “an analytical that employs multiple-axis framework, rather than a single-axis perspective” examination (James, 2019, p 412).

In all fairness, issues of cracking through the silences of publications from and within women of color in communication disciplines is addressed by women of color, (Shome ,1996; James, 2019; Flores,2019; Harding, 2019) among others. However, women that find themselves at the cross lines of religion, ethnicity, and race are still silenced identities in both the communication departments and their publications. For instance, Muslim women wearing a hijab are rarely found in communication departments. Surely, nonverbal communicative practices of hijabs still fascinate the west, centralizing Muslim women in identity homogeneity (Al-Mahadin, 2015). Their visibility as Muslim women amplifies the microaggressions that permeate their realities and characterize Islamophobia (Morin, 2010). The absence of their representation at work or in publications becomes ordinary.

In a way, the scarce visibility of Muslim women in communication studies is consistent with the dilemma of visibility of Muslim women in the larger discursive spaces. Wearing a hijab highlights American Muslim women’s visibility (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010) but also increases the perception of their victimization. Their nonverbal practice of wearing a hijab conceptualizes them as submissive to the patriarchal system within the academic and larger discursive spaces. In other words, Muslim women are surrounded by the oppressive discourses of Islam and patriarchy on one hand, and of the “global sisterhood” and Orientalism on the other (Bilge, 2016). Muslim women have just recently begun to rupture the silences of communication publications (Morin, 2010; Blige, 2010). So, beyond intersections of gender, race, and sexuality, (Kimberly, 1989), this article can expand intersectionality within communication studies to include minority religions, specifically Islam.

In short, the aim of this article is to break through the intersectional silences of identities that find themselves ill-fitting within one entity of race, or gender, or ethnicity. Insisting on auto-ethnography as a method recognizes the exploration of these intersectional silences to understand *intersectional identity*. To be clear, by no means do I undervalue a single mode of identity based on gender, race, religion, or ethnicity. For instance, the “Black People” identity is essential as long as the racial disparities and institutional racism still exist. As Mike Laws, analyzes in a recent piece for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, capitalizing Black is a reflection of a shared identity and community that recognizes as standard, the people, their art, culture, and their community. His discussion with a colleague summarizes this thought adequately, “to capitalize Black is to acknowledge that slavery “deliberately stripped” people forcibly shipped overseas of all other ethnic/national ties.” (Laws, 2020) Per this understanding, a single identity of “Black People” recognizes the history and the struggles of the Black ethnic group, and unequivocally, valuable. Advocating for intersectional identity, instead, is about the courage of those of us who exist in the *inbetweenness* of race, ethnicity, and religion to expose the different silenced identities instead of making some salient at the expense of others. The aim therefore is for those of us who exist in the intersectional silences, to find solace in the terminology of intersectional identity. In alignment with the growing publications in communication studies of identities that find themselves at the crossroads of racial, ethnic, and religious lines, this article ruptures the silences in the academic discursive space while expanding the rich line of research on racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010) in the context of intersectionality theorizing (Holding, 2019) to religion.

### **Vignette: Name/Hair/Skin<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The conversations that took place in other languages such as French, Arabic, or Spanish are transcribed, translated, and summarized by the author.

The year is 1989, I arrive to the USA excited for a new journey, I can pursue the American dream, I hear. I am a young student full of ambition for equality of women in the technology field. The adviser calls my name, BLANKE enter. As I enter, he looks perturbed, "Oh I expected you to be a guy." Who can blame him? After all Computer Science (CS) was mostly made up of male students and professors. "What did you say your name is again?" I give up and accept every pronunciation possible, Bahlanke, Blankia, Blankehe. I eventually gain a Master's degree in Telecom Engineering and a career as a consultant with a telecom company. As a lead on telecommunication projects, my subordinates and I visit different clients. The male clients dodge my answers. Instead they ask my male subordinates. Only a few times do the male subordinates reroute the questions to me. The only other female colleague, a white woman, informs me she has her own share of sexism, though infrequent. She continues, "Our male colleagues make more money than we do." Tired of the traveling and the clients, I tell H.R. I can't handle the racism and the sexism. I ask them to please lay me off. H.R. commends me on my decision.

A tragic day, 9/11 I awoke at 7 am, like all of us, to the crumbling city of NY. I think of all the families' tragic losses and of the people who have now become representative of my religion, Islam, a word that means peace in my language, Arabic. But after 9/11 something switched with everyone. "Blakehe, we always hangout, but I never asked you where you are from," asks our park friend. I reply, originally from Morocco. The woman flees the common playground. My son was only 4 years old but the incident marks him.

"I do not want to go to college.", says a neighbor's child. I try to convince her, college will provide you with great opportunities. Look I was not even born in the States and despite my color and my Arabic name, I made it in the computer industry. I can't convince this seventeen-year-old woman. "As a Black woman, there is no hope,"c she ends the conversation. Her voice resonates with me years later as I enter the election booth. An older white man, probably in his nineties, says "Why are you all smiley, your vote was cast for you in 1863." I was confused at first. But while voting, I remembered that was the year President Lincoln put the Emancipation Proclamation into effect. But none of it mattered, Barak Hussein Obama was about to become the first African American president. His father was African like me and Obama is mixed like me.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I am a graduate student in Communication Studies, I attend my first academic conference. This time instead of mostly white men presenting new technological products while white women market the products as was customary in my previous industry's conferences, white and some people of color are presenting communication findings. My presentation is about Muslim women and Call Centers in Morocco. In between panels, an audience member asks "What kind of a name is Blankehe anyway?" It is an Arabic name. "So exotic! "Can I ask you a question? As a Muslim woman, don't you need to wear a veil, a hijab?" she inquires. Not all Muslim women wear a hijab. "Oh I see, a progressive Muslim woman."

Again, I am the only one with my skin color and background in these Midwest university classrooms and faculty office hallways. "I want to focus on the role of technology in communication for my thesis." I remember a voice echoing in the silence of the room, "Don't you want to study race and culture?" Why is my white professor asking me this? I try to apply for a scholarship, "Sorry, but you are not black enough," answered the African-American committee member sitting in front of me. "This Ph.D. scholarship is for African-Americans only." He continues. I think, but I am black; White people refer to me as Black. I move on.

I am a communication scholar now, I conduct research on Muslim women in Colorado. I confide to one of the participants who told me people confused her for a Hispanic before wearing

her hijab. I tell her similar to her, I am thought to be Hispanic. A woman in a grocery store who thought I cut her off in line tells me, “No te crees que eres lo mejor porque te casaste con un hombre blanco.” I also tell this participant that few Middle Easterners I have encountered in different Arabic parties I attended in the United States think I do not look Arab when I tell them I am from Morocco originally. After listening to my rant, this participant tells me, “If you too wear the veil, you will show people you are a Muslim and no one will confuse you!”

### Intersectional Identity

I am an academic who exists at the intersections of BIPOC/immigrant/Muslim/American citizen/mother of children with mental illnesses/. I am an exhausted and angry woman. But my anger (Griffin, 2012) is intersectional in nature. At the basic level, my anger is pronounced in the silenced identities shared by Black women scholars in the communications studies (Davis, 2009; Allen, 1998 Griffin, 2012). But for someone inhabiting many discursive spaces like me, the silence extends to minority religion, ethnicity, culture, colorism, and many others. As a person who navigates Africanism in the geopolitical spaces, Moroccan Muslim in the cultural spaces, Arabic, French, English, and Spanish in the language spaces, and African and American (yet mistaken often as African-American or Hispanic-American) in the hyphenated and colorism spaces, this vignette helps me highlight the intersectional silences.

As a minority voice, the type of my name (both as the denotative Arabic name or the connotative meaning of the intersections the name represents) within the field of communication studies has been scarce. In narrating vignettes, my own struggles as a professional, academic, cisgender woman and highlight the intermingled struggles in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationalities are exposed. The vignettes mirror the silences of my identities in the larger discursive space, but they also connect this silence to identities that are created and shuttered through and within the discursive spaces. Professional intersectional silences and personal intersectional

silences are two emergent representations of microaggressions within this vignette. So as ‘racially’ Black person, why shouldn’t I just refer to myself as African-American?

*Intersectional Silences in the Professional Discursive space*

Upon arrival to America, my Arabic name, is butchered, degraded, constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed in terms of egotism and tokenism. In a way the use of Blankehe as a pseudonym included in the vignette is a representation of my name pronunciation erasure, it is a play on the blank space, I suddenly found myself in. My “exotic” name connotes meanings of both sexism and racism. Not knowing where to place my name as a gender may have granted me an entry to the computer science/Telecom industry thirty years ago. But my entry as a cisgender woman to an industry that was manspreading and mansplaining came at the expense of the patriarchal system. Please do lay me off, I ask the HR director. In my novice way of understanding racial codes, racial silencing, racial innocence, and racial collusion, I thought I had triumphed. I had quit a job before they laid me off. I had revolted against Corporate America.

But the joke was on me. It had used and abused my youth for few years and my surface level knowledge of race in America. A dream job of five-star hotels, jet setting, and meetings with mostly white men had ended. Just like that, Corporate America was done with me. It had silenced me before I could advance to a higher position. The gender silencing is not mine to claim alone. Thirty years later, for instance, females in junior level positions occupy 40% but that number decreases to 23% for females in higher executive positions (Reynolds, 2017) in the Technology industry. And only 3.2% of Black people occupy leadership positions (Brooks, 2019) in Corporate America.

After all, my conversation about salary with my colleague could still happen today. The discrepancy of salary between white men and African-American and Hispanic women is 64% and

54% respectively (Institute of Women's Policy Research, Compilation of U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) so corroborates my corporate colleague's assertion in the vignette. Realizing how thirty years later we still struggle with basic gender equality, I am sympathetic to the feminist point of departure of unifying identity solidarity among all women. Morgan (1996) discusses "global sisterhood," in terms of the similar needs and political challenges that all women face across the globe. In her publication "The Whole Woman," feminist Germaine Greer (1999), writes "before you are of any race, you are a woman." p.11. For sure, our history as women is rich with discourses that bring the male misogyny about our bodies and minds to the forefront.

Identity as dynamic and salient, a process of becoming, a social construction that an individual enacts according to the context and the situation they are in (Gee, J.P and Handford, 2012) seems befitting. Instead of a single mode of identity of solidarity of all women, I therefore prefer words such as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, Davis, 1999). By summarizing many injustices in a few words, I have come to learn that such words give me the freedom and power to raise consciousness on the microaggressions that were unclarified in prior discussions. My professor asking me to focus on race tells a story of the intersections of my gender and my color. "Don't you want to study race and culture?" . A million questions resonate in my mind. Why should I? Is it because of my color, my background, my name, my ethnicity? Or perhaps my professor knows about my religion. Have I disclosed it without remembering in this post 9/11 harsh times for Muslims?

You can see how this question is loaded. Somehow I am supposed to represent diversity of race, gender, culture, ethnicity, and perhaps religion in a department that had little diversity at the time. The silencing of my identities is twofold, my professor's dominant white identity assumes that my intersections determine what I want to study. The story told here is about the silencing of

the systematic structural racism of the unconscious bias (Saad, 2020) within academia. In a way, biases exposed in such racial encounters in academia, as Harris (Harris, 2007) reveals can become burdensome for the “marginalized individuals perceive them as a lifetime of repeated exposure to racial offenses, with an emotional tax that affects their psyche in various ways.” But the silencing also occurs for me in the burden of carrying the representation of all these identities, in the tokenization of representation. The role of intersectionality goes beyond a label, it helps me understand how different positionalities provide advantages for some and disadvantages for others (Romero, 2018). This intersectional analysis, therefore, recognizes the intersections of the race, gender, ethnicity, and religion that informs my intersectional silences in the different discursive spaces in America.

Let me be clear: such silences in the professional discursive space also expand to religion. The intersectionality pronounced by my gender, ethnicity, race, and profession has afforded me the privilege of leaving Corporate World. (Ahmad, 2017). And because I do not wear a hijab, my academic colleague’s answer placed me in “the progressive Muslim women” Category. But this category contains more nuanced intersections within it. According to the single view on identity, veiled women by no means can be progressive and non-veiled women by no means can be traditional. A 2017 survey of Muslim Americans found that the current 2.15 million Muslim adults in the USA is estimated to double by 2050 (Muslim Survey, 2015). So far, their representation in communication textbooks (Wood, 2012; Sorrels, 2016; Jandt, 2018) is scarce in terms of names and content. In most of the educational books, non-Eurocentric, for instance, names hardly exist. Most examples given in textbooks denote and connote Johns and Karens. Students seldom find a name such as Deja, Fatimazahra, Mohammed, Soojeang, Juan, or Ryka, among others. Representation that shows up in small details matters. Similar to James (2019), my years in Grad

schools demonstrate the persistence of white scholarship. But my representation as a student in communication studies, (and even as an academic in communication studies) excluded Black literature but also Muslim literature. Muslim women are mostly invisible in women's communication literature. When they are visible in the literature, they are discussed dichotomously based on the need for emancipation from the hegemony of the West, (Droogman, 2007) or the need for the abolition of victimization by the West (Morin, 2010). In a way, the scarce visibility of Muslim women in communication studies is consistent with the dilemma of visibility of Muslim women in the larger discursive spaces (offline and online discourses). Beyond intersections of gender, race, and sexuality, the basis of intersectionality (Kimberly, 1989), this auto-ethnography is an example of the importance of extending discussion in communication studies beyond just a whisper.

#### *Intersectional Silences in the Personal Discursive space*

As I moved across time and space in the USA, my Arabic name's invisibility as an unknown meant my gender ambiguity, but simultaneously, my name's visibility meant degradation of my ethnicity. In popular culture, Arab olive skinned women are described as harem girls and belly dancers, Arab men as sheiks. These images appropriated during Halloween, predetermined the meaning and reception of my name before my arrival to America. My Arabic name in the early nineties was placed in the context of offensive stereotypes of Arabs. If you think about it, "There is never an Arab hero for kids to cheer." (Shaheen, 1980). Arabs in the nineties were faulted for their stance against Israeli treatment of Palestinians, thrown into a war for Iraqi oil, and castigated for Libya's Kadafi. My home country, Morocco is not as popular as Egypt and its Pyramids, nor as chastised as other Middle Eastern countries. *Casablanca*, the classic American movie, gained Morocco its only fame, again though a stereotypical Arabic image. America had tokenized my

name, putting me in the defensive prior to my arrival, yet because of my light Black skin, some Middle East Arabs I have encountered in the United States tell me I “do not look Arab” as my vignette indicates.

My own admission of these discursive spaces is a recognition of my own crossings in the different spaces but also an acceptance of all my parts (Collins 1990). The vignette presents the crossings in and within these spaces to celebrate the pride and pain of my blackness (Griffin, 1998) intersected with axes of discursive and material oppression of black and other minority ethnicities/religions. If you recall from the vignette, “You don’t look Arab” was verbalized by one of the Middle Eastern attendees. With their whiter skin and straighter hair. My other Moroccan friends gain immediate acceptance in the Arabic party. My Lebanese acquaintances with their even whiter skin gain more immediate entrance into the larger American assimilating society. “Do you speak Arabic?” another attendee asks. Defensive, I answer, “Of course I do, I am Arab.” More trauma befalls me. On one hand, in the larger discourse, I have to defend the Arabic people from all the microaggressions directed at them in America. On the other, I do not look Arab. I can pass as some other ‘other.’ I have wished that these Arabic women, instead of trying to assimilate with whiteness and seek white privilege, would break with white solidarity and innocence (DeAngelo, 2017). In these personal as well as academic discursive spaces, as people with facets of my identities embodied whiteness and White performance (Al’Ghabra, 2018), I was put aside, accepted yet disregarded in the same sentences.

In her article, “The new African-American,” Cawo Abdi (2016) writes, the African presence in the United States is tied consistently to slavery. With the liberation of immigration laws in the sixties and increased ease of travel, post colonial Africans in economic and political turmoil traveled to the US seeking the American dream. Coming from Morocco, a country in

Africa, why can't I just call myself an African-American? My own narratives about "not black enough" or "how are you black?" or "No te crees que eres lo mejor porque te casaste con un hombre blanco," (Just because you married a white man, don't think you are all that) provide a different evidence to the accepted often Black ascribed identity stemming from a history of slavery. To nuance this intersectional silence more, let me remind you of my interplay between the ninety year old white man and the one between the young African-American woman from the vignette.

The systematic white privilege (Tatum, 2003) and the ideology of white supremacy (Allen, 2011) are upheld in this man's remarks. There was no racial coding in his language. Probably for this older man, it was a simple affirmation of his whiteness. Or, perhaps it was a way to remind me that white history as a visible norm can only exist at my own invisibility knowing I am voting for Obama. Perhaps he expected me to smile, to put up with his colluding across racial lines. But for me it became about an entire history. I was reminded about the history of slavery, which I hardly heard of in my undergrad or grad school in the US, but I was familiarized with in Morocco, my country of origin, and later as an academic. Certainly, the election of Obama, the "glorious day" in the words of my African-American neighbor gave many of us strength. Yet I can still hear the voice of the younger Black woman stuck in the residue of slavery due the discursive spaces that keep reinforcing it in the systematic structural racism that exists in the discursive space of online and offline, "As a black woman, there is no hope."

I contend the question of calling myself a new African\_American is a difficult and a complicated question. Claiming this hyphenated space denies my Arabism, my Islamism, and my NorthAfrican (multiracial) intersections. Though I share the color, I feel as an imposter to a wonderful culture filled with struggles and experiences neither I nor my ancestors have shared. Griffin's (2018) phenomenal Black/White (black) and white/black (Black) distinctions about her

biracial experience glances at the meaning of being in the middle, albeit different in-betweens than mine. The complication comes in the negotiation that happens in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship communication. In my case, the interpersonal attribution in the white dominance is a Black Person. But the old white man was wrong. My vote was not “cast with Lincoln’s Emancipation.” I came post slavery to the USA from a place that nurtured my color not because blackness is upscale in Morocco, but its intersectionality with middle-upper class and education afforded me a certain position in the world. What was salient in my upbringing is my Arabism in solidarity with the Palestinians. So when I arrived to America my advocacy was for the Palestine People. This desire was silenced as I woke up to a democracy in America that favored some communities at the expense of others. Though my shade of blackness has no slavery grounding nor exile stories, my skin color suddenly became important. My skin color, upon arrival was preordained to take on the burden of BIPOC that has been skewed by white supremacist America. But the same skin was refused by the Black People in forms of “not black enough.”

My intrapersonal struggle: for years, I have been in constant cognitive dissonance, I have obsessed about the allegiance and the loneliness that come from belonging to different marginalized identities but not being fully a part of any. I often wondered if I were visibly Muslim, by wearing a hijab, would this man verbalizes his overt racism or would his disdain be hidden. Magari Aziza Hill, an African-American Muslim and Co-Director of Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, expresses "Since most black American Muslims are African-American, there's a tendency to render African Muslims invisible." (Ochieng, 2017). But perhaps my visible intersections of Black and Muslim African-American would have positioned me in double jeopardy. I will never know. But one thing is certain, compared to my visibly Arab friends who wear hijabs, Islamophobia did not hit me as much. My micro-aggressions deal with skin color

mostly, only when I am ‘found out a Muslim’, that I become “a progressive woman” as compared to those who wear a hijab, for instance as uttered in the vignette.

However, to bluntly compare my experience of coming to the USA and excelling in the computer science industry, despite “my skin color and Muslim name” to this teenager was intellectually immature. This young woman experienced racism in the memory of the Jim Crow period and in the context of excessively high black male imprisonment. She has experienced the trauma of ill-treatment after Lincoln’s Emancipation constituted “in southern reconstructions with the Black Codes” (Castle Bell, 2018), the continuing policing of black bodies (Dailey, 2007), impacting black communities severely (Penrice, 2007). My uneducated self about the horror that my skin color endured in my new home is best captured by Davis (1998) “Where is the critical voice which speaks to Black women's identity constituted in the experience of slavery, exile, pilgrimage, and struggle?”p.83).

My struggles therefore speak to the axes of oppression found in the intersection of gender, ethnicity, religion, and race, and were found in salary gap patriarchal systems and racial hierarchy (Sorrells, 2016). But I had not taken into consideration her post slavery implications. I am grateful to the extraordinary Black women like, Harriett Truman, Sojourner Truth, among other famous and nameless people who helped both her and I exist in this post slavery world. But I recognize that in my intersectionality, there is privilege, post slavery for me has opened the unimagined future in “five-star hotels” and “corporate jet-setting,” Post slavery for this young woman has limited her bright future. I am still angry for this young woman who could not “make it” in her legitimate post slavery America. I wish that my voice carries her voice. But I also connect with the voices of visibly Muslim women who, too, subdue to first base racism for their visible constructed categorization due to veil wearing

If women's skin color has attracted much talk for its first base connection to racial categorization (Davis, 2005), my hair (or the lack of covering of my hair) is caught up in another 'collision of discourse.' Hair scholarship is popular in terms of gender discrimination, i.e. long hair as a sign of unintelligence in the work place (Dimitrius & Mazarella, 1999) or in the form of race discrimination against "bad" hair (Robinson, 2011) based on eurocentric judgments of hair beauty (White, 2005; Thompson, 2009). Since my hair is not covered, it is difficult for people to ascribe a Muslim identity as I am not visibly Muslim. Depending on how I wear my hair (long, straightened, frizzy, or wavy, dyed black, red, or gray), I am ascribed a different identity altogether. The participant statement "if you too wear the veil, you will show people you are a Muslim," is interesting for it repeats itself in the daily communication encounters, such as my academic colleague's question on "why I do not wear the hijab." Intersectionalities are processed between and within social identity categories (Knudsen, 2006).

If, in academia, Muslim representation and publication is quasi absent, homogenizing Muslims as a single identity seems to be a standard in the larger discourse. Homogenization is an outcome of movements to either accommodate Islamophobia or unify Muslims against it (Afshar, Aitken, Franks, 2005), centralizing the Muslim woman's hijab as the face of such homogeneous (Al-Mahadin, 2015) identity. Wearing a hijab highlights American Muslim women's visibility (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). Yet, their visibility as Muslim women amplifies the microaggressions that permeate their realities (Morin, 2010), pathologized as victims in the discourse of Islamophobia (Waqar Ihsan-Ullah Ahmad, Ziauddin Sardar, 2012). Unlike Muslim women who are visibly Muslims, my Hispanic/black ascribed identity had shielded me from the fury and rage against all Muslims or brown people who were mistaken for Muslims. Only when mention I am a

Muslim do I feel the need to defend and to represent. Recall from the vignette, the park playmate mother/child duo who fled the common playground as they found out I am a Muslim.

I am aware of oppression at the intersections (Ahmed, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; Ferguson, 2000; Sima, 2016; Morin, 2009; Collins and Bilge, 2016) of citizenship, religious rights, and “legal” immigration. But, truth be told, the intersections of my gender, race, ethnicity, and religion preexisted my American arrival. They are the outcome of the Moroccan geographic location between the west, the Arab world, and sub-Saharan Africa, allowing for historical multiculturalism (Arabic, Amazigh, European mixtures) and (Arabic, Tamazight, and Tachelhit, French, and Spanish [in the Northern and Southern province]) as daily languages. The spread of Islam in the seventh century is mixed with local cultures to present its Moroccan Islamic flavor.

But challenges come in the negotiation of identity that is expected of Muslim women in America. Thus, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, class and nationality are recognized as not (necessarily) independent of one another, “but interconnected and one may experience various forms of oppression on multiple levels depending on one’s positionality in a social hierarchy” (Lanehart, 2009). For example, prior to 9/11, Islam meant peace in Arabic. Until the moment when Americans asked the famous question “where are you from?” Morocco was either unknown or mistaken for Monaco and the country’s popular religion was neither understood nor cared for. Once it became visible, its meaning was aligned with “terrorism” in my adopted country. And so the intersectional silencing of the Islamic identity that my son at 4 years old had witnessed in the playground is repeated in different discursive spaces: society, television, social media, making the associations of axes of oppression at the intersections of Moroccan, Arab, Muslim, black, and woman.

Therefore, my own story, both academically and professionally, shows the continuous reflection of my tokenism. But it also carries the responsibility to become a good ambassador at the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, race, and religion for identities that I was initiated with or I inherited along the way. In that it adds to the stories of microaggressions within the United States So on one hand coming from Africa and having American citizenship positions me as an African and American. On the other hand I cannot speak for (nor represent) the African-American story. The interweaving of the identities that are salient and silenced at the same time is exhausting. My disclosing of my life in this article is a manifestation of the tokenism/ambassador tension. It is a testimony and recognition of my own grounding “in and in-tune with one’s privileges and oppressions simultaneously and continuously” (Al’Ghabra, 2018, p. 29). But most importantly, it is also a bravery to break through the intersectional silences of microaggressions in solidarity with other BIPOC that find themselves silenced in the professional and personal discursive space.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

If auto-ethnographic tales about people of color that expose systematic racism and sexism are still infrequent (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Griffin, 2012) in communication studies, auto-ethnographies that discuss identities at the intersections of sexism, racism and a minority religion are even more scarce within communication studies. Far from narcissism (Fulwiler & Hayakawa, 2007), the vignette is a representation of my own struggles as a professional, academic, and cisgender woman in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. The validity of auto-ethnography as a reflective narrative (Ferdinand, 2009) is unquestionable, but in the current discursive spaces (online and offline) that have transferred many of us from usual citizens to apprehensive beings, the power of auto-ethnography is instrumental. My voice, intertwined with others (Flores, 2019; James, 2019, Griffin, 2012) speaks to the need of a larger methodology in

doing research in communication about women who find themselves at the intersections of many axes of oppression (Bilge and Collins, 2016, Romero, 2017).

Therefore, the first contribution of this article is to strengthen auto-ethnography as a preferred method in studying intersectionality within communication studies. You have probably noticed that I used intersectionality (and intersectional) 82 times. This is to show how the discovery of such a word enabled me to infiltrate my own intersectional silences. It gave me the courage to lift my voice into the silences of publications and institutions. My auto-ethnography can give others who live with intersectional identity the courage to speak up and to rupture their own intersectional silences. Optimistically, this narrative can add to diversify the scope of the dominant white scholarship literature within communication studies.

A second contribution, therefore, is to widen the importance of intersectionality in communication studies by expanding intersectionality to a non-dominant religion within the United States (Ahmed, 2017, Bilge, 2016). Widening the use of intersectionality in communication studies shows the intersections of sexism, genderism, and Islamophobia in both the verbal and nonverbal communication practices. In contextualizing my auto-ethnography through the incorporation of intersectionality scholarship (Romero, 2017; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981). I seek to understand different levels of oppressions and scholars who to explore intersectional silences expanding intersectionality to Islam (Bilge, 2016; Ahmed, 2018). In analyzing the vignette, I have challenged the notion of a determinant single model identity that focuses on a gender or religion alone. I have argued that this single model identity is constructed to purposefully keep the homogeneous identity of Muslim women in place, branding the women between victimization (Abu-Lughod, 2013) to the west and emancipation from the west. But as Abu-Lughod (2013) argues, Muslim women do not need saving from the west. In a way, the scarce

visibility of Muslim women in communication studies is consistent with the dilemma of visibility of Muslim women in the larger discursive spaces. Beyond intersections of gender, race, and sexuality, the basis of intersectionality (Kimberly, 1989), the aspiration of this article is to expand intersectionality within communication studies to also include minority religions, specifically Islam.

In leaving identity essentialization behind (Appiah, 2016) and focusing instead on an intersectional identity that takes into account intersectionalities between groups and within groups, a third contribution of this communicative study on intersectionality is to nuance the intersectional identity by exploring intersectional silence. One implication to this contribution is that I am suggesting that our scholarship on the intersection of gender, race, and religion within the communication field needs to broaden to incorporate racial fluidity narratives for people who are considered neither black nor white, which a single determinant model of identity keeps reinforcing. As the number of more accepted mixed children as well as the people who live at the intersections is growing, such nuance might be appropriate. Therefore, engaging intersectionality in communication studies is about the recognition of individuals who exist at the intersections of sex/race/sexuality/ability, to understand the intersections of privilege and oppression in our everyday communication.

As these narratives show, I choose to make visible my intersectionalities through teaching, writing, and talking to share my stories. NSF, Science & Engineering Indicators (2016) indicates that by 2013 women held 50.3% of science and engineering bachelor's degrees, 39% of physical science degrees, 43.1% of mathematics degrees, 18% of computer science degrees, and 19.3% of engineering degrees in the United States. I would like to think that I can include myself in the handful of Muslim Moroccan Arab American women who were nameless stepping stones for

women in the field of computer science just as I am grateful to all the nameless women who paved my own journey for auto-ethnography and those who gave me courage to tell my story (Allen, 1998; Griffin, 2012). Whether you are an individual who identifies with one race, one religion, or a person who recognizes an *intersectional identity* as I have come to appreciate, the aim of this paper is that all viewpoints should be accepted. This study expands on intersectionality within communication, and especially, on the complicated intersectionality of minority religions not just as homogeneous groups, but also among groups.

Ultimately, intersectionality in communicative “practice” (Ahmed, 2017) is about oppression but also about privileges of professionalism and education. For example, I was able to leave my corporate career for academia. Having access to the classroom, conferences, and journals, I am able to bring my different voice. The analyses from an intersectional perspective provide nuances on a spectrum of struggles and privileges. Such analysis focuses on a spectrum of Muslim women, highlighting *intersectional identities* instead of a homogenous identity embedded in communicative practices of hijab wearing. By breaking with my silence (Chávez & Griffin, 2012) on the saliency of my different social identities I am adding results discussion from my auto-ethnography. I suggest the opening of a nuanced understanding of intersectional identity at the cross lines of Islam/race/ethnicity/gender within communication studies.

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