

Brown Bodies and Xenophobic Bullying in US Schools: Critical Analysis and Strategies for Action

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In this essay, Monisha Bajaj, Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher, and Karishma Desai present an evidence-based action project that seeks to interrupt and transform bullying behaviors directed at South Asian American youth in schools in the United States. In the context of this essay and project, they argue that larger macro-level forces which promote misinformation about youth who inhabit brown bodies have given rise to bullying and, in some cases, harassment and hate crimes in schools. Conventional literature on bullying offers inadequate frames for how the forces of Islamophobia—which affect all those perceived to be Muslim—and bullying come together to shape realities for South Asian American youth in schools. The authors advance new frameworks and strategies for understanding xenophobic and bias-based bullying and explore schools as sites of possibility to interrupt Islamophobia and misinformation about South Asian Americans.

Keywords: Islamophobia, bullying, xenophobia, racial discrimination, South Asia, Asian Americans

Jajpee, a seventeen-year-old Sikh American student born and raised in Georgia, has been regularly bullied since the second grade, suffering everything from name calling and peer accusations that he has a bomb in his turban to physical violence that left him with a broken nose, a chin fracture, and bruises all over his body.¹ His older sister said of that beating, “He was sitting there with blood all over him and an ice pack in his hand and

kids were telling him ‘go back to your country.’” After two surgeries to repair the damage, Jajpee returned to school, where the bullying continued, and, his sister says, the school did nothing at all to address it (Lee, 2015).

Khoshnoor came to New York from Pakistan when she was in the eighth grade. She was bullied from the moment she got to her school—her hijab was continually pulled off by peers who called her “stinky,” “ugly,” and “terrorist.” Students threw things at her, such as balled up pieces of paper with explicit or lewd comments written on them. Some even threw basketballs forcefully at her. She reported these incidents to teachers multiple times, but no one did anything to help. She never told her mother because she felt it was pointless (Paracha, 2008).

With countless stories like Jajpee’s and Khoshnoor’s in our consciousness as South Asian educators in the United States, we came together after the horrific 2012 shooting by a self-proclaimed white supremacist at a *gurudwara* (Sikh temple) in Wisconsin, to discuss how the increasing instances of Islamophobic violence in and beyond schools might be addressed through curricular intervention directed toward greater inclusion and respect for difference in schools.² As education scholars and professionals—a classroom teacher (Karishma Desai), an afterschool educator and youth development worker (Monisha Bajaj), a school psychologist (Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher), and all of us researchers of educational phenomena—we had seen how Islamophobia was on the rise in schools, sometimes propagated by reductive curricula and uninformed teachers (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). We also had experience organizing toward allyship and solidarity, as we believe schools to be sites of possibility (Freire, 1970). In our process of creating a curricular intervention based on extant research, policy reports, and discussions with experts and advocates, we came across hundreds of stories of xenophobic bullying in schools. The voices and experiences of youth like Jajpee and Khoshnoor are central to this curricular project and serve as the impetus for creating curricular resources that expand the empathic frame of *who is American, human, and worthy of dignity*.

Schools mirror larger forces of exclusion and inequality in society, often reflecting dominant notions of who does and does not belong. This article focuses on the consequences of the rise of Islamophobia—the fear or dislike of Islam—in the post–September 11, 2001 period.³ Specifically, the post-9/11 climate in the United States has seen an increase in violence against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims, namely South Asians and many other groups. Though hate crimes, harassment, and school-based bullying and violence are not new phenomena, incidents targeting South Asian Americans, who currently number 3.4 million in the United States, have been increasing since 2001 (South Asian Americans Leading Together [SAALT], 2014).

We seek to demonstrate how macro-level institutional forces, such as the globalization of Islamophobia in political and media discourse (Rana, 2011) and US military engagement in Muslim-majority lands, when coupled with meso-level factors, such as poorly developed curricula and inadequate teacher

professional development (Kohli, 2009; Sleeter, 2001), spawn micro-level expressions of bias among peers and teachers, creating a hostile school climate for any youth perceived to be Muslim. Unlike conventional scholarship on bullying that focuses on its interpersonal and psychological dimensions (Olweus, 1993), we draw a direct link from the micro to the macro, asserting that larger social and political forces that promote one-sided, singular narratives about wars overseas (e.g., the namelessness of citizens of other nations killed by drones) have given rise to the construction of those people of brown skin as *Other*, *terrorist*, and *enemy*. In US schools, this comingling of macro- and micro-level attitudes is manifested through a range of behaviors that we identify as bullying and, in some cases, harassment, abuse, and hate crimes.

The literature on bullying mentions in passing bullying based on race or religion but is often silent about how the forces of xenophobia and racism come together to shape realities for youth in schools. Particularly absent from bullying literature is how misinformation and ignorance—fueled by discourses of national security—can be propagated by teachers, school staff, and other families, rendering the bullying of South Asian American youth either invisible or unworthy of action (Subramanian, 2014). We utilize insights from critical race theory to explore the intersections of racism, xenophobia, and bullying to offer a clearer picture of where and how our curricular project seeks to intervene by addressing the realities of South Asian American youth in US schools. We posit that because schools are, in many ways, a microcosm of society and reflect the prevailing sociopolitical climate, greater attention is warranted to understand how xenophobia and contemporary racism significantly inflect youth experiences of bullying in schools.

In what follows, we first describe the impetus for our project as rooted in our lived experiences and pedagogical commitments. We then describe how conventional bullying literature overlooks the particularities of xenophobic bullying. Next, we discuss how we utilized key insights from a structural and historical analysis of racism and Islamophobia as it plays out in educational settings to develop an intervention that seeks to address the roots of such bullying rather than just the symptoms. Subsequently, we review the curriculum itself, including the strengths and shortcomings of the project, and offer an invitation to educators to join us in conversation about addressing xenophobic bullying through engagement with the curricular resource. Finally, we provide concluding thoughts on the project vis-à-vis larger issues of belonging, citizenship, and inclusion in US schools.

Beginning with the macro level, we trace the circulation of Islamophobic discourses (Rana, 2011) to the micro level, exemplified through acts of xenophobic bullying in schools. We also attend to the meso level, where teachers often intermediate by providing a null curriculum (what educators and schools don't teach) or by not interrupting the hidden curriculum (the unwritten and unofficial lessons that students learn in schools) (Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986), in this case one related to Islamophobia in the

larger political milieu and mainstream media (Rana, 2011). We then discuss the curricular project we developed to respond to this increase in bullying of South Asian American youth.⁴ With this intervention, we aim to catalyze the potential of the meso level to serve as a space to rethink epistemological assumptions about South Asians in the United States, to cultivate empathy, and to build solidarity. We also look to enhance and encourage teacher agency in interrupting Islamophobic discourses in schools and communities. This project can inform parents, students, school officials, and others who seek to examine how larger structural forms of bias manifest in and around schools through bullying. It can also serve as an example of engaged scholarship where resources and tools from the academy are paired with community needs—in this case, to produce an evidence-based curricular resource packet with the goal of interrupting xenophobic bullying.

Our Starting Point

Defining Terms

The Islamophobic attitudes that prevail at global, national, and local levels converge to create a hostile environment for youth with “brown bodies” (Rana, 2011). We understand the risk of using a potentially essentialist term; however, *brown bodies* encapsulates the perception of foreignness and illegality in post-9/11 America that has marked many groups—South Asian, West Asian, North African, and various other communities of color.⁵ For example, there was at least one case of a Native American woman who was killed in a post-9/11 hate crime in 2001 (Maira, 2009). There is also an increasing discourse of the US-Mexico border as a site for terrorist activity that has since colored debates on immigration. Rivera (2014) terms these discourses of danger associated with Muslims and Latinx the “brown threat” (p. 44).⁶ Thus, we use the term *brown bodies* as a signifier of how foreignness is mapped onto particular communities and reconstructed in classrooms, communities, and the media as threatening and how xenophobic bullying and harassment have psychological and corporeal impacts on the bodies of young people.

While the phenomena we discuss affect many communities, and some resources do exist for raising awareness in schools about Islam (Shah, 2011), we chose to focus on South Asian Americans for this curricular project because little is known about this multifaith community that is often targeted by Islamophobia. Also, through various academic and cultural affiliations, we had developed important partnerships with South Asian American community-based organizations that laid the foundation for this project.

South Asian Americans—whose families (perhaps many generations ago) originally hailed from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—represent diverse religious backgrounds, including Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Baha’i, and Zoroastrian (SAALT, 2012). Mainstream US media and larger xenophobic dis-

courses often flatten and elide the diversity among this population and present all members of this group as newcomers with “funny” accents (e.g., the convenience store owner character from the popular TV show *The Simpsons*) (Dave, 2013). In fact, South Asian migration to the United States is not a new phenomenon; it started as early as the 1700s but increased drastically after the immigration reforms of 1965 spurred by the civil rights movement’s attention to unfair restrictions and quotas on migration from non-European countries (Prashad, 2005). From 2000 to 2010, South Asian Americans were the fastest-growing major ethnic group, according to the US Census, and they now comprise more than 1 percent of the US population (SAALT, 2012).

Our Voices and Positionalities

In approaching this project, we reflected on our experiences as educators, researchers, and students (in the United States, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, and Germany) and how schools were positioned as sites of, at times, perilous attitudes and behaviors and, at other times, possibility, hope, and transformative learning.

We coauthors came to know each other at Teachers College, Columbia University: Monisha Bajaj was a professor there at the time this project was initiated, Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher was a graduate of the doctoral program, and Karishma Desai was a doctoral student. Though all of us are South Asians living in the United States, we have different vantage points: Bajaj is a second-generation Indian American with Sikh and Hindu heritage who grew up on the West Coast; Ghaffar-Kucher is a Pakistani Muslim who migrated to the United States for graduate studies and who had previously lived in Asia and Europe; and Desai is a second-generation Indian American raised in a large Hindu Gujarati community in the Midwest. Our intersecting experiences shaped how we came to the project and informed the work we carried out as a team. Our individual narratives underscore our investment in this project.

Monisha Bajaj: I moved to New York City two weeks before September 11, 2001. As the horrific events of 9/11 were unfolding, I found myself volunteering at the armory where services were being centralized: “Missing” posters lined the fences, donations poured in, and family members (like the Urdu-, Hindi-, and Bengali-speaking ones I clumsily helped translate for) brought in items with missing loved ones’ DNA, like toothbrushes and combs. A few months later, in 2002, I began partnering with an organization for South Asian workers based in Queens, New York. During this time, post-9/11 policy shifts—like the draconian national “special registration” process for men from Muslim-majority countries (in operation from 2002 to 2011)—broke up thousands of families through massive roundups and deportations. The multiethnic and diverse experiences of New Yorkers were slowly being erased and manipulated for political purposes, to justify military actions abroad and to enact legislation at home that eroded civil liberties.

Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher: I arrived in the United States a year before 9/11 to begin my graduate studies. Prior to that I had lived in Hong Kong, Pakistan, and Germany. Though race and racism had played a role in my everyday lived experiences (particularly in Hong Kong), nothing prepared me for the racism in the post-9/11 period. Though Muslims had always been viewed with some trepidation in the United States, the attitudes of many Americans toward Muslims (and brown people more generally) drastically changed almost overnight. Determined to learn more about the Muslim American experience, I began conducting research with South Asian and Muslim youth, working in particular with Pakistani high school students in New York City. Through their stories, I learned of the mundane microaggressions and outright racism that seemed to color their everyday educational experiences.

Karishma Desai: My own experiences of Otherness reflect the larger realities that many South Asian American children continue to endure. Every morning, despite my attempts to escape her lemon-colored comb, my mother would insistently secure my shoulders between her knees and braid my hair tight using coconut and *bhringraj* oil, reciting its countless benefits. Before leaving for school, I would sneak into the bathroom and quickly dab off as much oil as I possibly could from my scalp. And every morning, Jeff who sat behind me in Mrs. Cheney's third-grade class, would declare that my efforts had failed—"Ewww! What *is* that smell?" he would loudly whisper to his friend Matt. At recess, Jeff and Matt would chase Ekta and me, yelling, "Hindu dot! Hindu dot! Hindu dot!" They had made it their job to point out my differences and mark my foreignness. Although I attended elementary school in one of the most multiethnic districts in the country, I frequently experienced xenophobic bullying. The lingering shame oriented my curriculum and pedagogical commitments as a classroom teacher.

Our team came together in 2012 after the tragic shooting at the Sikh gurudwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The thought of immigrant communities seeking solace in worship at a Sikh temple (not unlike the one Bajaj attended as a child) only to be gunned down by a self-proclaimed white supremacist targeting "Muslims" was terrifying and heartbreaking. The starting point of this project was thus the desire to interrupt hate despite the many directions in which it flows. We knew that seeds of this xenophobic racism were either being planted in schools or ignored as they continued to be nurtured by nativist forces, impacting the everyday experiences of brown children and youth.

In designing the curriculum, titled *In the Face of Xenophobia: Lessons to Address the Bullying of South Asian American Youth*, we considered what we wanted educators and learners in schools with a South Asian American population to take away. Two enduring understandings especially compelled us. First, xenophobic racism against South Asians in America has a long history that manifests in microaggressions, bullying, and hate crimes. Second, our migration stories

as Americans have common themes and struggles (despite racialized differences); when we are aware of these historic commonalities, we can develop greater empathy and the capacity to become allies. And third, as South Asian Americans, our positioning as model minorities (Iyer, 2015; Prashad, 2005) has sometimes obscured the insidious visceral effects/affects of historical and present-day manifestations of xenophobic racism. As such, our curriculum is equally important for members of the South Asian community, who need to understand their long history in the United States and their stake in collectively striving for greater awareness and inclusion. Taken together, our personal experiences and commitments form the basis for this project, guiding our analysis and engagement with existing resources and scholarship and our development of the curricular resource packet as an intervention to promote greater awareness, understanding, and solidarity.

From Macro to Micro: Where Xenophobia Meets School Bullying

Current literature on bullying frames it as primarily an interpersonal phenomenon and one that can be corrected through behavioral approaches (Olweus, 1993; Sharp & Smith, 2002). In the United States, nearly 20 percent of elementary school children report being bullied; for high school youth the numbers decline to about 10 percent (Luxenberg, Limber, & Olweus, 2014). Bullying behavior has been defined as repeated and intentional abuse in a social or institutional setting (Olweus, 1993). It can create or result from imbalances of power, and it manifests differently in distinct social and cultural contexts (Sharp & Smith, 2002). The most common discourses about bullying in the United States delineate between “the bully,” “the bullied,” and “bystanders” (Olweus, 1993), with some intervention efforts seeking to cultivate “upstanders” who serve as allies (Facing History and Ourselves, 2016).

One example of current discourses about bullying, the documentary *Bully* (Hirsch & Lowen, 2011), has an extensive curriculum developed by the organization Facing History and Ourselves with a circulation effort reaching over a million educators and children, according to the film’s website, and nationwide airing on PBS (Facing History and Ourselves, 2016). The film features the heart-wrenching stories of youth largely from rural (predominantly white) school districts who were targets of bullying based on ability and sexual orientation. The film also includes families of teens who committed suicide due to bullying. The one example of a youth of color in the film was an African American young woman who was so harassed and bullied that she pulled a gun on her tormentors, resulting in forty-five felony charges (Scott, 2012).

While the film is a useful tool and raises important conversations, it evidences how bullying literature has been predominantly influenced by psychological approaches (Olweus, 1993) that treat bullying as individual (albeit often horrific) acts to be stopped through greater oversight and zero-

tolerance policies (Stein, 2007). Conventional bullying literature and interventions consider neither how larger discourses, media narratives, and discriminatory policies shape actions nor the roles of teachers and schools in perpetuating or permitting bullying. Further, there is little mention of macro-level or structural forces (e.g., racism, homophobia, Islamophobia) in scholarship or policy documents on bullying.

Bullying often reflects the social dynamics and biases embedded in the sociocultural contexts in which schools are situated. All forms of bias-based bullying, broadly, and xenophobic bullying, specifically, require that attention be paid to the micro, meso, and macro levels in order to adequately understand its causes and the dimensions of its occurrence and to effectively design strategies to counter it (figure 1).

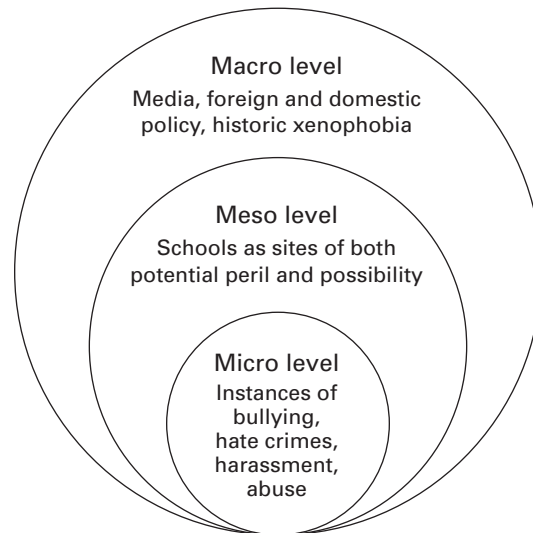
Our rationale for addressing the xenophobic bullying of South Asian American youth stems from its increasing incidence: more than half of all Asian American youth report being bullied (Hong, 2013), the highest percentage of any ethnic group surveyed, with even higher numbers for South Asian American youth (up to 75 percent) (Coker, 2013). The majority of Sikh young men report being harassed, taunted, or intimidated because they wear a turban, a noticeable signifier of difference (Kuruvilla, 2015). These young men are often believed to be Muslim, and their harassment exemplifies the Islamophobia and xenophobia targeting youth from South Asian communities irrespective of their actual religious background.

Prevailing Islamophobia across the United States, facilitated by one-sided media narratives, extensive surveillance of Muslim communities (Ali, 2014), and misinformation about Muslim populations, has resulted in a significant increase in bullying of South Asian American youth from a variety of religious, national, and ethnic backgrounds (Coker, 2013; Sacirbey, 2013). This is evidenced not only by numerous stories in the media but also by data collected by advocacy groups and think tanks—such as South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), the Council of American Islamic Relations, and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)—and reported in scholarly research (see Ahmad & Szpara, 2003; Ali, 2014; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Sirin & Fine, 2008).⁷ A report by the ISPU suggests that Muslim American children and youth are bullied not for typical reasons (e.g., physical appearance, ability level and popularity) but because of their ethnicity and religion and out of the belief that they pose a threat to the “American way of life” (Britto, 2011).

Situating Islamophobia at the Macro Level

The construction of Muslims in the Western imagination has been a historically racialized process—the assumption being that Muslims come from “the Orient” and are typically brown-skinned (Rana, 2011). Rana (2011) links the “moral panic,” or fear of “dangerous Muslims” and anyone perceived to be Muslim, after 9/11 to the xenophobic discourses and policies of decades past,

FIGURE 1 *Levels of analysis to understand xenophobic bullying*



terming it an “Islamic peril” (p. 50). Drawing on critical race theory, he discusses how fear and insecurity, coupled with media representations and restrictive policies, have advanced the “consolidation of a Muslim racial formation post-9/11” that conflates “Arabs and South Asians . . . into the racial figure of the Muslim” (p. 93). Signifiers of this “racial figure” include brown skin, turbans, hijabs, accents, and beards, all underscored by mainstream perceptions of illegality and foreignness.

We find this concept of the racialized Muslim useful to our project because it supports our argument that those *perceived* to be Muslim are unified by this form of xenophobia in terms of the violence directed at them. In the two months following the 9/11 attacks, thousands of people were assaulted, with nineteen killed, including South Asians, Arabs, Latinx, Native Americans, and others with “Muslim-like” features (as cited in Rana, 2011, p. 51). From 2001 to the present, hate crimes against anyone perceived to be Muslim have “skyrocketed” (Ingraham, 2015). But rather than uniting groups that are affected by Islamophobia, these instances of violence are usually documented and responded to by specific communities (e.g., by Sikh or Muslim advocacy groups).

Contemporary anti-Islamic violence (inclusive of bullying) and resulting insecurity come out of the juxtaposition of racism, neoliberalism, and neo-imperial wars and are felt within realms of social life that seem unrelated to state power (Grewal, 2014). The terrain of America’s “War on Terror” is infused with cultural constructions (e.g., “terrorist threats” and “alien civiliza-

tion”), which legitimate racial profiling policies that target populations based on US foreign policy anxieties (Maira, 2009). These constructions—which perpetuate the perceptions of Muslims as premodern, antidemocratic, and therefore a threat to liberal Western society (Ali, 2014) and ideals of humanness (Azad, 2015)—belie the promise of cultural citizenship—“the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense,” because “in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens” (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 402).

Synthesizing the work of Rana (2011) and other scholars (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Maira, 2009), we identify three larger tropes shared by historical forms of xenophobia and present-day discourses of unequal citizenship and humanity that construct macro-level discourses of Islamophobia. The first trope draws on Rana’s (2011) notion of *Islamic peril*, the fear and insecurity produced by being around individuals perceived to be Muslim. For example, the regular accounts of brown-bodied individuals being removed from planes for speaking Arabic, wearing a T-shirt with Arabic letters, or carrying a breast pump perceived to be a bomb highlight the routine, everyday interactions that render brown bodies dangerous (BBC, 2015; RT, 2015; The Daily Beast, 2006).

The second trope, which has deep historical roots as well, is of a *clash of civilizations*. The supposed Christian nature of the United States—asserted particularly by those on the political Right—is often highlighted as being incompatible with the practice of other faiths, despite the fact that Muslims have been in the United States from its genesis as a nation (Ghaneabassir, 2010). Examples of this trope are proposals and political rhetoric about banning Muslim immigrants or interning Muslim Americans, as various politicians have suggested in recent years. And in schools, students have reported being told that being Muslim is incompatible with being American (Abu El-Haj, 2010; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). Contributing to a larger climate of Islamophobia is the third trope, *perpetual foreigner* (Maira, 2009, p. 82). No matter the length of time South Asian American individuals and families have resided in the United States, they are perceived by many to be foreign, dangerous, and unaccepting of American values.

These tropes influence the milieu in which schools operate, and students are particularly susceptible when lessons in critical media literacy and historical information that attends to geopolitics are notably absent. We argue that the particular brand of xenophobic bullying in schools that our curriculum seeks to address results from larger historical and institutional forces that accentuate these problematic tropes. These tropes are continuations of colonial discourses that have been exacerbated in the post-9/11 period, when anyone perceived to be Muslim is seen as a threat to security. Thus, we believe that it is important to refocus a structural and historical lens on examining Islamophobia in order to allow for more nuanced analyses of individual expressions of bias.

The Curriculum Development Process: Understanding Islamophobia at the Micro Level

In seeking evidence for our curricular intervention, we reviewed scholarship on the experiences of South Asian American youth targeted by xenophobic bullying (rooted in Islamophobia, whether or not the victims were Muslims); drew from our own experiences as educational scholars and practitioners; and interviewed researchers who work in this area. Traditional bullying scholarship distinguishes among physical, verbal, social/emotional, and cyber forms of bullying (Olweus, 1993); we found that when the bullying target was perceived to be Muslim, the types of behaviors (while encompassing all the forms above) took on additional forms that followed the tropes of Islamic peril, clash of civilizations, and perpetual foreigner. Additionally, traditional bullying literature posits that such behaviors happen between peers and can be interrupted by student mediators, teachers, or upstanders. However, we found a troubling trend: many of the instances of bullying happened with the knowledge of teachers or, in some cases, with them participating, as in the vignettes that open this article. Teachers espousing xenophobic views of South Asian American youth repeatedly emerged in our review of reports and literature. For example, in her research on South Asian youth in Brooklyn, New York, Ghaffar-Kucher (2012) relates the following: “Talah, a high school sophomore, relayed an incident in a classroom where a student was asking his teacher how she came to school. The teacher allegedly replied, ‘The Verrazano Bridge. Why, do you want to blow it up?’” (p. 44).

Based on our review of dozens of incidents, we identify five forms of xenophobic bullying South Asian American youth repeatedly experience that are linked to the three tropes.⁸ The first form, name calling and verbal bullying, is a common type of bullying in conventional scholarship, but it takes on a particular dimension when the targets are assumed to be Muslim, are called “terrorist,” “raghead,” “diaperhead,” or “towelhead,” and are threatened with nativist violence. A second form of xenophobic bullying includes physical assaults and intimidation. Regular incidents we found included taunting, violently removing hijabs or turbans (in some cases, setting them on fire), forcibly cutting off someone’s hair, and other physical assaults. The third form could include verbal or physical forms of bullying, but with a specific religious-based character. Youth reported bullying behaviors that indicated that non-Christians are going to hell, that they believe in false gods, and that they cannot be American if they are not Christian, as well as ridicule of their religions and defilement of religious objects.

A fourth form of xenophobic bullying includes attacks on families and communities; this differs from conventional bullying that scholarship suggests is focused within schools. Routine examples students reported included statements such as “Go back where you came from”; physical damage to property (throwing of eggs, lighting fires, vandalism/graffiti); attacks at school on stu-

dents' property; and attacks on homes and places of worship. The last form of xenophobic bullying relates to ridicule and taunting based on the types of foods students eat, their appearance, and how they dress or smell.

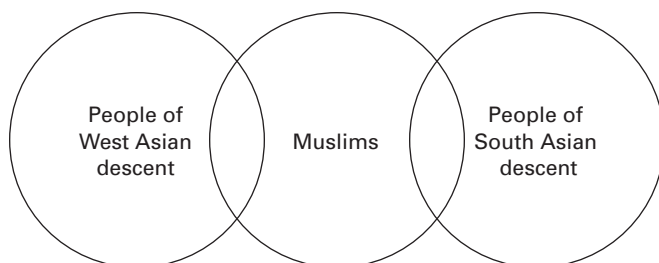
By analyzing actual incidents and understanding the forms in which youth experienced bullying, we were able to ground our curriculum in real-life incidents, or experiential knowledge, as critical race theorists of education advocate (Yosso, Villalpando, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001). The mapping of larger understandings of bullying onto the types of racialized incidents that brown-bodied South Asian Americans routinely face informed the curricular intervention we developed by focusing on the most common types of bullying and harassment faced by South Asian American children and youth (figure 2). For example, the lessons highlight instances of all five forms of bullying we identified through role-playing or other activities. While conventional bullying literature proved insufficient for our project, its belief that educators, parents, and communities can play an important role in intervening and preventing bullying through the creation of safe school environments (Olweus, 1993; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009) resonated with us. Thus, in developing our curriculum, we considered schools as not only potential sites of misinformation but also as possible sites of transformation.

The process of designing this curricular intervention had several overlapping and complementary stages. We performed a comprehensive review of the literature, academic scholarship, and policy reports to create the domains. We also drew key insights from critical race theory in education, namely: (1) understanding the permanent centrality of race and racism and its structural nature in the United States at all levels (Yosso et al., 2001, p. 91); (2) incorporating the use of storytelling and experiential knowledge (woven throughout the lessons) as curricular resources; (3) "envision[ing] social justice as the struggle to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination while empowering groups that have been subordinated" (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 91); and (4) linking the micro, meso, and macro levels to understand the complex ways that racialized discourses are deployed, lived, resisted, and transformed in and around schools (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The social justice imperative of critical race analyses of education (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) led us to seek out community partners, such as the New York City-based nonprofit South Asian Youth Action (SAYA), and the national advocacy network South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT). SAALT partnered with us to broaden the distribution of the curriculum to teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, and youth organizations and to enable the input of advocates addressing issues facing South Asian Americans. We also drew extensively from SAALT reports and training materials utilized with college-level students to address issues in the South Asian American community.

In the curriculum we highlight historical forms of xenophobia as an antecedent to current forms of Islamophobia. To that end, we approached the

FIGURE 2 *Intersections of those commonly affected by Islamophobia in the United States*



Note: Estimates of the West Asian American population range from 1.8 to 3.7 million (Brown, Guskin, & Mitchell, 2012); Muslim Americans 3.3 million (Mohamed, 2016); and people of South Asian heritage 4.9 million (US Census Bureau, 2015), with important overlaps between these groups in terms of national origins and religions.

South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) and received permission to use its compilation of images in our lessons as primary sources to link students to the lived experiences of South Asian immigrants and historical racialized constructions from the 1700s to the present day. Working in tandem with educators, activists, advocates, and community members, we created *In the Face of Xenophobia*, a ninety-page open-access curricular resource packet that offers middle and high school educators and organizations resources for addressing xenophobic bullying and racism directed at youth of South Asian descent in US schools.

Curriculum as Intervention: Mediating Islamophobia at the Meso Level

The normalization of xenophobic bullying is based on ideas about which bodies are seen as fully human and which bodies are seen as subhuman (Azad, 2015; Butler, 2004; Weheliye, 2014). We offer the curriculum as an intervention to counter this by historicizing this specific form of bullying and engendering spaces of interconnectedness and thereby humanizing the Other. Race has been a dominant marker of South Asian, West Asian, and Muslim Otherness, and racist portrayals of these groups have persisted since colonial times (Prashad, 2005; Said, 1993). When their presence has been perceived by some as threatening, South Asian American youth have become objects of bullying and violence. In seeking to strengthen the empathic capacity of students, educators, and schools, we had to extend the frame of who is regarded as “American” and “human.” The bullying we seek to counter through this curricular intervention is a part of, and rooted in, this process that defines and delimits who is fully human. Anchored in a larger narrative, xenophobic racist bully-

ing underscores the disposability and precarious status of certain lives (Butler, 2004).

In what follows, we describe the curriculum and explain how this intervention seeks to counter the Islamic peril, clash of civilizations, and perpetual foreigner tropes. In particular, we resist the idea that some people have full-human status and others do not through learning opportunities that offer common ground and enable students to make connections between migration stories, to develop empathy, and to act as allies.

The Curriculum

Educators, while sometimes part of reproducing dominant narratives of xenophobia and bias in schools, often seek ways to intervene when they see situations of bullying or injustices in their schools. *In the Face of Xenophobia* offers educators and school staff resources and tools to foster dialogue about xenophobic bullying, support students targeted by bullying in locating themselves and their histories in the United States, and encourage understanding and awareness in school communities about fellow students who might be perceived to be “brown threats” rather than peers of equal value. We acknowledge that educators concerned with social justice may be more likely to gravitate toward such a curriculum, as may educators who work with South Asian students. As such, this curriculum presupposes that the classrooms it will be utilized in have some contact or familiarity with South Asian American communities. And this is no small number of classrooms: US Census data reveal that South Asians have settled in all fifty states, with significant populations in Northern and Southern California, the Tri-State Area (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut), and the Washington, DC, Chicago, Detroit, and Houston metropolitan areas (SAALT, 2012).

Given the rise and persistence of Islamophobia manifested through xenophobic bullying in schools, we also felt a sense of urgency in designing this curriculum and making it available, since schools are the third-most-common site for the perpetuation of hate crimes in the United States (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013). We sought to equip educators with resources and tools to create awareness about bullying and prevent instances of intimidation—whether from peers or teachers.

The curriculum looks to address xenophobic bullying by unsettling the racialized tropes of Islamic peril, clash of civilizations, and perpetual foreigner and by enriching students’ and teachers’ limited knowledge of South Asian Americans. The following essential questions frame and anchor the intervention:

- How does understanding historical narratives of South Asia and South Asian American history lead us to comprehend, unpack, and undo current views and forms of xenophobic racism?

- How do deeper understandings of complex and diverse community and individual histories help us build empathy and act as allies?
- How do we build more inclusive schools and communities?

Insights from critical race theorists in education—such as understanding the forces of structural racism at all levels and using counterstories based on lived experiences—informed the design and implementation of the curriculum. Specifically, Lessons One and Five posit race and racism as central frames for understanding the South Asian immigrant experience, while Lessons Two, Four, and Six incorporate the use of counterstories that seek to spark solidarity and a commitment to social justice. All of the lessons and the curricular packet as a whole draw from critical race analyses by historicizing xenophobia and not presenting it as merely a post-9/11 phenomenon but, rather, as one with diverse manifestations since the 1700s.

The curricular resource packet consists of an introductory note for educators, six lessons, and an extensive list of further activities and resources that offer educators an entry point to talk with students about bullying, harassment, hate, and violence (see table 1).

The resource packet has objectives that can be extended beyond six lessons (as noted by the expansive educative goals in table 1). The curricular intervention intends to provide information about the diversity of South Asians and their experiences in the United States and to unsettle the misconceptions contained in the larger Islamophobic tropes. First, the trope of Islamic peril positions individuals with brown skin as enemies of the state who produce fear and insecurity. The curricular packet's lessons (specifically Lesson Three, which introduces real examples of bullying scenarios) seek to counter this by explicitly defining and problematizing xenophobic bullying. The lessons also highlight deep civic engagement in the United States by South Asian Americans to counter the narrative of "foreign enemy" and "threat." Notably, we include information about the first member of Congress of Asian descent, Sikh immigrant Dilip Singh Saund, who was elected in 1957 to represent California.

In tackling the clash of civilizations and perpetual foreigner tropes, the curricular packet seeks to historicize discrimination against South Asians in the United States as not just a post-9/11 phenomenon but as one that has existed since the eighteenth century, when immigrants from South Asia first arrived. The lessons provide historical information about the lived realities of immigrants past and present. While much xenophobia in the guise of security has come to be accepted in mainstream political and social discourse, connecting these tropes to earlier, more obvious forms of xenophobia allows students and educators to see the extension and persistence of exclusionary forces and policies across different historical moments. Furthermore, by asking prospective learners to attend to their own family's migration stories, the curriculum seeks to destabilize the attachment of foreignness with brown bodies. For example,

TABLE 1 *Table of contents for the In the Face of Xenophobia resource pack*

	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Educative goal</i>
<i>Lesson One</i>	<p><i>South Asians in the United States</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Timeline of images and facts about South Asians in the US 2. Glossary activity with key terms and definitions 	<p>Historicize South Asian presence in the US since the 1800s</p> <p>Introduce key terminology about Islamophobia, xenophobia, and bullying</p>
<i>Lesson Two</i>	<p><i>Everyone’s Migration Story</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mapping migration stories 2. Timeline of key moments in US migration of various groups 	<p>Place xenophobia in historical perspective</p> <p>Expand frame of “American” by examining migration more broadly, including learners’ families</p>
<i>Lesson Three</i>	<p><i>Bullying Intersections</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussion of bullying broadly 2. Real-life xenophobic bullying examples through role-play 	<p>Build empathy by providing information about experiences of xenophobic bullying</p> <p>Develop capacity to identify bullying incidents</p>
<i>Lesson Four</i>	<p><i>Building Empathy</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learn about Oak Creek, WI, shooting; read testimonies of survivors 2. Write letter to survivors 	<p>Build knowledge about the dangers of Islamophobic attitudes</p> <p>Foster solidarity with victims of violence</p>
<i>Lesson Five</i>	<p><i>The Racialization of South Asians, Past and Present</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Examine images and texts of xenophobic incidents from 1907 to the present 2. Link past forms of xenophobia to the present 	<p>Address roots of xenophobia and place it in historical perspective</p> <p>Foster knowledge, empathy, and solidarity</p> <p>Improve ability to identify xenophobic attitudes and acts</p>
<i>Lesson Six</i>	<p><i>From Bystander to Ally</i></p> <p>Activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Role-play to practice being an ally in the face of xenophobic violence 2. Explore Islamophobic cyberbullying 	<p>Develop capacities of allies to interrupt xenophobia</p> <p>Practice skills and behaviors for engaging with difference</p>

in Lesson Two, “Everyone’s Migration Story,” participants examine primary-source documents from different migrations—including from parts of Europe through Ellis Island, the Great Migration of African Americans from the US South to the North, and immigration from Asia in the 1800s—to understand how social racial formations in the United States have shifted over time, marking different communities as “alien” and undesirable in distinct moments.

The use of primary sources in this way gives learners actual examples of xenophobia in the United States across time. For example, in Lesson Five an incendiary front page of a newspaper from the early twentieth century (image 1) and an excerpt from the accompanying editorial enable students to historicize xenophobia against South Asians. The editorial describes how, in response to a “tide of turbans” and “dusky Orientals,” a nativist mob violently attacked South Asian millworkers and their families in Washington State, driving them out of town. The writer notes the horrific violence but concludes that “the departure of the Hindus [outdated term for all South Asians] will leave no regret” and further states that “they are repulsive in appearance and disgusting in their manners . . . The Hindu is a detriment to the town” (Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, 2007).



Image 1. Newspaper headline from September 1907 on the riots in Bellingham, Washington. From *Morning Reveille*, September 6, 1907, p. 4.

After analyzing the newspaper image and editorial from 1907, Lesson Six asks students to explore present-day examples of cyberbullying, drawing on the historical information, definitional understandings of Islamophobia and xenophobia, and information about what being an ally means (image 2).

By moving between past and present, macro to micro, the curriculum offers students *and* teachers a complex yet accessible introduction to the ways in which xenophobia plays out. The links between blatantly racist historical events and everyday practices give students opportunities to make connections, engage in critical media literacy, and develop an understanding of experiences of targeted students (or recognize such bullying as abusive, in the case of students experiencing it). The six lessons and additional resources work together to offer many points of entry and new information to teachers and students.



Image 2. Excerpt from Lesson Six. A real-life example of bullying that emerged during the authors' background research.

Reflections

Since the curricular resource was launched in April 2013, it has been disseminated widely to educators, activists, and policy makers. Through our own networks and contacts, as well as those of the partners on this project (SAALT primarily), youth training programs for South Asian Americans have used the curriculum; it has been introduced as a text in teacher education courses (at City College of New York, New York University, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, among others); and it has been circulated to teachers across the United States and Canada. In May 2013, SAALT worked with Representative Mike Honda (D-CA), chair of the Congressional Anti-Bullying Caucus, to circulate the curriculum to his fellow congressional representatives, with a cover note about the importance of addressing bullying. The entire curriculum is online and freely accessible to any individual or group seeking to use it in part or as a whole.⁹

Our team has conducted several workshops and trainings for educators and policy makers at a variety of venues, including South Asian American advocacy meetings and several teacher educator conferences. In these workshops we

provide an overview of the rationale for the curriculum and examples of xenophobic bullying and then walk participants through a sample activity or two from the curriculum. Many participants have responded that it was powerful to learn about real-life examples of bullying as well as strategies to interrupt such practices. The next steps for this project are to study any impact—intended or unintended—of the curriculum and engage in further teacher professional development.

We crafted the curricular lessons with the hope that educators and students would begin to grapple with issues of xenophobic bullying, move beyond mainstream discourses often embedded in school-based instruction, examine new perspectives, and question dominant assumptions. Certainly, the curriculum complicates and disrupts the construction of contemporary Islamophobia as it moves through historical timelines, shared migration narratives, stories of xenophobic bullying, and comparative explorations of targeted racism across time.

On reflection, however, we see that including lessons about historical and contemporary global geopolitics (such as on colonialism and US foreign policy from the 1900s to the present) would have furthered our goal of deconstructing Islamophobia. Educators and students might better understand the reasoning that infuses these problematic discourses with added curricular material that teaches analyses of the historic construction of the “racialized Muslim” (Rana, 2011) and present-day reconfigurations of these colonial tropes. Additional lessons could also further a better understanding of contemporary global conditions, such as the international war on terror that produces Islamophobia.

It is our hope that, as an introductory set of lessons, the curriculum packet historicizes the migration of South Asian Americans as well as the configuration of these bodies as threatening and feared Others in the mainstream imaginary and will thereby complicate constructions held by educators and students. While we see empathy as a productive feeling with the potential to support student understandings of the precarities faced by children who encounter xenophobic bullying, education scholars have recognized the limitations of empathy in a social justice curriculum (Boler, 1997). For instance, Boler (1997) illustrates how the desire to generate empathy or full identification with the Other in a multicultural curriculum often maintains passivity and fails to interrogate relationships of power. Two particular moments in our lessons seek to build empathy explicitly: a lesson on shared migration histories and a lesson that asks students to engage the testimony of Harpreet Singh Saini, who lost his mother in the Oak Creek tragedy. But integrating provocative and risky questions to guide the reflective letter in response to Harpreet’s testimony might further students’ critical reflection on their own positionality and thereby produce a “testimonial reading” that can elicit an empathetic response that leads to action—the participant feeling responsible for making change to address an issue of injustice (Boler, 1997, p. 263).

However, knowing that teachers may be picking up and utilizing this open-access curriculum without much training or a background in critical pedagogies, we strove to make the lessons as accessible as possible for interested educators. Thus, we recognize the limitations of this and any curricular intervention in addressing macro-level discourses, policies, and historical conditions. At the same time, we see the potential: unsettling normalized notions might alter the ways in which the teachers and students affected by the curriculum engage with communities attached to these markers of difference and how they consume biased media discourses and images.

We also think that the curriculum would have benefited from pilot lessons and ongoing discussions with students and educators over the course of its development. With more time and planning we could have engaged classroom teachers and students more in the process and piloted the curriculum in multiple sites, evaluating the implementation and revising the resource accordingly. Greater input would have allowed us to provide suggestions on how to map this curriculum onto teachers' plans, specifically about where in the curricular sequence such lessons, in whole or in part, might fit. With different mandates regulating teacher curriculum, such guidance would make the incorporation of this curriculum more feasible beyond our brief mention of how it aligns with the Common Core standards (Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desai, 2013, p. 5).

As it stands, the curricular packet is our first cut; it presents information and understandings that we believe can begin to destabilize Islamophobic sentiments and promote greater empathy. But such an assertion has not yet been explored in practice. Given that the curriculum is largely an untested innovation, this article serves as an invitation for others to engage with it, assess its impact, join in conversation, and suggest additions and modifications.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

Through this curricular project, we seek to speak back to the bullying literature, which lacks a structural analysis of how xenophobia impacts youth experiences. Conventional bullying literature provides insufficient frames for our analysis of the sometimes-harmful attitudes and roles of teachers in xenophobic bullying incidents and for tracing such attitudes back to larger discourses, media narratives, and discriminatory policies.

Not only is the diversity among South Asian Americans rarely acknowledged, their experiences with bullying are infrequently understood. Our work with South Asian American communities, coupled with both academic and gray literature, suggests that xenophobic racism experienced by these youth is different from that experienced by other immigrant youth, as it frequently relates to the youths' (assumed) religious backgrounds. We posit that understanding the macro-level formation of Islamophobia enables connections to the particular discourses that circulate and shape how youth experience bullying in schools. Schools do not exist in a vacuum, and the intersection of

racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia seems to consistently be the cause of this kind of bullying experienced by South Asian American youth. In order to effectively address such bullying, we must understand what drives it.

Although more than fifteen years have passed since 9/11, the repercussions felt by South Asian, West Asian, and Muslim communities remain. As these communities continue to grow, South Asian Americans face increasing hostility and surveillance (SAALT, 2014). We regularly hear about Islamophobic graffiti on mosques, Hindu temples, and gurudwaras, as well as violent assaults inside and outside of schools. All of these are rooted in a larger matrix of racialized violence against brown bodies.

Informed by their own experiences with extremist violence, South Asian American organizations, together with several advocates of various immigrant justice organizations, have sought to act in solidarity with other religious communities facing such violence. Sikh communities have stood with Muslims, even while being the false targets of Islamophobic violence (Young, 2016), and with African Americans, such as after the horrific shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston in 2015 (Delong & Sachs, 2015).

Alicia Garza, cofounder of the Black Lives Matter Movement, asked in an article following the Charleston massacre, “Who taught Roof [the convicted shooter] to hate Black people, enough to kill nine of us, in a sanctuary?” (Garza, 2015). Similarly, some of the larger questions that guide our work as scholars and practitioners in education and that are infused into this project, as well as our ongoing projects, include such questions: How can educators who encounter racist attitudes in their classroom work to foster respect for difference and equal rights in their school communities? How can schools be sites for transformative learning amid dominant narratives and structures of inequality that reproduce racism and xenophobia? How is it possible that racist attitudes can go unchecked and indeed flourish while a student spends thirteen years in the American educational system?

In the Face of Xenophobia serves as one small intervention, as an attempt to disrupt the consequences of these structures of inequality by unsettling the assumptions people have of South Asians in the United States, bringing lived experiences of xenophobic bullying to the fore and casting possibilities of new forms of empathic understanding. While certainly not a panacea, this curricular resource packet seeks to engage with race in meaningful ways in the classroom to offer transformative learning for students and educators that can interrupt the hidden and not-so-hidden curriculum of bias that too often leads to violence in and around schools. Humanizing the Other is the premise of education for social justice, peace, and human rights. By offering a window into the experience of South Asian Americans—and the often-painful manifestations of violence youth in this community face—we hope to encourage dialogues that increase empathy and expand notions of belonging and citizenship for these students who increasingly attend US schools.

Notes

1. The authors learned about these bullying incidents from advocacy reports and information that is publicly available featuring the students' real names.
2. The Sikh religion emerged in the fifteenth century in northern India. There are more than thirty million Sikhs in the world and an estimated 250,000 Sikhs in the United States, with their migration dating back to the 1800s (Sikh Coalition, n.d.).
3. Following the Runnymede Trust Commission (Taras, 2012) in the United Kingdom, we agree that, in fact, there are a multitude of Islamophobias rather than a single phenomenon and that "each version of Islamophobia has its own features as well as similarities with, and borrowings from, other versions" (p. 2). In this article we focus on how the forms of Islamophobia directed at those perceived to be Muslim operate in and around schools.
4. Despite some accounts that bullying behavior is actually decreasing in schools (Musu-Gillette, Hansen, Chandler, & Snyder, 2015), we found that xenophobic and race-based bullying behavior is actually on the rise (Coker, 2013). There is a central tension in the data vis-à-vis reports of bullying versus actual bullying that skews our understanding of whether occurrences are actually increasing in frequency or have remained consistent and more awareness is resulting in greater instances of reporting bullying.
5. We did not use the term *brown bodies* in the curricular packet for educators and students because of the complex ways it might be understood. We opted instead to use the term *South Asian Americans* in some instances and *those perceived to be Muslim* in other instances. We also prefer the term *West Asia* to *Middle East* given the colonial origins of the latter.
6. The term *Latinx* encompasses men, women, and gender nonconforming individuals with Latin American heritage.
7. At the time of writing this essay, the 2016 presidential race, which featured some candidates' controversial positions about banning Muslim migration, saw an increase in Islamophobic rhetoric.
8. To develop these domains, we culled examples of xenophobic bullying from reports and websites, engaged in discussions with researchers whenever possible (e.g., Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Maira, 2009; Subramanian, 2014), and considered our own observations as educators and policy documents. We then categorized the domains under which incidents fell and subsequently delineated the historical and macro-level frames that outlined the context in which xenophobic bullying takes place, identifying tropes that shaped South Asian youths' experiences of bullying.
9. See <http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/In-the-Face-of-Xenophobia.pdf>.

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