

Speaking voice into the silence and naming the deception of "hoaxes": Islamophobia and other forms of racism at McMaster University.

I often struggle with silences. As a social worker, I have been taught that a lot can come of silence, a place, a space for one to think, process. We can interpret silence in research, inquire into the unsaid. In these ways, silence can be useful for knowledge and *be* knowledge as well. As a person with a commitment to social justice, I have shuffled between Mahatma Gandhi's dualistic (and realistic) and seemingly contradictory positions on silence. The first, *to speak only if it improves upon the silence*, and second, *that silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the truth and acting accordingly*. The Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. took this somewhat further connecting silences with both complicity with injustice and even betrayal.

When I read about the drastic and horrible increases in Islamophobia and other forms of racialized violence in Canada (and specifically Ontario) after the tragic killings of 43 people in Beirut, 26 people killed in Baghdad and the 129 people killed in Paris, I felt that maybe I should not be the one to speak first. I remained silent. Many raised concerns.

When I saw on the news that two women who are Muslim were verbally attacked at a Toronto subway station, accused and being "terrorists", read about a mosque being set on fire in Peterborough, and listened to the story of a Muslim woman being attacked by two men when picking up her kids from elementary school (receiving punches and being kicked while hateful slurs were hurled at her, while her attackers tried to take her head scarf) - I started to feel complicity in my silence.

As an instructor, I raised the issues in my classes. The talk of racism raised the issue of the posting of notices for a "white student's union" at McMaster University on social media. Similar postings and posters have been seen at the University of Toronto, York University, and Ryerson University. An article on CBC stated that the postings instructed students to use "pro-white memes" and "we've had enough of these people" rhetoric.

Spokespersons from the Toronto Universities spoke out to say they do not condone the group nor has the group been sanctioned. At McMaster University, the group had 41 likes by the time the CBC article was written and the acts were explained also as non-sanctioned and as being a "hoax". The implication was that there was no official University group and therefore neither are there any effects of such postings or reasons to respond to such postings. As a teacher, and a member of the McMaster community I wondered about my contribution via my silence to a wider system of betrayal to racialized people listening and reading about how the issues were being dismissed while fear and violence was increasing.

I recently heard that a group of Muslim women who are McMaster University students have been forced out of their home in the McMaster neighbourhood due to threatening behaviour by unknown individuals, rummaging through their belongings and leaving a knife stuck in the wall.

While I do not speak for those who have been attacked, assaulted or who have been made to live in fear, as a person of colour, who lives in the area, and works at McMaster, I too have felt this fear. Recently, it limits where I go with my two year old son, it has me look over my shoulder after my night class more times

than anyone should and it has me more worried about the confederate flag on the pick-up truck at the house across the street from where I live.

As a member of the McMaster community, I want to speak loudly to acknowledge the severity of the increase in violence directed toward racialized minorities especially Muslim women and to the unacknowledged community members and students who are living in fear and who are now living with an increased risk of experiencing racialized violence. I also want to voice my opposition to and condemnation of the use of social media or posters for messaging that incites racial hatred or images of racial superiority. This is not a hoax.

Beyond acknowledgment and condemnation of the public incitement of hatred on social media at McMaster University, and the acknowledgment and condemnation of acts of racialized violence towards racialized minority people and students at McMaster University and elsewhere, there is of course the necessity of action.

As loud and as silent as these moments of hatred have been, we as a community must equally be active in the loud and the silent to name and reveal injustice and let people know that they/we are not alone. We have to let our friends, neighbors and families know that we can support them and that we care about their safety. We must speak out against acts of hatred and condemn all incitements of public hatred for their participation in the sustainability of racism rather than to dismiss these acts as "hoaxes". Also, we should advocate for this acknowledgment and these (and other) kinds of statements of opposition to racism (as well as for solidarity to those experiencing fear of threats or attacks) at institutional levels.

Last week the Office of Human Rights & Equity Services offered a drop-in for Muslim staff, students, and faculty to begin to talk about these issues on campus. This is part of a recent "Challenging Islamophobia on Campus" initiative. For more info contact: Hres@mcmaster.ca

While this recent initiative is both appreciated and necessary, more is needed. Until we are in a place where silences are filled with a sense of love, belonging, safety, and community, there is always work to be done and ample opportunity to improve upon the silence.

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