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Mapping and Sensing Halal Consumption in Philadelphia

If you happened to find yourself under the Market-Frankford line stop at 52nd and Market, you would be a stone's throw from almost a dozen businesses that sell halal consumer goods. A few storefronts to the west, you could pick up halal chicken wings or cold cuts from a supermarket meat counter that, as signs assure you, never handles pork products. If you walk two, vivacious blocks south, you'd arrive at a bookstore packed with primers on Islamic jurisprudence, Prophetic biographies, Arabic textbooks, and modest fashion options. Across the street from the bookstore, you could buy a truly astounding range of perfumes and hygiene products, as well as clothing, Islamic wall art, incense, and children's books. Next door, a restaurant offers hungry shoppers all kinds of Arab and Americana dishes—from falafel and kebab to cheeseburgers, chicken wings, and pizza—all of which are halal certified by US-based organizations. They also carry emergent food categories, like “New York Entrees,” which you might find at food carts around Philadelphia, as well as “Maroush” options, familiar to consumers in Philadelphia as the signature item of another halal restaurant a little more than a half-mile east.

The halal consumer goods that circulate in these businesses materialize Islamic tradition. But how do their materializations shape that Islamic tradition? And how does Philadelphia—its urban design, the communities within it, patterns of migration, the asymmetric distribution of resources, and structures of racialization—impact that materialization and its embodied, emotional dimensions?

My research seeks to understand how things come to feel authentically Islamic. In my dissertation, I focus on halal consumption in Philadelphia and Islamic tattooing online as sites for the materialization, mediation, and embodiment of Islamic authenticity.¹ Methodologically, I employ multi-modal ethnography to analyze the ways that city planning, immigration, socio-economic inequality, and ethnicity shape halal consumption in Philadelphia. This approach draws on scholarship that has shown how Islamic tradition is spatiotemporal (Grewal 2014),

¹ The LRDA fellowship directly supported the research on halal consumption. So, I focus on that here.

aesthetic (Elias 2012), and felt (Chan-Malik 2018, Elias 2018) by more closely tracking the affective economies (Ahmed 2004, Schaefer 2019) that make things feel authentic. From this approach, Islamic tradition is not primarily or foundationally discursive, but a thing that is materialized in and through bodies, objects, and places.

In contemporary Islamic discourse, “halal” generally refers to permissible food and, increasingly, hygiene products. My dissertation argues that urban Muslims feel that a product is authentically halal because of Islamic tradition *and* the materialities around them. So far, my research has evidenced that urban planning, systemic gentrification, migration patterns, and Islamic institution-building variegate what feels halal in Philadelphia. It has also shown that the influence is multi-directional—halal consumption also shapes the terrain of Philadelphia. These businesses populate the visual landscape of Philadelphia with signs of halal consumption. They bring halal consumer goods and their diasporic itineraries into the city. They serve as vital spaces for the formation and establishment of Islamic terrains and the communities within them.

The combination of digital humanities and ethnography has generated exciting, if yet refined, insights about the way the city shapes Islamic authenticity. For just two brief examples, embodied learning through movement across the city has elucidated how transportation design impacts the felt experience of the city. This clicks brilliantly with the bird’s-eye-view that transportation routes and infrastructure have an outside role in dividing neighborhoods, while also pointing to ways that maps of parcels and roads fail to capture subtle shifts that appear to the walking (or biking or driving) body. Mapping the density of ethnic halal consumer goods sellers in certain parts of the city (e.g., Uzbek restaurants and butchers in the Northeast) and their signage points to the way migration resettlement practices shape the tastes, smells, sounds, and moral geography of what feels authentically Islamic in those spaces. Concepts for organizing these and many other insights are bubbling to the surface, in flux and progressively refined.

The process of learning from business owners and community members has also highlighted the importance of opacity when working with disproportionately surveilled communities, such as Muslims in the US. My interlocutors have expressed concerns about security in reference to a public-facing, comprehensive digital map of sellers of halal consumer goods such that my dataset

and map are currently protected by passwords. The disproportionate surveillance of Muslims and religion- and ethnicity-based violence since 9/11 is on the mind of many people I speak with. I share their concern. I am still working to make the dataset and map useful beyond their analytic value for the dissertation. On that front, I am in conversation with Muslim advocacy groups to determine the most safe and effective way for this data to ease and improve their work. Additionally, I am experimenting with mapping models that will show the density of sellers and institutions without showing exact locations. I look forward to ethically sharing an opaquer and more secure representation of halal consumption in Philadelphia in the future.

COVID has constantly been in the background of this project, casting shadows on method, research timelines, and my embodied experience of field work. To reduce the likelihood of transmitting COVID to the people who have generously talked with me or welcomed me into their businesses, I opted for socially-distanced interviewing and extensive site visits. I also began my in-person data collection later than expected because of the complications of ever-changing COVID transmission rates and guidance about social activity. This meant that during the spring, summer, and early fall I focused on building out the dataset of sellers of halal consumer goods and building relationships with business owners. As COVID transmission rates and university guidelines have allowed, I have visited over 50 businesses (mostly in West Philadelphia and Center City), reached out to business owners across the city, and talked with friends, imams, and colleagues. I've also photographed some businesses and their products (with the owner's permission). Ethnography is rolling on as I daily visit businesses, connect with more owners, and conduct more interviews.

Undertaking this work during the ongoing pandemic has highlighted the precarity of Philadelphia's network of halal consumption and the resilience of the workers who keep these businesses alive. Since I started my research, I've counted more than a half-dozen brick-and-mortar sellers of halal consumer goods that have shuttered. As for mobile businesses, cart owners and workers routinely tell me about the struggles they have faced these past couple years. At stake here are those laboring on the front lines, many of whom lack a safety net and often support other family in the US and abroad. Moreover, COVID imperils the vibrancy of halal consumption in Philadelphia. If these businesses help variegate Islamic authenticity by

materializing the diversity of Islamic tradition, then COVID can narrow what is felt as authentically Islamic. Thus, that hub of halal consumption around 52nd and Market isn't merely a space for the circulation of goods and money; it's a vital terrain for the propagation of Islamic tradition in its breadth and complexity. Halal consumption in those spaces enable multiple forms of Islamic embodiment that, ultimately, produce a harmony of Islamic authenticities in Philadelphia.

Works Cited

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