EXPLORING BLACKNESSS FROM MUSLIM, FEMALE, CANADIAN REALITIES

EXPLORING BLACKNESSS FROM MUSLIM, FEMALE, CANADIAN REALITIES:

FOUNDING SELFHOOD, (RE)CLAIMING IDENTITY AND NEGOTIATING

BELONGINGNESS WITHIN/AGAINST A HOSTILE NATION

By

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ABSTRACT

From what *specific* socio-cultural "positionality" are African-Canadian Muslim females living their realities? What methods do these women employ to locate, (re)claim, and/or assert an autonomous selfhood from these (peripheral) spaces within the white nation-state? How does their shared socio-religio-racial and gendered marginality, potentially, act as a site for inciting a sense of camaraderie towards one another? Such, increasingly telling, queries frame the content of this thesis which commissions qualitative research methods to unearth answers that rely upon the "particular"--by taking an intimate gaze at thirteen Black Muslim women's gendered-racialized experiences in Toronto, Ontario. Dividing analysis along the lines of religious status this work examines the dynamics distinct to 1. convert and 2. born/"life-long" Muslim participants' cultivation of an independent religious as well as racial identity. The anti-Black *and* anti-Islamic discrimination that continues to punctuate contemporary, urban, "multicultural" Canada later collapses investigation into a unified survey of the ways African-Canadian Muslim women in general, contend with the oppressive socio-cultural forces attempting to infringe on their humanity. Ultimately, research concludes that the adverse *or* hospitable responses of surrounding communities (these are: the ethnic-majority Muslim community; the non-Muslim Black population; Eurocentric secular society at large) to these women, influences how they both place themselves in their environments *and* interact with their Black-Muslim female fellows. This thesis argues that the persistent ostrasization of African-Canadian Islamic women within the religious and secular-public spheres of society establishes a necessary, defensive solidarity amongst these individuals; specifically, their communions can erect a nurturing platform to challenge or minimize the impact of oppressive forces--particularly protecting against the mental and social violence inflicted by *racist-sexist Islamophobic white supremacist powers*.

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In memory of Camilla Mryglod one of the earliest, most genuine fans of my work and a once upon a time person sized life preserver. My ideas brewed, swelled and overflowed in front of you--encouraged to eventually take shape within the mould provided by the sincerity riddled across your face and the trust in my success fluent in the tenor of your voice. I can not repay you for these things. But with the seal of this ink, I immortalize your kindness.

"To Camilla"

There is a space in my mind where you rest./

Crouching,/ backed against a brick wall,/ rolling your infamous cigarettes./

You are 20 years younger./Your hair is 10 inches longer./And 5 shades darker./

Your mouth is opened in an "O" and you are luminous./

I love and I loved and I am loving you,/

born from you "schooling" me on how not to hate myself./

Yet I still ask, "What am I *good for*?"/ "What is the 'good' in me that *earned* you,/ that *deserved* you?"/ And, "What couldn't sanction your stay?"/

This is not a love sonnet in the usual sense/ but it is still a transcription from my heart./

We share hearts/ herstories/ wine/ laughs/ frozen pizza/ tears/ and Nietzsche./

You are my friend/ my councilor/ my Mother/ my Aunt/ my analyst/ my thesaurus/ my mirror./

My *REAL*./

And even without your limbs--you are still these things./ Even as a red stain across those tracks/

you are more than the person that once was./

You still make an "IS"/

And you IS in my life/And you IS in my mind/And you IS in my anger/ And you IS in my

frustration/ And you IS the object of this lament/And you IS going to fade/

But you IS NOT, going to *fade out*./

This is a requiem/ to you,/ to us,/ to what we will become/

because your residence in the hereafter is not far enough away/ for you not to be *present,/* for you

not to be *pertinent*/

here/

after.

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Introduction: Traversing Blackness, Engaging with Islam

Point of Entry

Ask me about my experiences growing up in the white, middle-class suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area and I will tell you how a Black girl learns to hate herself. Ask me about my earliest *conceptions of a Black self* and I will explain to you that my Blackness was a murky swamp in contrast with ripe barrels of peaches and fresh bowls of cream; it is here that I would offer you a blueprint of my most *pesky* "difference" spanning ages seven to nineteen. So, ask me *what being Black meant* at that time and I will recount the taunts correlating my brown skin to the colour of shit, to the colour of dirt. It was not until much later that I came to see that *my brown* is the colour of Mother Earth--that, yes, brown *is* the colour of my skin and *my skin encloses "me."*

If you had asked me back then *what represents Blackness* in Canada I would have told you *solely* about the underground railroad. A history dribbled to me from smug pink lips, cascading down a white bumpy chin, to be dutifully swallowed by the three Black pupils--as a dry lump of feigned gratitude and searing shame. If you had quizzed me further about the presence of "my people" in the nation, I would have answered you with *silence*. You see, the popular edict of my public school education taught me that Blacks fell off the map and out of public consciousness after they had *finished being saved* by a white, Messianic, superiorly non-racist Canada--embraced by soft gracious arms with retractable spikes. For you to understand my *sense of a Black identity* today I must read to you from the text, "My Evolution to Womanhood: A Black-Canadian Comedic Tragedy."

The pages will be blank because it is a tricky task to pinpoint the beginnings of your unraveling--finding that first frayed or snagged thread. So, I would open to the middle and *feel* the tale to life. My traumas will leak from my fingers to become script; an oozing from the hemorrhages of my heart--reaching out to yours, to hers, to his.

The first words will speak of the internalized racism I met in high school wherein the Black population miraculously quadrupled yet the pervading mentality amongst this Black student body that dark skin is a polar opposite to both *beauty* and *acceptability*, erected a hatred of "Black" that stole away my chance to relish in the shifting demographic. Read on, and you will learn that I came to *shun Blackness* and how McMaster University helped me do it since I saw four Black faces during my first few years--one of which was visible only when I looked into a mirror. Flip the page, and watch as my wounds begin to recede with the first bandage tenderly laid by a Native American literature course. The *wit* and *intelligence* of a people writing of/for themselves awakens in me the desire to locate this strength in the voices of "my racialized fellows". I am driven by the hope that if I locate my roots I can *locate myself*. Scan the clumsy yet, telling poem marking the dawn of this quest:

> I went looking for some Black writers./ I can spiel off the names of those white authors/and the titles of their works/ that have not only been awarded general respect,/ but have received such devotion through countless hours of reading./ Works eagerly consumed/ yet forever failing to hold meaning within *my* realities./ My favourites are then by the "other",/ who affect my life by offering glimpses into their own./ So, I went looking for some Black writers./ Poets—from whom I longed to receive inspiration./Authors of fiction—whose imaginings would finally render my experiences commensurable./ Historians—who could remedy my feelings of a lost past./ My search came to an end!/ I found them./ *I found me, some Black writers*./ In a separate section/ at the back/ through the side door./ I wanted to sit amongst their works/ on the floor between the selves/ but there were too few for this./ So/ instead I sat with Faulkner and Dr. Seuss,/sipping an Italian wedding soup/ as I read Orville Lloyd Douglas' poem/ "I am not Black" (composed 05/28/08).

Now read of how I chanced upon <u>The Book of Negroes</u> by Lawrence Hill and in one swift move, my grade school vision of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is transformed. Images of Black people's psychological death through the absoluteness of their subjugation is humpty-dumped with Hill's depiction of one enslaved African woman's ability to garner strength through Islam; in an instant, I see my academic future.

Here Are My Objectives….

bell hooks (1993:17) attests that it is crucial that *Black peoples talk to one another* because it is the sharing of our stories which "enables us to name our pain…. and to seek healing." Within these pages the voices of (one of) the nation's forsaken appear in conversation as Black women's experiences overlap and converge through narrative. The "specific" socio-cultural positions *from which* African-Canadian females live their realities and the "particular" maneuvers *by which* they affirm their identities in Toronto, Ontario are what comprise the content of this thesis. Functioning as the supporting structure of my investigation is Islam--explored as an "alternative" agent for *knowing* the world and the self.

I intend to unearth the distinct variables bound with living as a racialized and religious "other" within a *white supremacist secular urban Canadian* setting. African-Canadian Muslim women occupy the peripheries of society and as such offer a unique view of "multicultural" Canada that diverges from the images of the nation deceptively produced by the powers that be. Moreover, the multiple identities of these women liminally place them between the ethnic-majority Muslim communities (Indo-

Pakistani/Arab) *and* the non-Muslim Black-African diasporic communities; thus emerges a *wholly other vision* of the surrounding environment since these women occupy a separate socio-religious sphere. Hence, the experiences of research-participants will paint a picture of 1. Toronto, from a Black Muslim female perspective as well as, 2. Black womanhood, from a Muslim-Canadian perspective.

The "blinders" distributed by the nation's multicultural campaign conveniently obscure the religio-racial discrimination that operates within its borders[1]. Yet the weight of participants' encounters with anti-Islamic and anti-Black sentiment challenge this national oversight since their narratives demand that the pervasiveness of the oppressive forces infringing upon their humanity are acknowledged. An allegiance to Islam is here examined as the instrument that at once heightens African-Canadian Muslim women's socio-cultural ostracization while also providing them with a source of mental and spiritual *strength*. I question what the (dis)similar aspects are between individual Black Muslim women's interactions with wider society; furthermore, I examine how

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[1] The Canadian Multiculturalism Act's (1985; 2011) preamble boasts of Canada's affiliation with the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* whereby ethnic, religious or linguistic minority persons have the right to "enjoy their own culture" and "profess and practice their own religion"--seeing as the Government of Canada has generously decided to recognize that diversity is "a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society" (1985; 2011: 2). Moreover, the Multiculturalism Policy itself, section 3(b), allows that multiculturalism is "an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future" thus a function of the policy is to "foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures"(section 3[h]) (1985; 2011: 3-4). The Act speaks in the grandiose language of revolution, pulling on the tattered heart-strings of non-white (and non-Anglophone) Canadians--promising more than the second-class citizenry they have always known by vowing to shield them "against any discrimination" (1985; 2011: 2). Yet the lingering question is, "Who is to protect these persons from the racist philosophies informing/permeating the Canadian government?" that is, "What do these rights mean when discrimination comes from the top-down, beginning with the 'unwritten' policies of the powers that be?" To truly realize the objectives of the Multiculturalism Act there must be a conscientious overhaul of the official/unofficial social structures inciting prejudice, because, racism in Canadian society is systemic. However, the government does not now need to perform these duties since issuing this token policy has taken care of "the diversity problem" in one sweeping (silencing) gesture.

participants' reception by the public differs depending on 1. the audience--that is, Muslim and non-Muslim or, Black and non-Black and 2. how each respective group *categorizes* these women to comfortably "fit" the framework of its worldview.

Rinaldo Walcott (2003) takes the opportunity to speak directly to readers in the introduction of his work Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada (Second Edition): "Here's my disclaimer: Do not read this book *as a treatise on blackness in Canada*. Instead, read the essays as *an attempt to articulate some grammar* for thinking Canadian blackness" (2003: 26, my italics). Borrowing from Walcott I profess a similar objective-- this thesis is not intended to stand as a scholastic embodiment of "the" *African-Canadian Muslim female experience* (which frankly, can not be homogenized in this way) but, rather offers insight into what life in the nation is like for thirteen women. Thus, I aim to invigorate awareness in the academy, problematize the status quo, and provide data on which future research can expand. From herein the reader will witness my efforts to take the "particular" to the "microscopic" since analysis of Black-Canadian Muslim women is divided by religious status into 1. converts to Islam and 2. born/life-long Muslims.

An alternate lens of being Black, Muslim, and female emits from each participant group and is further segmented by the heterogeneity of the individual and her distinct religiosity; in this manner, what it is to *live in these identities* is investigated from numerous angles. African-Canadian Muslim women are surveyed in relation to one another with special attention to the interpersonal dynamics of conversion as seen through dual lenses. At the heart of this method rests the objective of uncovering what Black women in Islam *mean to one another*. In recognition of these women's anomalous status

in the religious and secular-public spheres (as well as the prejudicial treatment they contend with in both), this thesis will explore the *possibility for camaraderie[2]* when inspired by a shared religio-socio-racial marginalization. Finally, I question how in the midst of these trials women are affirming their selfhood; thus I ask: "How are Black Muslim women *directing their worlds* and *cultivating a sense of self* within/against a hostile nation?"

A Short History of Blacks in Canada (*Slavery to Post-American Civil War*)

Olivier Le Jeune is the first Black person recorded[3] to set foot in Canada, arriving in *New France* in 1628 as the enslaved child-companion of "the so-called English Conqueror of Quebec," David Kirke (Winks 1971: ix). From thereon the presence of Black peoples in Canada divides into three major historical periods, organized by Ali Abdi (2005) as follows: 1. early 16th to end of 18th century (composed first of indentured labourers, servants, and then the enslaved--wherein Black-Africans are imported through the slave trade into the early 19th century), 2. early 18th century to mid 20th century (initially fugitives coming through the underground railroad [however these "numbers are

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[2] The word "camaraderie" has the potential to immediately evoke certain images in a reader's mind, particularly those aligned with war, battle and the fraternal union(s) amongst soliders. Hence, the uncontextualized use of this term may distort my intentions for this thesis; additionally, without clarification the term can be harmful to a research-subject group who are constantly contending with the untutored tendency of mainstream non-Muslim society to align Islam with violence/warfare. By "camaraderie" I am therefore refering to a potential solidarity, (acquired) affinity and/or sorority between Black Muslim females. African-Canadian Muslim women are indeed "fighting battles" yet this is not with the uptake of arms but in a positive coalition of minds and spirits against racist-sexist-Islamophobic oppression.

[3] Winks (1971: ix) clarifies that Blacks had in fact been in New France prior to Le Jeune's arrival however, an adequate record does not exist for these persons.

uncertain, and generally exaggerated"] with Blacks entering as "typical immigrants"[4] in

the early 18th century), 3. mid-20th century to present (2005: 50-1). Persons of Black-

African descent have thus been *within the nation* for well over five hundred years but, for

the majority of this expanse of time they have not been considered *of* the nation. This is

most obviously a rebuff considering the fact that Blacks have resided in Canada as "free,

and skilled people" for over 350 years (Abdi 2005: 50) which, includes the Black British

loyalist who entered Canada (Halifax, Nova Scotia) with the first company between 1782

to 1783 (Winks 1971: ix).

White hegemonic forces have endorsed a mainstream edict that willfully and

conveniently *shortens* the historical length of Blacks' Canadian residency. According to

Walcott (2003) the "deni[al] of the longer Black presence in this country" (2003:14)

includes overlooking the existence of slavery within its borders--exemplified in *the*

notable absence of slavery in "official national discourse and popular narratives" (2003:

35; *also see Clarke 2002: 31-35*). In this regard, the dominate discourse allows that

Blacks *first* appeared in Canada as persons fleeing enslavement (2003: 35) who found

solace in this "slavery-free" and thus, "morally-superior" nation. Referring back to Abdi

(2005), fugitive Blacks *did* take sanctuary from slavery in this country however, the

contention here is that by reveling in the "heroism" of this history the fact that slavery

once thrived within Canada is ignored.

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[4] This is a somewhat misleading statement on Black immigration by Abdi (2005), if by "typical immigrants" immigration offices, passports and the hope for new/promising beginnings are meant--yes, 18th -20th century Blacks may match such signifiers. Yet the racist-blockades strategically straggling their immigration well into the 20th century, along social barriers Blacks endured once within the nation (as undervalued additions to the Canadian mosaic) clearly conveys that there is little that is "typical" about Black immigration to Canada.

White Canada can happily pat itself on the back convinced that *its* hands have not been bloodied by participation in human trafficking; it flatters itself that the bodies of Blacks have not been welted by *its* whips. In this manner, white Canada comfortably puts its feet up as it passes full responsibility for the slave trade onto its *cruel American neighbours* (Mensah 2010: 2; Satzewich 1998: 11). On this Robin Winks (1971) writes, "in post-Civil War times, [white] Canadians were giving themselves self-congratulations for their lack of prejudice when reflecting on the myths of the North Star, the Underground Railroad, and the fugitives' haven…. when these myths could no longer be tested…. since Black fugitives 'sought out Canadian soil' there was self-satisfaction for race relations in Canada…. used as evidence that Canadians shared none of the American racial virus" (1971:193-4). Canadians are *intrinsically kind,* are they not? Our history books have been whitewashed to ensure that at least this appears to be so.

Population Stats, Immigration

Contemporary times mark an influx of Blacks into Canada throughout the 1960s-70s once their restricted immigration as "undesirables" was lifted following: 1. 1962--end to the white immigrant preference, 2. the implementation of the *points system* in 1967 whereby specific variables (i.e. education, age) qualified one as an acceptable immigrant instead of race, 3. the erection of immigration offices in Black nations throughout the Caribbean and Africa (Mensah 2010: 3, 69-71). As a result, fifty-seven percent of Black-Canadians[5] are immigrants, as of 2007 (Wane et. al 2007: 177). The majority of Black-Canadians today are either from the Caribbean or continental Africa or of this descent

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[5] This statistic refers only to Black *women* in Canada and is based on the Canadian Health Network's 2007 consensus (Wane et. al 2007: 177).

(Mensah 2010:4; Okeke-Ihejirika et. al 2005: 205, *from Okeke-Ihejirika et. al 2000*).

Furthermore, this population continues to grow in more recent times; between 1996 and

2006 the Black population increased from 573, 860 to 783, 795--a thirty-six percent

spike which positions African-Canadians as the third largest visible minority group after

Chinese and South Asian Canadians (Mensah 2010: 79). Daniel Hiebert (1994) attests

that an optimal means of studying ethnicity in Canada involves attention to a *spatial,*

urban frame (1994: 262) as such, it is important to recognize that forty-five percent of

Blacks live in Toronto, Ontario. Yet even with this spatial density Blacks are not as

"spatially concentrated" as *non-visible minority groups* (i.e. Jews) and thus, are not

"spatially segregated" (Mensah 2010: 82, 86) although they may be *socially segregated*.

Social Devaluation and the Relief of Religion

   Throughout Black people's history in Canada they have been/continue to be

situated in the lowest level of "the social hierarchy of acceptance" according to Joseph

Mensah (2010:3) who further claims that, the degree of *exploitation* and *dehumanization*

leveraged against Blacks arguably surpasses that endured by any other racial minority in

the country (2010: 3)[6]. From the nation's past to present, *Blackness* is positioned as the

extreme opposite of "white" by the dominant discourse which consequentially guarantees

Blacks ostracization in all social spheres of mainstream society. Cecil Foster (1996) notes

that African-Canadians have historically found refuge from the abuses inflicted by a

dominant culture in the Black Church, which has traditionally formed *the heart of Black*

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[6] This is undoubtedly a provocative argument that speaks to the long-standing oppression of Blacks in Canada. However, I would like to point out that I am not interested in participating in *a lesser or more than* comparison of minority groups' subjugation since, I feel this can work to invalidate experiences and/or destructively pit ethnic-racial groups against each other. Moreover, Mensah's statement controversially overlooks the severe exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

communities in Canada[7] (1996: 55, 58; *also see Simmons 2009:173*). In a 19th century

fraught with socio-religio-racial tension, the Black Church became a venue wherein

African-Canadians can find welcome and thus a counter to the exclusion they perpetually

encounter in larger society. Winks (1971) adds that although most Churches in this era

were not "officially segregated," the racial divisions of the time created a palpable

discomfort when Black and white Canadians met in these spaces; hence, separate Black

religious institutions meant that Black congregants could relax in a setting *distinctly their*

own where sermons catered to the concerns of their realities and were spoken in a

language that met their needs (1971:338-40).

A Muslim-Canadian Presence

        With recent trends in Black immigration to Canada came a surge in alternative

religiosity which included Islam--brought with the new arrivals from African countries or

from America at the height of the Black-American civil rights movement. Yet one is hard

pressed to locate data on an *exclusively African-Canadian* Islamic history since

scholarship centers either on 1.the historiography of America's Nation of Islam (Jackson

2005; Tate 2005; Banks 1996) or, 2. begins with the immigrant Middle Eastern/South-

Asian Muslim experience (Takim 2009; Yousif 1993); thus the voices of African-

Canadian Muslims are lost within this chronic oversight. Regardless, it is still important

to acknowledge the Indo-Pakistani/Arab immigrant Muslim presence in this country

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[7] Foster points out that this image is borrowed by Black-Canadians from an American rendition of the role of the Church in Black communities therefore, it is important to recognize that Blacks are now arriving in Canada with different religions (other than Christianity) and expectation*s* (1996:55).

because, as the nation's Muslim ethnic-majority their histories reflect how non-Muslim

Canada *responds to Islam* in general.

Early Arrivals and Population Stats

Pinpointing the initial entrance of Muslims into Canada is an impossible task since

official documentation (tellingly) does not exist. Nonetheless, the available records mark

1854 as the year of the first *Canadian-born Muslim*, James Love--thus, with the mid-19th

century begins the nation's certified acknowledgment of an Islamic presence (Hamdani

1983; 1984: 8). The late 19th century to early 20th century saw a "pioneering" Islamic

population as Muslim men from Syria and Lebanon flocked to a newly thriving Alberta as

traders of goods. These wandering merchants eventually settled in the north end of the

province, making Lake La Biche the *first organized Muslim community in Canada*

(Hoodfar 2005: 136; Husaini 1990:99). At the turn-of-the-century Muslim men from

Turkey and Arab countries opted for major cities, arriving in Toronto and Montreal as

unskilled labourers and peddlers with hopes for economic success--which were often

realized (Abu-Laban 1981:99).

The 1960s marked an end to the restrictions inhibiting non-Western immigration

to Canada which afforded larger numbers of Muslims access to the country. As such, the

majority of the Muslim population immigrated in the 1970s coming from South-East Asia

and East African nations (Hamdani 1983; 1984: 8; Azmi 1997: 154); highly educated

Muslim women are amongst these numbers, who wedged a place for themselves in the

workforce followed by their less educated female fellows in the 1980s (Hoodfar

2005:142). These patterns of immigration therefore speak fully to Paul Bramadat's

(2005:12) declaration that of Canada's major minority religions the Muslim community trumps in ethnic diversity.

An 1871 national consensus put the Muslim population at 13 which had grown to 1,500 by 1911 (Abu-Laban 1981:99). Fast-forward to 1981 and Muslims in Canada tally at 98,165 (Hamdani 1983; 1984: 7), with numbers later increasing to over 650,000 (Hamdon 2010:10, *from Zaman 2002*)--a 128.9% leap--between 1991 and 2001 thus making Muslims Canada's *fastest growing religious and ethnic group* (Haideh et. al 2009:7). Evelyn Hamdon (2010:10) points out that consensus data is not "continuously collected" on the Muslim population which I suggest makes it difficult to *accurately* follow the growth of these communities. Furthermore, the data that *is* available appears as bare figures that discount Muslim-Canadians' contemporary diversity which is very much "a mosaic within a mosaic" (Hamdon 2010:10; Dossa 2009:15; Hoodfar 2003:75). Amin Malak's (2008) assertions add to this critique since he notes that, although Muslims in Canada are nearing one million there is a *dearth* in "serious knowledge" on what Islam looks like in the nation (2008:80) which now includes a shifting demographic with a second and third generation Muslim population born in Canada.

A Minority Religion in Canada

Canada is a *white supremacist patriarchal nation* with a Christian ethos underlining its secular image. The Christian faith reigns as a "normative" presence in the chronicles of a Canadian past as well as in the mainstream society of today. In a country that *naturalizes* the dominance of Christianity, minority faiths such as Islam are relegated to the *margins* of dominant discourses on religion in Canada (Bramadat 2005: 5, 14).

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Bramadat (2005: 6-7) elaborates that despite this Christian elitism, religious concerns do not typically factor into the federal policies of a government that likes to imagine that religiosity exists solely on a *private* scale. One of the repercussions of this national edict is that Islam's long-standing Canadian history goes unnoticed while non-Muslim Canadians remain ignorant of the basics of a faith to which a sizable number of their fellow citizens have pledged allegiance.

Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution non-Muslim Canadians were *ignorant of, yet hospitable to* Islam. However, dominant society became less amicable towards Muslims after media coverage flippantly misconstrued Islam (Hoodfar 2005:133). Furthermore, the public mentality transformed into an "openly anti-Muslim rhetoric" following the violent events of September 11, 2001 (Haideh et. al 2009: xi). In recent times Muslims occupy an unstable position within the nation whereby their Canadian status does not safeguard them from prejudice (Hamdon 2010:14). Rather, the "Muslim-led" attack of America has been used to justify non-Muslim Canadians' cross-border s*uspicious* and *watchful* response to surrounding Muslims (Haideh et. al 2009: 172); a religio-ethnic profiling Sheema Khan (2009:42) cleverly calls "Canadian while Muslim" by way of alluding to the near criminality of simultaneously wielding these identities.

Fieldwork

Research Method(s)

At the core of this thesis are the dynamic voices of thirteen women whose stories have been documented through one-on-one interviews conducted between September

2010 and January 2011. Framing each interview are a series of prepared questions (23 for

converts, 22 for born Muslims) which gradually shift from general demographic

information (i.e. "how do you define your ethnic background?") to queries that target the

specific religio-socio-racial factors of their realities (i.e. "have you ever felt excluded

from the general Toronto non-Muslim community because of your religious affiliation to

Islam and/or ethnic background?"). Despite these guidelines however, participants were

not restricted from discussing issues they considered relevant even though they diverged

from the specific set of queries. To ensure participants felt as comfortable as possible they

chose the setting of the interview, with locations ranging from their homes to community

centers, local cafes to restaurants. On average these sessions took about one hour, but

could also run anywhere between twenty-five minutes to one hour and thirty minutes.

Notably, I conducted two phone interviews for women who have settled outside of

Ontario but are former long-time residents of Toronto. The materials bound with my

qualitative approach to research are 1. hand-written field notes and 2. audio recordings

whereby, the former allowed me to jot down my commentary during the interviews while

the latter enabled later verbatim transcription.

Gaining Access to the Muslim Community

Although female experiences dictate the content of this study, male authorities

have regulated my access to research participants. Moghissi Haideh et. al's (2009) work

on Muslims in the Canadian diaspora elucidates that the already difficult (but, essential)

task of gaining respondents' trust has been complicated by the demonization of Islam

following 9/11 so that, Muslims express greater hesitancy in sharing their experiences

(2009:xii-iii); this detail speaks to my trials in locating participants whereby my initial contacts (Imams) acted as the gatekeepers to the Muslim community, conceivably guarding it from the ill-intentioned. As such, cold-calling/emailing mosques and Muslim organizations were ineffective techniques--I speculate that my unfamiliar voice or script offered little by way of reassurance to these religious porters.

Access was therefore solely possible through *a process of referral* which took place as follows: A. my supervisory committee member Dr. Liyakat Takim graciously requested the assistance of a known Toronto Imam on my behalf; B. the Imam forwarded the contact information of the mosques with which he is acquainted; C. I emailed the Imams of these institutions to ask if they had applicable congregants; *every* email began by mentioning both Dr.Takim and the initial Imam; D. the Imams who responded either connected me with potential participants or, more typically, passed my information on to Muslim community leaders who could be of more assistance--here offering themselves as my reference to these third parties; E. occasionally I met with the community leaders in person to explain my research as well as my personal intentions before they connected me with potential participants (to whom I eventually sent the details of my research through a recruitment email). In this way, *three or four degrees of separation* often stood between myself and the women of this study.

Additionally, confirmed participants frequently volunteered to inform their friends, sisters, and/or daughters about my work to help increase numbers. Due to this impromptu means of acquiring research respondents a number of the women in this study have personal ties to one another. However, as part of my commitment to confidentiality

these connections have not been drawn out in analysis. Furthermore, two of these women invited me to participate in various events orientated towards (or, run by) Muslim women, which includes: 1. attending a Muslim (and Non-Muslim) women's discussion group, 2. volunteering at a conference entitled "Working with Muslim Women" for non-Muslim public service workers; and, 3. becoming a board member of a Muslim (and Non-Muslim) women's community service organization. Through these activities based in the Toronto Muslim community I made valuable contacts for this thesis while also improving my rapport with the women who extended the invitation.

Commenting on her experiences as an *insider-outsider* ethnographer amongst Black Gullah women Josephine Beoku-Betts (1994) states, "[I was] invited to take part in the social circles of those I studied in ways a scholar with outsider status likely would not.… [m]y shared racial background proved instrumental in providing access to research participants and in reducing the social distance at a critical stage of the research process" (1994: 417, 420). Similar to Beoku-Betts, by sharing in the racial status of participants I am--to a certain extent--granted standing as an "insider." I presume that both my *Blackness* and *gender* has unlocked the doors to the archives of these women's worlds which can otherwise, remain secured from the researcher who is unable to grasp the weight of these tales with the sensitivity that can come from comparable socio-racial positioning, if not experience.

Hence, it was during the interview process that participants and myself were often able to relate beyond the sterility of researcher-subject, especially as I divulged my own encounters with anti-Black discrimination. Ultimately, these factors allowed me to gain

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respondents' trust so that they felt safe to speak freely and openly about some of their most private concerns. Even so, Beoku-Betts' (1994) article "When Black is not enough" points out that Black scholars' *shared racial membership* with research participants is "not enough to preclude other challenges"--particularly those stemming from diverging, multiple identities (1994: 414). On this note, the ways in which respondents view me as *different* from themselves (i.e. religious status, nationality, profession) fortifies certain kinds of mental barricades which influenced the *types of information* they were willing to disclose.

Demographic

Putting out a call for female Muslim research respondents I emphasized two main variables, volunteers are to be 1. Black and 2. Canadian. It is neither in my power, nor remotely of my desire, to "warden" the boundaries of Blackness by deciding who does or does not qualify as a Black person; thus, if potential participants *identify as Black* that is enough to have a place within the study. Furthermore, I refuse to engage in any edict that decides "bona fide Canadianness*"* whether that be based on place of birth, ethnicity, or length of residency within the nation. In this regard, women for whom Canada is a permanent home *or* the country of their socialization are included here[8]. As such, the national and ethnic origins of the thirteen Black Muslim women whose narratives permeate this thesis are wide ranging--dividing as follows: 2 subjects from Central America (with Black-African ancestry); 2 subjects from Northeast Africa (one of Black-

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[8] I conducted fourteen interviews in total however only thirteen are included in my study. I met the fourteenth woman through a participant referral but quickly discovered (during the interview) that, she is an international student in Canada solely for the purpose of completing her undergraduate degree and with every intention of leaving the country once finished--as such, she does not fit the desired demographic.

African/Italian ancestry, one of Black-African ancestry); 1 subject from Southeast Africa (with Caribbean heritage); 2 subjects from the United States (of Black-American/German ancestry); 4 subjects born in Canada (one of Black-American/European/Northeast African ancestry, and three of Caribbean heritage); 1 subject from East Africa (of Black-African/Arabic ancestry); 1 subject from West Africa (of Black-African ancestry).

Of these women, seven are converts to Islam while six have been born into the faith. Although I did not enforce age restrictions there is an observable *generational divide* between these two participant groups. In general, participants' ages range from eighteen to the early seventies however, all born Muslims are in their late teens to early twenties while converts' ages vary, from: mid-to-late twenties (2), early thirties (1), middle-aged (3: early forties to early fifties) or, elderly (1: early seventies). Considering that a number of women referred acquaintances for the study I speculate that the clustering of ages (particularly amongst born Muslims) reflects the arrangement of their immediate social circles. Moreover, patterns of education amongst participants further speaks to trends in their social as well as familial groups; all women are currently completing or, have completed post-secondary education in Canada--specifically, one woman is in college while the remaining are/were in university and two hold Masters' degrees.

Notably, participation in this study is *self-selective* in so much as individual women decided whether they wished to volunteer their time and stories. However, the initial respondent group likely evidences the "type" of Black Muslim woman the Imams considered appropriate for my research (that is, *eligible* candidates to reflect their

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communities). Thus, it is from this already narrowed pool that I receive participants'

referrals of those within their closest social realms--other women who conceivably share

in their interests, values, and, consequentially, their level of education. Of these 13

women, all who are over the age of 25 are married (or divorced) and have children; the

younger participants do not share in these variables although two are engaged to be

married. Furthermore, four women are currently students and the remaining nine are in

community service based occupations. Finally, the city of Toronto is both the regional

and socio-cultural focus of this study therefore, all participants are spatially dispersed

throughout the Greater Toronto Area and its surrounding suburbs.

Operational Definitions

African-Canadian: I use this term to speak of persons in Canada of *Black-African*

descent which includes those who have immigrated from African countries and/or have

an ancestral link to the continent--however distant. An academic consensus on the *most*

appropriable label for peoples of this heritage does not exist nor is "African-Canadian"

an applicable identity marker for *all* persons of this descent therefore, "African-

Canadian" is used interchangeably with "Black" and "Black-Canadian." Nonetheless, in

making use of *African-Canadian* I aim to 1. differentiate between the experiences of

Blacks in Canada from African-Americans--thus, "depart[ing] from the omnibus

categorization…. that tend[s] to lump all Blacks together as though they are an

undifferentiated mass" (Tettey et. al 2005:12); and, 2. honour the diverse histories of

Black-African peoples which can be overlooked when "Black" becomes an all-

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encompassing and homogenizing label. At the same time I acknowledge the limits of this term which most specifically includes its participation in the white normative discourse that solely requires non-whites to *hyphenate* their "Canadianness" (Tettey et. al 2005:40); yet this shortcoming conjointly stands as a testament to the limited vocabulary "officially" available for people of colours' self-definition.

Black/ Black-Canadian/Blackness: employed as an alternate to *African-Canadian* to refer to persons of "Black"-African descent. Within the popular discourses of racialized society the phenotypical traits of skin pigmentation, facial features, and hair texture broadly combine to qualify a person as *Black*. Even so, Walcott (2003) asserts that the terms *Black-Canadian/Blackness* go beyond "the categories of the biological and the ethnic" (2003:28); in light of this ethos "Black" appears in this thesis with its *full complexity*. Specifically, it alludes to the multitude of socio-racial and cultural signifiers which *make it meaningful* to the individual and to the ethno-racial communities. "Black" is at once *an ode to ancestry, culture*, and *personal identity*. Moreover, I pair it with a capital "B" to mark this gravity and vitality.

Islamophobia: "a dread or hatred of Islam and of Muslims [as] threat[s] [to] the peace and security of Western nations" (Hoodfar et. al 2005: 136, *from The Runnymede Trust 1997*). Consequently this mentality justifies the negative stereotyping of Muslims, the demonization of the Islamic faith and its practices, and structures the discriminatory treatment of individual Muslims--all of which "relies on a sense of otherness" (Gottschalk et. al 2008:5). The adverse actions of *any* Muslim in the global landscape "implicates" *all* Muslims in the West (Hamdon 2010: 15) to a public waiting in-the-ready for the *enemy in*

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their midst to fulfill/confirm its "innate" capacities for evil. *Fear* of the non-Christian/non-white "other" is at the root of this prejudice which creates a hospitable terrain for essentialism whereby "difference" is used to qualify any number of stereotypes. Additionally, I understand Islamophobia's conjoining variables to be xenophobia, racism, and neo-colonialism which work in solidarity to maintain the status quo of the "dominant" group.

White Supremacy: the "racial politic" (hooks 2000: 4) based on "the implied superiority of Europe" (Bullen 2005:12) whereby *whiteness reigns supreme* in all systems of Western societies. "Whiteness" marks *full-personhood, first-class citizenship, ownership of the aesthetically normative body*; as such, white supremacy functions as a system of *advantage and disadvantage* (Bullen 2005: 28, 29). It is an "ideology of domination" that works to maintain its capital as the "dominant" group by naturalizing its autocratic hegemony. White supremacy erects oppressive socio-economic structures which ensure non-whites--branded as *inferior* and *outsiders*--remain in subjugation. *Mainstream/dominant/majority/white hegemonic society* are terms found throughout this thesis, intended to be varying signifiers for "white supremacy."

Chapter Summaries

   Chapter One, "A Literature Review 'Blackness is the Shell, Islam is the Center: Thinking through Black Canada'" provides an extensive overview of the scholarly theories that in combination shape the body of this thesis. As such, this chapter will walk the reader through the complexities of the Black-African diaspora in Canada, including:

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issues of identity and belonging, the reality/effects of Blacks' socio-cultural ostracization, and the ideology of the *imagined African homeland*. Furthermore, racist-sexist oppression of Black womanhood is delved into through Black feminist thought to illustrate the forces within/against women are affirming their identities. Lastly, an analysis of Black conversion to Islam conveys the ways selfhood finds assertion within a religious sphere. Hence, it is by searching these bodies of work with a literary fine-toothed comb that the "bald spots" wherein my own work fits becomes most apparent.

Chapter Two, "What is it to Embrace Islam?: Writing on African-Canadian Female Converts" explores the dynamics of living life as a Black convert woman by presenting participants' narratives. The issues each woman faces as an individual often appears with a different shape in the stories of her participant-fellows thus, it is the subjects that weave their words together that dictate the content of this chapter. This section includes: motivations for conversion (Christian aversion, intellectual pursuits, or a racial/Afrocentric worldview), reception by the Muslim community's ethnic majority (a hospitable welcome, or painful ostracization), the challenges of locating a religious self while maintaining (or, foregoing) a racial identity, as well as the possibility for a sense of affinity to emerge between women who share in these experiences.

Chapter Three, "'Life-long' African-Canadian Muslim Women & the (Dis)similar Experiences of Black Convert Women" presents the dilemmas and socio-religious values of Muslim women born into the faith by examining 1. generational differences in religiosity within the family; and, 2. the influences of a secular Canadian socialization on their worldviews. Furthermore, by investigating life-long Muslim women's encounters

with/perceptions of converts this chapter reveals the factors that can assist or hinder the former's development of an autonomous religious identity--while also exhibiting their reflections on these processes.

Chapter Four, "Black Like Me?: Negotiating Racial (Dis)harmony, Contending with Anti-Islamic Prejudice" offers a survey of the discrimination Black Muslim women in Toronto are consistently made to contend with, irrespective of convert or born Muslim status. Analysis unveils the "camaraderie" that can emerge between these women as a defensive maneuver--waylaying the anti-Black prejudice of the ethnic-majority mosque population and the anti-Islamic/hijab prejudice of non-Muslim Black persons. Additionally, what it can mean to dually negotiate a Black *and* Muslim identity in a socio-cultural setting hostile to both is also dealt with here through an investigation of participants' responses to dominant society's Islamophobia--which particularly targets the hijab.

Chapter Five, "Conclusion; Point of Departure: This End Marks A Beginning" is a closing chapter that addresses the loose ends of this thesis and presents my final conclusions--outlining what my analysis has contributed to discourses on religio-racial ostracization, multiculturalism, and African-Canadian Muslim women's camaraderie(s). Additionally, I engage in a self-critique that points out the weakness and/or limitations of my research methods; acknowledges the possibility of this work being misinterpreted as neo-imperialistic; and decides ownership of the finished product. Moreover, I open up a forum for future study by listing the topics that arose during interviews but did not find a

place within this thesis; closing with my intentions, aspirations, and reservations as well

as my self-reflexive thoughts as an insider-outsider researcher.

Chapter One; *A Literature Review*
Blackness is the Shell, Islam is the Center: Thinking Through Black Canada

Overview: The Black-African Diasporic Community

The Black-African diaspora[9] in Canada represents an autonomous, multifaceted

culture and can function as a unique identity-shaping agent for Black-Canadians. Yet the

diversity of national origins Canada's Black diaspora encompasses--along with the array

of tools used by the individual to construct meaning from within it--are often overlooked

in academic inquiry. Rather, an *inflexibility* on the part of scholars to differentiate

between the innumerably distinct lives lived by Black diasporic bodies typically

permeates current academic research (Tettey et. al. 2005: 5). Thus, as Philomina Okeke-

Ihejirika et. al (2005) notes, the "particularities" of Black-African[10] experiences within

Canada are lost to the nether regions of *the chronically understudied* seeing that these

individuals' dynamic realities are frequently drowned within a homogeneous "Black

pool" (2005: 206)--a broad-sweeping gesture that is unconcerned with what differentiates

one Black individual from the next; instead, the Black-African diaspora is awkwardly

enmeshed within investigations of "older [Canadian] Diasporic communities" or

alternatively, the Caribbean becomes "a pseudonym for [all] blackness" (Okeke-Ihejirika

et. al 2005: 206; Walcott 2003:135).

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[9] Bramadat (2005) asserts that a *diaspora* is made up of, "a peoplehood among groups that have been scattered" (2005: 14); alternatively, Tettey et. al (2005) defines *diaspora* as, "a group of people who have a common geographical origin, have trans-located through migratory patterns occasioned by the forces of globalization and/or domestic stress, and share identifiable markers (e.g. ethnicity), a collective consciousness, and common experiences in their new locales" (2005: 4). Either scholars' description is pertinent to a discussion of the Black-African diasporic community in Canada particularly since both refer to the cognitive and/or physical sense of "collectivity" that can emerge amongst transplanted peoples.

[10] In this instance "African" refers to continental African immigrants within the Canadian diaspora (Okeke-Ihejirika et. al 2005).

Such trends discount the diversity of nationality, lineage and autonomous identities that actually comprise Canada's Black population. Scholars therefore appear uninterested in these complexities as they unapologetically evade accurately locating Black-Canadians' origins or exploring the ways Black persons locate themselves. As part of this thesis' overall attempt to fill some of these inexcusable voids in academic inquiry, this initial chapter works to draw each of these "gaps" into a glaring light by presenting an overview of where scholarly theory presently stands on the subjects most pertinent to an analysis of African-Canadian Muslim women; these topics therefore include: "belonging" and "selfhood" within the Black-African diaspora in Canada; the marginalization of African-Canadians; Black feminist theory and its responses to the oppression of Black womanhood; Black-American religiosity as a tool of resistance; and, the incentives behind Black peoples' conversion to Islam.

Who Belongs to the Black-African Diaspora in Canada?

Membership within the Black-African diaspora of Canada does not fit neatly into the conventional factors that determine 1. *nationality* (i.e. place of birth, citizenship), nor 2. *diaspora* (i.e. migratory patterns). According to Wisdom Tettey et. al. (2005) "Africanness" in a Canadian setting is *inconsistently defined* since its multiple criteria evokes numerous yet unsynchronized interpretations, by Blacks, of the identity-marker "African-Canadian"--which includes factors extending beyond any presumptions of their shared origins (2005: 6). Therefore, in an attempt to both recognize the possible *affinities* between Black-Canadian persons while simultaneously guarding against homogenizing tendencies it becomes important to ask: "Who qualifies to be designated as part of the

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African diaspora in Canada [?]"(2005: 4-5). However, the answer to this query is dependent upon the multiple (and often, divergent) criteria individual Black-Canadians use for self-definition; importantly these variables reveal the class of persons Blacks consider to be of their racial communion--as determined by whether or not an individual is thought to align with their perceptions of *Blackness*. On this note, I further question: "What are the deciding lines along which Blacks in Canada judge which individuals 'African-Canadian' as a racial-ethnic classification encompasses, to thus qualify as a 'legitimate' member of (and thus, gain admittance to) the(ir) Black-African diasporic community?"

Interestingly, Tettey et. al (2005) draws attention to critics who renounce classifications of "African-Canadian" (and thus, the "African" diaspora) that emphasize "formal citizenship and geography" oppose to *Africanness* as an "innate characteristic" of every Black--irreverent of their official national status; there are also those who claim that *all* Black persons in Canada are legitimately "African-Canadian" by the authority of their ancestry which can be lineally traced back to the African continent (2005: 7). Notably Tettey et. al dismiss this latter argument for its lack of cogency while on my part I challenge its disavowal of *the autonomous act of self-naming*. Specifically, I argue that the individual (primarily) sanctions the variables and boundaries of their own identity-- subsequently deciding on the individuals they feel to complement their sense of personhood to then form the "collective." Hence, to broadly assert that *every* Black person is *necessarily* contained within the socio-racial label "African-Canadian" takes

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away this power and/or ignores the variant ways Blacks in Canada understand their

selfhood.

A significant aspect of the Black-African diasporic experience is what Walcott

(2003:140) describes as, "the problem of belonging." Walcott stipulates that *belonging* is

a "strategy" embedded within the narratives of "blood, land, [and] tribe" and thus sutured

into the discourses of "generations and citizenship" as they apply to one's location within

the nation-state; for Black-African diasporic persons this becomes a project of

"positionality" (i.e. ethical-political) which reveals the "disjunct spaces" they *historically*

and *temporally* occupy as minorities within Canada (2003: 140). Drawing on these

estimations I speculate that Black-African peoples' attempts to *re-organize* their places

within the nation as part of this "project of positionality" so that their marginality is

transformed from an indication of socio-cultural ostracization into a podium from which

they can decide the parameters of their racialized communities.

In this regard, marginal spaces can be embraced as sites for shaping identity and

fraternity wherein social exclusion by/within the nation is subverted, to re-emerge as an

opportunity for Black-Canadians to create their own sense of belonging by *dictating the*

criteria for inclusion as merited diasporic selves[11]. Floya Anthias et. al's (1992)

conception of *the axis of "race"* acutely illustrates this system of inclusion and exclusion

as utilized by racialized bodies: "[the axis is located] within *constructs of collectivity and*

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[11] This conjecture presents a nuanced version of Michel Foucault's (1978:101) "reverse discourse" theory. As homosexuality in the 19th Century found a voice to "speak in its own behalf"--with the opening of medical and jurisprudential discourses on this supposed "perversity"--it boldly invoked the language and categories used by the official, medical realm(s) to disqualify it, to declare its own validity. Hence, this self-directed capacity to transform the dominant discourse(s) from within, utilizing its labels but redefining their meaning, arguably, appears within the Black-African disapora of Canada--whereby individuals exhibit agency and take part in a power that otherwise orchestrates their social exclusion.

belongingness (that is, ethnic phenomena) postulated through notions of common origin

or destiny, not in terms of cultures of difference but in terms of *the specific positing of*

boundaries" (1992: 2, my italics). The racial categorization "African-Canadian", or the

ethnic conglomerate "Black-African diaspora", are therefore engineered (or re-wired) as

social constructions of origin to establish boundaries for deciding autonomous

community and to then unify the socio-ethnic-racial group (1992: 4-5).

Defining and Recreating an Black-African Identity within the Canadian Diaspora

To explain the concept of "nationalism" Benedict Anderson (1983; 1991)

presents the notion of the *imagined community*. For Anderson, "popular nationalism" is

the lived/historical/cultural relations of a society where people love and sacrifice for a

culture, ancestral history, and *physical space* they view as shared amongst themselves

(1983,1991:86). However, the political community that forms the nation (or society) is

imagined since the majority of the collective will never meet one another yet "the image

of their communion" with these faceless members persists nonetheless (1983, 1991:6).

Anderson's premise is useful to truly understand the "manufacturing" of the Black-

African diaspora in Canada as a socially constructed community. The proclamation of an

"African" identity by Blacks in Canada may in fact rely upon connections to continental

Africa that are neither *concretely* nor *verifiably* substantiated, rather, these ties potentially

emerge from imagined, spiritual, or mythical linkages (Anthias et. al. 1992: 4,5; Tettey et.

al 2005 4-5, 7; Okeke-Ihejirika et. al 2005: 209). Foster (1996) points out that there is a

tendency amongst some Blacks in Canada to identify with Africa despite the fact that

relatively few can claim the continent as a birthplace--nevertheless, these ties are made by

qualifying *Africa* and *Africanness* as, "a state of mind" (1996: 18). In this way, Black-African diasporic peoples are mentally expanding the definition of *Africanness* (Tettey et. al 2005: 7), and stretching the notion of "origins" in order to equip themselves with--what Walcott (2003:13) calls--a "grammar for thinking [of their] blackness in Canada."

The Black-African diasporic community permits Black-Canadians to form/renew their identity/ies through the (re)invention of a culture and/or an ancestral history. Michael Nash (2008: ix, x) and Tettey et. al (2005: 153) correlate this attachment felt towards Africa (as a place and a culture) with what they define as, a *nostalgia* for the continent as a "homeland." Laying claim to a trans-national (though, *fictitious*) homeland serves this diasporic population by, "offer[ing] the best cognitive environment for…. their assertions of self" (Tettey et. al 2005: 153) which evokes a sense of belonging in a socio-cultural setting that otherwise marginalizes them as outsiders. Althea Prince (2001) recognizes this search for a positive space to furbish an identity as Black Canada's "yearning" for a satisfactory definition to fit the multiple layers of their *beingness* (2001: 19); a Black-African diasporic identity can therefore be understood to, partially, alleviate this longing for self-affirmation by equipping Blacks-Canadians with both the cognitive space and a recognizable socio-racial-cultural community wherein they can produce a refined notion of their personhood--that is *within* yet simultaneously *beyond* the white nation. Walcott (2003: 26) declares that this language of renewal and (re)invention is in fact the most *critically affirmative* and *fundamental* component to discourses on Black diasporic cultures. Black persons in Canada use this vernacular to make sense of the self in a way that reaches beyond the imposing limits of a dominant white culture, as such it

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prefaces any academic attempt to even begin to hypothesize "the politics of blackness" (2003: 137, 146). Hence, it is once Black peoples are embraced within the nurturing folds of a Black-African diasporic cooperative that a variety of identities may be employed and rendered meaningful (Tettey et. al 2005: 219).

Social Marginalization of the Black-African Diasporic Community

"African-Canadian" and "African-American": There Is Indeed a Difference.

A dearth in academic analysis into the specific realities of Blacks residing in Canada both participates in *and* perpetuates misguided presumptions of homogeneous life-ways between "African-Canadians" and "African-Americans." The complexities unique to what it means to be Black in contemporary Canada are all too often overshadowed by American models of Blackness, whether these images arise from academic literature or the imaginings of popular culture. Conversely, the individuals writing on and thus problematizing this phenomenon of cross-border homogeneity are notably emerging from the Black scholastic community; "Black Canada" therefore appears to be of consequence mainly for those scholars who are able to pair lived experience with research in order to enunciate the independent value of racialized lives. The importance of the racial group must therefore be declared from *within* the collective while the non-Black academic world is evidently unbothered by this obscuring of difference.

Foster (1996; 2007) enunciates mainstream Canadian culture's inability to distinguish between Blacks on either side of the American-Canadian border by pointing

out the pervading indifference to 1. the sensibilities specific to the Black-Canadian

population at large, and 2. the distinctive differences African-Canadians identify among

themselves as individuals (1996: 20-1, 25). As a note to fellow academics Foster argues

that in order to understand the realities of Canada's Black communities there must first

come the acknowledgment that African-Canadians are in fact *unique* and," [not] a carbon

copy of the African-American population" (1996: 13). Walcott (2003) concedes that there

may indeed be similarities between African-Canadians and African-Americans[12],

however, he argues that these relative parallels *do not* translate into the ability for

African-American lives to encapsulate "the locality of black Canadian political concern"

(2003: 38) considering that, African-Canadians "reinvent" American-borrowed

mechanisms for their own local pursuits (2003: 146; *also see Clarke 2002:35, 39*). Thus,

in recognition of mainstream culture's tendency to blur or, ignore their specificity I

postulate that Blacks in Canada utilize their membership within the Black-African

diasporic community to clearly (and defiantly) assert the distinctiveness of their identities.

A Challenge to the "Othering" of Black-Canadians

Black-Canadians' desire to affirm a distinct identity within diasporic Canada is a

compulsion some scholars explain as a "combatant measure," reactively stemming from

the tense social dynamics felt between disempowered Blacks and the all-powerful, white

majority population. On this note, an objective at the forefront of Blacks people's

affirmations of their unique personhood is not only the need to extricate themselves from

cross-border classification (through the recognition of their difference) but, also a desire

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[12] Note: the *similarities* Walcott (2003) is specifically referring to here are "notions of race" which he suggest may be borrowed from African-American cultural/political discourses by African-Canadians.

to challenge their marginalization by dominant society. A number of works unanimously affiliate the African-Canadian experience with the reality of being made into an "other." In particular, Tettey et. al (2005: 40) contend that the implicit assumption that Blacks are "foreigners" permeates the dominant discourse which continuously places the validity of their *Canadianness* under scrutiny by casting Black persons as "perpetual outsiders and eternal immigrants" (2005: 40-1). Moreover, these scholars note that "authentic" (read: white) and "adultered" ("non-white") versions of citizenship decide *legitimate* Canadian status from the "undeserving intruders sponging off what the *real Canadians* have achieved" (2005: 41, my italics).

Further, Prince (2001: 32) illustrates that Blacks who *are* in fact recent immigrants are made to feel like second-class citizens within/by the white nation-state-- which I speculate to be a tactic used by the dominant group to ensure that these new arrivals quickly learns to fall-in-line with the subordinate social positions it prescribes (and, *normalizes*) for the Black population. African-Canadians are socially branded as "suspects" by a Eurocentric society that does not accept them as *full citizens* but instead willfully withholds this status (Foster 1996: 69) therefore ensuring this "undesirable" population is kept to the social peripheries. Essentially, these prejudices exemplify what Walcott (2003:12) describes as the *limits* placed upon "what being Canadian is imagined to be." African-Canadians must then attempt to establish their identities and *forge their integration* amidst the frustrations of a pecking-order that invariably places them in the hierarchical drudges of national status (Tettey 2005: 27). In this regard, I suggest that the Black-African diasporic community's propensity to locate the essence of their identities

outside of the nation may in fact transpire from these encounters with anti-Black

discrimination which challenges their citizenry. By attaching themselves to an African

"homeland" Blacks are, again, able to consciously *re-orient their "otherness"* and render

it as a positive source of self-definition by reorganizing its meaning--in this way, not

being considered to be "of" the nation, within mainstream thought, can not upset their

notions of selfhood since it does not depend upon this type of inclusion.

What is particularly significant about the marginalization African-Canadians are

made to contend with however, is the reality that it occurs *amidst* the national policy of

"multiculturalism." Walcott (2003) declares that the "othering" of minorities actually

arises as a *result* of this edict: "multicultural, as a category, is reserved for those who need

to be imagined as adjunct to the nation…. [and] they are usually people who are not

'white'" (2003: 119). Hence, it can be read that whiteness officiates unadultured

Canadian status, while Blacks (and other ethnic-racial minorities) must "hyphenate" their

identities with national origins that are *exterior* to Canada. Himani Bannerji (2000)

describes *ideological Englishness/whiteness* as the central force of multiculturalism

seeing that it provides a "point of departure"--a *normative* guideline--for defining

multicultural policy and Canadian culture in general which allows whiteness to manifest

as "the hegemonic Canadian identity" (2000: 110).

Although Canada's white self goes (un)conspicuously *unnamed*, for Bannerji it

uses a multicultural edict to *create* an "other" and further organizes power along lines of

difference (2000:111, 110). In corroboration with *the ideology of whiteness*,

multiculturalism consequently assists in producing the criteria to assert an "us" and a

"them" (2000: 66, 108) whereby official categories of *otherness* (i.e. visible minority, immigrant) decides categories of national membership (2000: 111). "Multiculturalism" arguably constitutes a façade of acceptance that discretely, but rigidly shapes both the center *and* the margins of socio-cultural acceptability; Notisha Massaquoi (2007) describes this parody of diversity as: "[a] national climate of multiculturalism with anti-racist overtones [and] racist undertones…. [thus] [a]s long as I, the blackened foreigner, exist in Canada, 'Canadians' clearly know who they are not (Mercer 2003; Walcott 1997)" (2007: 75).

Blacks in Canada can expect national placement in no other realm than the *marginal* since to be a racialized "other" is equivalent to being an outsider. According to Foster (1996: 25) and Mensah (2010: 4, 24) although dominant white society homogenizes all Blacks into a single ethnic community--to organize their "otherness" I would suggest--common experiences of racist-discrimination tentatively override African-Canadians' factual heterogeneity through a *shared subjugation*. It is therefore reasonable to propose that the Black-African diasporic community partially works to override the destructive limits of multiculturalism by transforming "difference" that is, shifting it from functioning as an appendage of the "nationally-undesirable" to a socio-cultural tool that offers a source of inspiration that is alternative to a hostile nation.

Gendered Understandings of Racial Oppression

Dominant Powers Infringing Upon Black Womanhood

Anthias et. al (1992:5) states that a racialized group's "ethnic positioning" within the socio-political stratum produces a common worldview amongst individual members because they are made to share *cultural resources* as well as a *collective positioning* in relation to dominant culture. Yet, these scholars argue that a proper analysis of the logistics behind *how* these worldviews become commensurable to the racialized collective involves attention to the cumulative forms of oppression concurrently endured *and* the multiple identities simultaneously held--specifically, the forms of subordination occurring through gender/sex, class, as well as race are pertinent (1992: 5, 10). Historically, *Black feminist theory* has coherently combined analysis of these variables through its exploration of the systems of oppression which frame the serial struggles often met within the lived experiences of Black women.

Black feminisms emphasize that racism constitutes but *one* type of the numerous forms of oppression attempting to infringe on the freedoms of Black women (hooks 1981: 4, 88; Wane et. al 2007: 10). Patricia Hill Collins (1991) claims that there are in fact three dimensions which encapsulate these women's subjugation: 1. *the Economic dimension of oppression* (the exploitation of their labour), 2. *the Political dimension of oppression* (exclusion from the rights/privileges made available to white men), and 3. *the Ideological dimension of oppression* (a fabrication of their "qualities" to justify their oppression) (1991: 6-7); Collins concludes that as part of a white hegemonic system of social control these factors effectively solidify Black women's subordinate positions while protecting

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elite white male interests (1991: 7). Such affirmations corroborate other early Black

feminist intellectuals who juxtapose the systems of oppression shaping Black women's

experiences, existence, and *culture* with the violence of white dominance. In particular,

scholars emphasize the psychological state of these racialized women as a *plundered*

"psychic landscape" from which they must attempt to affirm their personhood in a world

of "white and/or male consciousness" that unremittingly deems their concerns invalid

(Lorde 1983: 155; Bobo 2001: 5). In this respect, Black women can be said to form a

gendered and racialized collective since they are communally offered a hostile terrain on

which to formulate their identities--and thus, unavoidably, share in these degrading

realities.

Reclaiming Black Women's Agency and Strength

hooks (1981; 1993) postulates that the abusive powers of dominant white society

have methodically *socialized Black women's identities out of existence* (1981: 7) thus

complicating any endeavour, by these women, to locate "affirming images of black

femaleness" (1993: 83). Furthermore, hooks argues that by barricading Black women

from establishing a firm sense of selfhood, *white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal*

society wields its most effective exploitative tactic (1993: 14). Conversely, it is in the

"decolonization" of Black women's minds (extracting them from the toxic grip of white

hegemonic society) that their mental pathways become receptive to the power of

invention (1993: 2). In this way the definitions/productions of Black womanhood devised

by dominant culture are overridden with assertions of how *Black women* comprehend and

experience their own realities and hence**,** "transcen[d] being manipulateable objects"

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(1993: 2). Finding a voice from which "agency" and "self-affirmation" can be articulated

is a project undertaken *by* Black women *for* Black women (1993: 2); Black feminist

thought serves as both the mouthpiece and the platform to garner this strength as it works

to break through the confines of Black women's socially enforced silence and allow them

to publically proclaim, as Barbara Christian (1989) states, "their search for themselves"

(1989: 59). As a theory, Black feminism makes the *specific truths* bound with living as a

Black female conceptually clear by punctuating the *importance* of their lives and

concerns amidst a societal/institutional climate that perpetually excludes them from

serious cultural analysis (Bobo 2001: xv, xviii; Powell 1983: 292).

Returning to Collins (1991), *a dialectic of activism and oppression* emerges from

Black female intellectuals' tradition of resisting the suppression of their ideas by white

supremacist powers and it is this show of agency, against domineering forces, that forms

the foundation of the politics of Black feminist thought (1991: 5-6). Culturally prevailing

notions of Black womanhood are first *razed* and then *re-formed* within a theoretical space

that places Black women as the chroniclers of their own worlds. Specifically, marginality

arises yet again as a seat of productivity by opening up an opportunity for "authorship"

through the alternative perspectives available from the fringes of society. This novel

angle of vision is described by Collins "an outsider-within stance", whereby, a uniquely

Black women's perspective arises from their marginal position within a society that

forever denies them full membership (1991: 11, 12); these social peripheries act as

"initiating agents", enabling Black women's *activism* as well as Black female intellects'

efforts to re-conceptualize and reclaim the knowledge of Black females, ravaged by

subjugation (1991:12-15). Collins (1991) understands Black feminist theory as contributing to discourses of empowerment through its capacity to induct supplementary ways of understanding oppression *and* participate in a dialogue of "the ways of assessing 'truth'" (1991: 222). Ultimately, this feminist articulates the power of this gendered-racialized theory to denote strength both within/against a climate that relishes Black women's domination.

Obstacles Emitting from Within the Black Women's Guild

Despite the positive possibilities embedded in Black women's coalitions it would nonetheless be an oversight to enunciate the external forces of oppression violating their agency without analyzing the harm inflicted on their psyches from within the collective. A number of Black feminist scholars write against the tendency of Black women to work in opposition to one another wherein they reserve their feelings of abhorrence for their doppelgangers in societal oppression, instead of for the institutions sanctioning and perpetuating their subjugation. Barbara Smith (1983) claims that the most abysmal effect of this form of *separatism* amongst Black women is *not* a violence committed against the "enemy", white-dominant society (against which Black women do not have the social power to inflict harm from their subordinate spaces), but rather the isolation from their Black female fellows which ensues (1983: xli)--Smith laments, "I've seen the wreckage of these sister-to-sister rejections far too many times" (1983: xli). The scholar's comments on these conflicts are problematic so far as they presume that *all* Black women consider (or *should* consider) themselves in communion to one another, based on a "necessarily" instinctive and/or naturalized bond; nonetheless Smith's inferences allude

to the viral strength of the dominant structure which enables it to *infiltrate* the minds of the oppressed to the extent that they, destructively, emulate the behaviours of the oppressor.

Referencing early Black feminists thought, I postulate that the strife between Black women is indicative of: 1. internalized racism (whereby the group accepts the impositions of dominant society and thus possesses a duplicate discriminatory structure [hooks 1981: 151]), and 2. the individual capacity to simultaneously be the oppressed *and* the oppressor (hooks 1981: 9; Smith 1983: xliii; Collins 1991: 225)[13]. Black feminist scholars critique the lack of affinity between Black women because they envision a "coalition" amongst these females as a political vehicle for *change* and *activism* (Smith 1983: xxxiii, xliii; Collins 1991:237). Furthermore, feminists locate the *spiritual rehabilitation* of Black women in their unified struggle wherein the dignity of Black womanhood is able to sequentially find affirmation (Teish 1983: 332 ; hooks 1993: 6, 17, 19). Black feminist theory therefore aims to offer an *intrinsically positive platform* to guide women through a psychological emancipation from oppressive forces by informing them of Black females' past and present capacities for self-empowerment; in this regard, it nurtures Black women through the *veneration of their foremothers* (Teish 1983: 332) as it simultaneously equips them with the *tools of resistance* (Collins 1991: 228) and attempts to unite women in these efforts.

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[13] Collins (1991: 225) analyzes this dual *oppressed-oppressor* status, referring to it as the "both/and conceptual stance" wherein excluded peoples can simultaneously occupy both roles since all groups have access to some degree of *penalty* and *privilege*.

What Does Black Feminism in Canada Look Like?

Notably, the majority of Black feminist scholarship analyzes the realities of Black women as they are rendered in an American context. Although Black feminism in Canada borrows from these influential theoretical frameworks--garnering inspiration for its own postulations--there are nevertheless intrinsic differences to how formulas shaped in an American setting perform in a Canadian cultural context which reformates these tools to reflect the unique and variant complexities of Blackness across the northern border. According to Massaquoi (2007) Black feminisms in Canada are at once, the *articulated consciousness* of Black women's comprehension of their peripheral social positioning as well as a *cultural narrative* indicative of their sense of self (2007: 11, 13). For Black feminism to thus be a viable tool for *African-Canadian women* it must be appropriately situated within the gendered and racialized actualities of their experiences. As such, Massaquoi (2007: 10) argues that an adequate Canadian Black feminist theory must simultaneously enunciate the distinctiveness of Black womanhood as lived in the nation while challenging the homogeneity of mainstream feminist frames of reference (read: white normativity). Furthermore, this scholar emphasizes that being a Black woman in Canada involves a constant confrontation with the terms and consequences of her oppression (i.e. sexism, silence, deferred dreams) hence, Black-Canadian feminist discourses necessarily arise from "the specific materiality found in these women's lives" (2007: 7,10), and therefore have to be wholly in touch with these factors.

However, the number of available and/or readily accessible scholastic publications writing from an *exclusively* Black-Canadian feminist framework are scarce. Massaquoi's

"anticipatory" tone in speaking of a Canadian-based theory alludes to its requisite development; the scholar explains the discourse's lack of refinement as a ramification of the *constructed silence* surrounding Black-Canadian culture at large (2007:8-9). Black women in Canada have been obliged to essentialize their identities as solely "ethnic" whereby they join the ranks of other non-white feminisms--obscuring their particularities--as the most effective means of being heard amidst the domineering and homogenizing traditions of white-Canadian feminisms (2007: 9). Wane (2007: 150) suggests that a remedy to this socio-cultural issue and academic dearth is the self-directed penmanship of Black women, who in writing of themselves will begin to fill the holes in research on African-Canadian females. "Doing" Black feminism in Canada is indeed possible, yet as a theory still in formation African-American feminist discussion presently functions as its established point of reference.

Black Religiosity as a Tool of Resistance

An alternative means for combatting subjugation by dominant society, utilized by peoples of African descent, is the refinement of the ideological powers available through religion. As an extension of the project of socio-cultural re-invention, Blacks have traditionally maneuvered the reconceptualization of dominant Euro-American religious models (i.e. Christianity, Judaism) to correlate with the demands and concerns of their own contexts. Documenting the historical patterns of African-American religious traditions Gwendolyn Simmons (2006) suggests that, the ethos most central to the maturation of Black spirituality is the individual *and* collective ambition to override the

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racist-exploitation perpetuated by white hegemonic society--objectives attempted by

deploying the forms of social, ritual, and political action made available through religious

institutions (2006: 172). Simmons (2006) goes on to argue that Blacks manipulate

religion to address "the vagaries of racism and class stratification" therefore, it is by

serving their racialized communities in this way that religion is felt to be a social

institution that is decisively *their own* (2006: 172-3). Religion provides some Black

peoples with a *willfully segregated discursive space* that functions as a stage to articulate

their resistance to overarching systems of subjugation. I would then propose that the

transcendental principles of religion allow these individuals to at least "viscerally

envision" the spiritual realm as a locale where oppressive forces are untenable.

Situating the "Self" through Islam

Islam is one of the prominent spiritual avenues for resistance that have been

embraced by peoples of African descent from their earliest inceptions in North America

(Turner 1997: 24). Robert Dannin (2002) and Karen Leonard (2003) explain the Black

allegiance to Islam through the "functional benefits" it provides for a racial group in

rehabilitation from the psychological abuses inflicted upon them by white hegemonic

forces since the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade; essentially these scholars

emphasize a *practicality* to Islamic membership seeing as, the faith enables Blacks to

establish empowering *religious ties* and *ancestral claims* that are distinctively "dissimilar

from" and thus "alternative to" the normative systems of mainstream culture (Dannin

2002: 235, 263; Leonard 2003: 5). Accordingly, the potential to subvert societal norms

from its peripheries yet again appears to advantageously serve Black communities. I

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postulate that it is the pronounced "otherness" of Islam (relative to dominant, secular society) that engenders its facilitation as a tool of resistance, whereby a *difference* that is incomprehensible to/loathed by white society is conversely *owned* and *utilized* by marginalized Blacks. It is thus conceivable that Blacks in Canada *further refine* their diasporic selves with a Muslim identity. Islam delivers a spiritual path to autonomy that is able to coincide with *what it means* to be a racialized body since the faith itself is relegated to the peripheries of mainstream Western culture and thus, empathically offers strategies for surviving and *thriving* in these spaces. Put in another way, Islam "segments" Blackness by establishing an observable distance from the dominant culture and by graciously accepting difference, in principle.

Nash (2008) writes of Black-American Muslims' assertions of self as a discursive intersection of: "religious belief, religious practice, ethnic identity, and the altering of ancestral relationships" (2008: vii). Although Nash's postulations come from an American framework they nonetheless help to emphasize other scholars' pronouncements on the fluidity between "ethnicity" and "Islam" for African-Canadians. Specifically, Husaini (1990: 9-10) argues that a Muslim identity holds *symbolic meaning* for Black-Canadian which is based on "ethnic patterns" that support the individual's identity by becoming a signifier for their "roots"; while Homa Hoodfar (2003) asserts that for the Black immigrant to Canada the ethno-religious communion made possible through Islam eases the period of adjustment to the new nation by aligning them with the familiarity of a local Muslim community (2003: 13). Approaching these concepts from another angle, I question whether Black-Canadian Muslims' communion with the Islamic community

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partially exemplifies a decided effort to *further accentuate their individuality* by distinguishing themselves from the general Black-African diasporic population. This would mean that Islam functions as a socio-spiritual mechanism that delineates Blacks' personhood by giving them a religious identity that is a novelty even to the racialized collective--thus as Muslims, Black-Canadians can emphasize/heighten their individuality within the already particularized group. In this regard, a diasporic space is "managed" by actively emphasizing the numerous layers to the Canadian "Black consciousness" that are asserted by Foster (1996: 15)--which includes religious allegiances.

Even as a Muslim: Inescapable Marginality

Nevertheless, a paradox is met by Black Muslims who seek a positive agent for autonomy through the anticipated Islamic ethno-religious cohesiveness. Despite Islam's universalistic ideology, scholars have commented on its pervading "ethnic orientation" in Canada (Abu-Laban 1980; 1981: 106; Hogben 1983: 119) and within North America at large (Nash 2008: viii; Takim 2009:198; Smith 1999: 66). Although equality amongst Muslims is advocated within Islamic texts it infrequently transcends into practice (McIrvin Abu-Laban 1991: 7) instead, ethnic variances; national origins; racial characteristics; and *experiences as a peoplehood* are the composite factors sanctioning divisions oppose to solidarities between Muslims in Canada (Haddad 1978: 80).

For African-Canadian Muslims this ethnic separatism frequently punctuates their interactions with the ethnic-majority Muslim population (of Indo-Pakistani, or Arab descent). Diverging ethno-racial traits emerge as a means to invigorate as well as justify the ethnic-majority's anti-Black prejudice in the religious space. As *a racial minority*

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within a minority religion, Black Muslims are often "othered"--exhibiting that shared

religiosity is simply not enough to draw Blacks into the realm of acceptability for Indo-

Pakistani, Arab Muslims who may prize ethnic-cohesion over universal brotherhood; this

in turn conveys the limits to Islam in Canada's own rendition of multiculturalism

(Hogben 1983:116) which regulates the boundaries of "recognized" religious

membership. Interestingly Islam sustains only circumstantial admission to Canada's

national policy of multiculturalism, it does not fit with the criteria of "acceptable

difference" but is *tolerated* as a rule. Regardless of comparable social marginalization and

a unified allegiance to Islam shared by Black and immigrant Muslims, the former are

nevertheless (hypocritically) made to contend with the struggles of *a double peripheral*

status as dictated by these Muslim fellows.

The Racialization of Islam in the Literature

The "othering" of African-Canadians by the dominant Muslim community is a

challenge to the legitimacy of their Islamic identity, as sanctioned by the dividing lines of

race and further perpetuated in academic literature on Islam. Bramadat (2005) writes on

the futility of any attempt to isolate a single "Islamic ethnicity" within Canada due to the

extensive diversity amongst Muslims (i.e. customs, nationality) (2005: 12); even with this

commendable attempt at non-essentialism, Bramadat does not decisively count African-

Canadians amongst these diverse numbers and thus joins the leagues of scholars who also

make this oversight. Scholarly explorations of Islam often materialize as a concentrated

investigation into the realities of South Asian and/or Arab Muslim communities (i.e. *see*

Haideh et. al 2009 and Yousif 1993). This trend substantiates the problematic

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presumption that *specific* racial-ethnic background as well as national origins define an "authentic" Muslim identity. Islam is thus essentialized in this entwinement of race and religion, while Black Muslims are forgotten. Hamdon (2010:16) specifically recognizes the tendency of academic as well as popular literature to use "Arab" and "Muslim" as interchangeable classificatory terms. Non-Arab Muslims must then compete to render their own conceptions of *the nature of a Muslim identity* sensible since the actual multiplicity of Muslim identities are not accommodated in these limited, Arab-favoured, perceptions of Islam; thus emerges the self-conscious query: "What constitutes being a *real* Muslim?" (2010: 46). Joshi (2006) defines this phenomenon as the *racialization of religion*:

> It is at these blurred boundaries between race and religion that we find the racialization of religion…. wherein the fact of an individual's race creates a presumption as to her [or his] religious identity…. racialization results in essentialism…. present[ing] a homogeneous, undifferentiated, and static view of an ethnoreligious community…. whereby a specific religion becomes identified by a direct or indirect reference to a real or imagined ethnic/racial characteristic (2006: 212, 216).

In reference to Joshi, the pairing of "Blackness" with "Islam" therefore appears nonsensical to dominant conjectures on what ethno-racial criteria *produces* a Muslim. African-Canadian Muslims experiences are hence overlooked in mainstream discourses on Islam which exclude their cultural perceptions and individual voices from the dialogue, since they "fail" to accommodate pervading social-constructions of *what a Muslim looks like*. I therefore propose that African-Canadians are themselves made to assume the onus of explaining and/or proving their religious identity to the "real" Muslim community and non-Muslim academy alike.

Conversion to Islam in the West

The Components of Conversion

Haifaa Jawad (2006) writes that there is no word in Arabic to specify

"conversion" seeing that, *Muslim,* in itself denotes a submission to God and an

acceptance of the Prophets/practices therefore a term to define the act of conversion is

redundant to this *primordial testimony* (2006: 155). Nevertheless, in an effort to make

conversion to Islam comprehensible Ali Kose (1996) and Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006)

classify its definitive characteristics. Kose proposes that religious conversion in general is

a composite of three distinguishable experiences: " [1.] increased devotion within the

same religious structure, [2.] a shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious

life, or [3.] a change from one religion to another" (1996: 1); van Nieuwkerk

compartmentalizes the up-take of Islam into two typologies: 1. "Relational conversion"

premised on pre-conversion encounters with Muslims (further divided into, *Instrumental*:

the marriage of a non-Muslim male to a Muslim woman and, *Noninstrumental*: based on

marital relationships/interactions with Muslims), and 2. "Rational conversions" solely

induced by an intellectual search--a method van Nieuwkerk discerns to be more

discursively Islamic (2006: 3). In either scholastic rendering, conversion materializes as a

"re-orientation of the self."

The elements of the conversion process are abundantly discussed in the applicable

literature. Jawad (2006) catalogues the components, she defines as, intrinsic to the stages

of becoming a Muslim, specifying: the compliance with the first pillar of Islam--that is,

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the declaration of faith, "the Shahada"[14], before witnesses; followed by the underlying

assumption that Islamic rules and regulations will be incorporated into the new Muslim's

daily comportment (2006: 155). Beverly T. McCloud (1991) emphasizes the conjoining

spiritual demands of conversion by cross-listing the requirement for converts to study the

Qur'an and the Arabic language, with the necessity of internalizing a connection to the

faith (a consciousness of God) (1991: 152). Moreover, van Nieuwkerk (2006: 4) stresses

the substantial transformation of socio-cultural loyalties seeing that, conversion to Islam

is the manifestation of "new bodily practices" (i.e. fasting, prayer) which in many ways

clash with former worldviews and as such need to be consciously distanced from them.

For Anne Roald (2006), the reconfiguration of a convert's outlook on their world

exemplifies the alteration of *cultural truths* that comprise a necessary aspect of the

convert's socialization into a novel socio-cultural context (2006: 48).

The act of melding into these newly adopted philosophies, post-conversion, is

infrequently understood as a spontaneous occurrence. For one, Larry Poston (1992)

articulates that conversion to Islam is most often preceded by an *active pursuit of*

knowledge (i.e. reading Islamic literature, conversing with Muslims)[15]; this *pupillary*

investigation of Islam linearly extends throughout a procedural process, that at times

preludes with a general "seekership" period where the convert encounters the religion as

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[14] Tariq Ramadan (2004) provides a concise definition of *the Shahada,* describing it as a testament to a Muslim's faith and as the foundation of their identity; it is a pledge ("amana"), binding them to the following avowals: "they are Muslim, believe in God, in its messengers, in the angels, in the revealed Books, in fate, and in the day of judgment…. [t]hey believe that the teachings of Islam come from a Revelation and that they are members of the Islamic community (*umma*)" (2004: 74).

[15] Poston notes that conversion to Islam is not characterized by an "emotional upheaval" nor initiated by "crisis" (that then pivots the religion as the only tenable solution) rather, conversion is the end result of *careful examination* and followed by a *deliberate choice* (1992:169).

one amongst a series of alternative faiths they explore (1992: 170, 172). Lewis Rambo (1993) proposes a rationale for this pre-conversion exploration, asserting that a pivotal condition of conversion is the ability to locate within the chosen faith some degree of continuity with the individual's previous orientation, since a radically divergent spiritual framework would make the religion *intellectually unavailable* (1993: 61). Although Rambo writes from a Judeo-Christian perspective, these conditions usefully present an intellectual system that is compatibly aligned with Islamic preferences for "rational conversion" and additionally indicate that Islam holds some degree of fluidity with Western frames-of-thought--seen in its ability to attract converts from the West.

The trends of conversion to Islam are presented by van Nieuwkerk (2006) as a product of the processes of *modernization* and *individualization* whereby, a socially sanctioned liberty to choose the most appealing religious worldview from the multitude of faiths accessible through the "religious marketplace" emerges (2006: 3). Borrowing from Gabriele Hofman's (1997) premise on the direct link between "agency" and "patterns of conversion" (arising from the process of individualization), van Nieuwkerk (2006) presents Islam as a "player" in this transformed system of religion--it is Islam's *religious goods* that are specifically appealing to the individual convert (2006: 3). Precise ratios of conversion to Islam are, however, not as readily observable, especially when figures are to be determined along the lines of gender seeing that statistics on Muslim populations are either non-existent in the West or fail to distinguish between born Muslims and native converts (van Nieuwkerk 2006: 1). Poston's (1992) limited research into American trends of conversion to Islam does however, locate an average age of conversion within the

range of the late twenties to early thirties. Furthermore, Poston points out that there is a significant intermediary period between the individual's rejection of the religion of their culture and/or upbringing and the later adoption of Islam (1992: 166)[16]--correlating with earlier speculations on the *liminal stage of seekership*.

Individual Incentives Leading to the Adoption of Islam

Undoubtedly there are appealing aspects to Islam that charismatically draw individuals and satisfy their quest for an alternative religious outlook. Reiterated throughout literature on conversion in the West is the significant role interpersonal relationships with other Muslims play for both the initial introduction to Islam and during the vigilant process of pre-conversion investigation. Yvonne Haddad (2006) comments that an interest in Islam often begins as a *general curiosity*, without the slightest intent to convert--mentoring by surrounding Muslims (i.e. neighbors, boyfriends, acquaintances) however, eventually cements Islam as the ultimate avenue for spiritual fulfillment (2006: 27). Returning to Poston (1992), these effectual relations are explicable as, "cult-affective bond[s]", specifically, the *example* and *imitation* of Muslims acts as a positive reinforcement (not a social pressure) for conversion (1992: 172-3, 175-6). Additionally influencing the decision to convert are prevailing notions of Islam's fundamental logic as a "supremely rational faith." In this way, the climactic force propelling conversion is Islam's "reasonable teachings" and "inner logic" which are concluded to be *intellectual evidence* in favour of a religion refreshingly accommodating to modern science as well as enlightened thinking (Haddad 2006: 27-8; Poston 1992: 177).

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[16] Of Poston's twenty-two American participants, the average age for rejecting their prior faith is 16.8 while, the average age for converting to Islam is 29 (1992: 166).

Alternatively, Islam is embraced for the daily discipline it provides for those longing for a structured life organized by prescription (Haddad 2006: 32; Kose 1996: 78); while for others, the faith's values are directly appealing, including: the principles of modesty, conservatism and equality between the sexes (including the respect of a Muslim man for a woman) (Haddad 2006: 34-5)--otherwise Islam is embraced as a practical path to God and as an edict to resist society's "oversecularization" (Kose 1996: 78). Scholars on conversion to Islam also correlate this religious transference with an initial disillusionment with the theological and social precepts of Christianity noting that, converts deem the *perennial doctrines* irrational and/or incomprehensible--specifically the concepts of: holy trinity, incarnation, original sin, and the resurrection of Christ (Takim 2009: 198; Haddad 2006: 30; Poston 1992: 165-6). Christianity is further renounced as a worldview ineptly equipped to meet contemporary social concerns while in juxtaposition, Islam's simplistic demands of the convert and accommodation with modernity make it an appealing choice (Poston 1992: 166).

Why are Black Persons Converting to Islam?

In general terms, conversion is made analogous with a series of positive effects which inspire the formation of identities that are compatible with the new religious ethos. The convert's development of a *Muslim sense of self* is said to be invigorated through the following: 1. the emergence of feelings of "belonging" and "acceptance" in addition to provisions of a personal and cosmic identity (Gillespie 1991: 73, *in Kose 1996: 2-3*); 2. an incorporation into a "ready-made" community that embraces the convert and holds them in esteem (Haddad 2006: 33,40); and 3. the *empowerment* of acquiring "resolution

and clarity of purpose" in the act of conversion itself (2006: 38). Conversion thus transpires as a *revitalizing force* according to these scholastic renderings; even so, these processes/by-products of conversion are not necessarily duplicated within the particular factors, or incentives, that denote the experiences of Black persons who join Islam.

Despite the painful complexities of wielding the dual identities of Black *and* Muslim amidst a dismissive mainstream socio-cultural and religious climate, there nonetheless remain persuasive incentives encouraging Black peoples to affirm allegiance to Islam through conversion. Writing specifically on Black Muslim *women's* conversion experiences, Jane Smith (1999) classifies Islam's allure as arising from 1. Islamic intellectual achievement and/or 2. the opportunities available for personal reform through the religion's call for discipline (1999: 65-6); Dannin (2002) affirms the distinctive factors of Black women's conversion, explaining that their underlying desire to address the various *social* and *economic* "injustices" encroaching on their lives motivates an embrace of Islam--paired with their aspiration to finally attain ethnic-equality through the faith's inclusive universalism (2002: 237). Correspondingly, McCloud (1991) further articulates Black women's insistent hope for *visibility* and *acknowledgement as human beings* through the egalitarian sanctions of Islam--as a contrast to a dominant secular society that perpetuates their *invisibility* (1991: 179-8, 182, 184-5). Here Islam markedly appears to function as a "liberation theology" (Dannin 2002: 237) for Black women since it is bound with their anticipations of finding not only spiritual fulfillment, but also a tool of socio-cultural reconstitution and justice.

Edward Curtis IV (2008) conveys Islam's capacity to satisfy Black Americans' need for: a spiritual exemplar, an autonomous niche, and an identity (2008: 678). Significantly, Islam is purported to have been the religion of the majority of West Africans for centuries prior to their capture and enslavement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (McCloud 1991:1). As such, the faith provides a tangible religious history for Blacks who are able to locate their genealogy in a system that is completely "other" to white hegemonic culture (Leonard 2003: 5; Smith 1999:163). In this regard, Islam is not a "mere" religion for Black converts but, rather functions as a means of connecting to a past that pre-dates their domination as a people; it offers a sense of their "roots" that does not include their subjugation by Eurocentric forces thus, Islam can give Blacks a chance to *imagine* this form of socio-spiritual freedom in a contemporary environment and shape an identity from this worldview.

Moreover, a pre-conversion rejection of Christianity is interpreted by scholars as an additional aspect of Black peoples' efforts to defy oppressive social forces; the Christian faith is understood to be shamefully linked to the slave era as an agent that actively sanctioned the bondage of their ancestors, thus, severing allegiance from Christianity is to break from its racist history (Turner 1997: 59). In this way, conversion to Islam is meaningful in a style that is specific to Black individuals since it speaks to their history--an Afrocentric worldview may in fact initiate their fascination with the religion and cement their eventual decision to convert (van Nieuwkerk 2006:106).

The Perpetual Ostrasization of the Black Convert

Despite the historical evidence that linearly connects Black peoples to Islam, the pervading racial discrimination within the ethnic-majority Muslim communities perpetuates Blacks' marginality and potentially negatively impacts the conversion process. Muslims in the West are a dynamic composite of peoples from an assortment of cultural contexts as such, converts enter Muslim communities organized by ethnic (or "homeland") milieus. Problematic for the convert is the tendency for born Muslims' socio-cultural backgrounds to materialize as "the" standards of *proper Islamic comportment*. Hence, converts' religious behaviours are judged by these often rigidly defined "homeland" renditions of the faith (Haddad 2006: 39; Takim 2009: 54-6), while ethnic divides reappear as an alienating force to bar Black converts from the privileges of equality integral to the *purportedly colour-blind* faith (Takim 2009: 198)

Leonard (2003: 139) claims that Black converts who are met with foreign cultural demands may choose to "surrender" to the authority of immigrants as a desperate attempt to attain some degree of social inclusion. A willful appropriation of South Asian or Arab versions of Islam comes, however, at an uncomfortable cost. Ironically, converts likely forfeit their ties to a distinct Afrocentric identity in the act of conforming to an authority that has little to no grasp of the socio-political issues pertinent to living as a Black individual (Rouse 2004: 42-3; Kamara 2000: 510). Particularly unsettling is that in all probability, these efforts are not rewarded with full admission into the desired religio-cultural community, due to 1. born Muslim immigrants' reluctance to take part in

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Da'wa[17] and assist in converts' learning of Islamic tenets (effectively widening the margin for error and later justifying Indo-Pakistani, Arab Muslims challenge to the legitimacy of Black converts' Muslim status [Smith 1999: 160-3]), and 2. Muslims' hierarchical value of converts which positions Anglo-converts as the desirable, racially "superior" novice (Haddad 2006: 40; Haddad et. al 2006: 58-9; Rouse 2004: 127). Moreover, Smith (1999) argues that this discrimination is felt on a trans-generational scale seeing as, the children of Black converts--although "born" Muslims--are also classified as poorly educated in the principles of Islam by association (1999: 108). Essentially, scholars articulate the perpetual paradox of the Black convert who faces an apparently inescapable subordination within the Muslim community--illustrated in Haddad's (2006: 58) claim that Black converts' expectations and/or aspirations for socio-racial inclusion by the dominant Muslim community is simply *delusional*.

Markedly absent from these scholarly postulations on conversion is the *Canadian* or specifically, the *African-Canadian* perspective. Academic literature consistently manages to overlook Canadian realities within investigations of Western conversion to Islam. Rather than using this scholarly negligence to conclude that Canadian conversion experiences are inconsequential however, I take advantage of this dearth by speaking and writing from within the nation, on the nation--identifying where these scholars' claims diverge, reappear, or multiply in a Canadian setting. It is by analyzing these academic reckonings in the particular space of Canada *and* within the further segmented realm of

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[17] "Da'wa" is an Arabic word that literally means a "call(ing)". Smith (1999: 160) emphasizes that it is a calling "to god, to faith, to Islam"; while Poston (1992) elaborates that "Da'wa" also means "an invitation", or "missionary activity" (1992:3). Essentially, it is an *Islamic missionary activity* that is meant to propagate the faith through the individual and collective effort of Muslims.

the Black-African Muslim community, that in one swift but determined motion I am

declaring that there is indeed *something to be said* about the ties of Blackness and

conversion to Islam within the nation.

Chapter Two
What is it to Embrace Islam?: Writing on African-Canadian Female Converts

Overview

What are the concomitant experiences of being a Black-Canadian Muslim convert woman in the metropolis that is Toronto? How do these women define and negotiate their variable realities amidst three prominent identities that separately *and* collectively writhe with cues for their social marginalization; two being unavoidably visible--*Black, female* while the last is willfully chosen--*Muslim convert*. In investigating the complexities that frame the lives of Black female converts to Islam the ways in which race/ethnicity, gender, and religion continually intersect have proven to be pertinent for comprehending the dynamic methods these convert women employ to both "refine" and "locate" the *self* within (and often, *despite*) larger society. Black-Canadian convert women are by no means a monolithic group and recognizing this fact makes broad based queries such as: "What are the *overall* concerns of these women?" or, "What are Black converts' *primary identifying traits*?" simply senseless—without the scholar's fervent attention to the primacy of individual variation and the reality of diverging worldviews. Prince (2001:9) writes that there is a "kind of Blackness" to be found in 21st century Toronto; to this I would add the deduction that African-Canadian women converting to Islam provide a "particular lens" through which the multifaceted configurations of *this specific type of Blackness* can be delved into--as one part of an innumerable whole.

My intentions here are to figuratively sit amongst these women's reckonings of their worlds. I endeavour to become enraptured by their *truths* as they firmly proclaim: 1. the ways they see themselves as situated in society, 2. the specific identities that they

deem applicable to their understanding of self (as well as the socio-political mechanisms that cause these labels to converge and retract) and finally, 3. how they look upon each other as they interact in these spaces--potentially forming racialized and/or gendered coalitions. Conversion for the participants in this study is both a contemplative process as well as a weighted act that often affirms their spiritual values. Thus, my scholastic efforts are devoted to gaining a measure of insight into the ways African-Canadian women's interpretations of and encounters with their surrounding environment(s) are sculpted by their entrance into the Islamic religion.

My ambitious tasks are partially accomplished by using this chapter on converts to explore: motivations for conversion; initial (and continued) reception within Toronto's ethnically divided Muslim communities; identity formation; and the absence *or* presence of congenial bonds between Black women who occupy similar socio-religious positions. Being both literally and figuratively *guided* by these women's voices I am by no means attempting to "conclude" on how Black female converts in general "live their identities." Rather I aim to participate in Black feminisms' distinct project of clarifying the "specific" truths of *some* Black women's realities; while additionally working with participants to challenge pervading notions of a "singular" Muslim identity (Leonard 2005: 473) and to convey what it can mean to live as a "Black body" in Islam.

Converting

"Why do you practice Islam?; When did you become Muslim?; Why did you decide to convert?" this stream of queries is one convert participants unfailingly meet

early on in the interview process; answers come back contemplative and thorough, so much so that I quickly learn to anticipatorily sit back in my seat, pen held in the ready, in preparation for the sequence of events that make-up each woman's evolutionary tale of conversion--often defined as one of the most significant decisions of her life.

Christian Aversion

"It's like that thing you get when you fall in love" Rachel says wistfully, almost laughing at herself as the words come out and the once distant memories of her initial draw to Islam come whirling back to the forefront of her mind and seemingly, her heart. At age thirty-three Rachel has been Muslim for eleven years with her conversion period smoothly overlapping with the time of her permanent arrival in Canada from her natal America. The sheer *intimacy* of the Islamic religion flows freely throughout Rachel's attestations to the "possibilities of faith" as well as "the stories of Islam" which captivated her interest and appeased her spiritual inclinations. Interwoven with these appreciative reminiscences, however, is the acknowledgment that her steps towards accepting Islam began with walking away from a nonsensical Baptist Christian faith.

Rachel explains that although she is Catholic by infant baptism, her teenage years were devoted to the Evangelical Baptist Christian sect, whose teachings faltered in their logic for her young adult self. It was during a religious exploratory period that an investigation of Islam through independent study (assisted by her Muslim convert sister) concluded with the sense that here, in Islam, "everything clicked." A preliminary dissatisfaction and/or disillusionment with Christianity colludes not only with the scholarly suppositions of Takim (2009: 198); Haddad (2006: 30);

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van Nieuwkerk (2006: 3); and Poston (1992: 165-6) that each predicate conversion on an initial aversion to Christianity followed by a "seekership" period, but this precursory disenchantment also uncannily ruminates with the events marking a number of participants' conversion narratives.

Although convert participants are unanimously of Christian upbringing (of diverging sects), it is amongst those women who classify their previous religious life as "devout" that a preemptive unrest with the faith is squarely located in a childhood doubt or suspicion of Christian ethos. Paulita, a fifty-one year old woman from Panamá, pointedly demarcates the age of seven with the uprising of her quizzical challenge of Catholicism; "A lot of things just didn't make sense to me" she matter-of-factly states, with the hint of a Spanish accent punctuating her sentences. Paulita converted to Islam shortly after her immigration to Canada in 1987 as a 28 year-old divorceé with two young children. Now, as a social worker in Toronto with a burgeoning ambition to earn a Masters' degree in her field, she reflects upon the innocence of her early curiosity and general unease with Christianity--bracketed with memories of chastisement by adults for her questioning and the knowledge that her obedient adherence to the faith was an expectation.

Upon arrival in Canada however, Paulita was struck not only by the ethnic diversity of Torontonians but by the religious variance of the people she met; amongst these religions, fatedly, was Islam. "It was like I had a puzzle in my mind and Islam came and filled the answers" she says thoughtfully, sitting back in the swivelling office chair in the small interview room, where the autumn colours of her "conservative" dress subtly

stand out against the white washed walls. A Muslim man made her early acquaintance

and met her interest in the faith with 1. the suggestion that she study Islam on her own

(free of the influential biases of Muslims) and 2. the truthful accusation that her grasp of

Christian precepts was shamefully superficial. Thus, Paulita explains to me that she

studied both Christianity *and* Islam in an effort to, "be fair to Christianity and be fair to

my own roots." Strikingly poignant for her during this endeavour were the incontestable

similarities appearing between the principle beliefs of either faith, specifically: the idea of

one God, a respect for the virgin Mary, and the acceptance of Jesus--herein Islam was her

religion of choice and allegiance, expertly syncing her spiritual values; conjointly

exemplifying Rambo's (1993:61) speculations on the necessity of a degree of fluidity

between *the chosen* and *the previous* worldviews in religious conversion.

"Any religion that was going to deny the existence of Jesus, I wasn't going to look

at them because, how could you deny Jesus?" Trisha proclaims, almost incredulous at the

very thought of forgoing this prophetic figure. Born in Ethiopia, Trisha grew-up trailing

her UN diplomat father around the globe to finally settle in Toronto in 1989. We meet in

a quiet, yet spacious, Lebanese café. I arrive early and take a table by a rear window; a

location that proves optimal not only for the generous portion of sunlight it happily offers

but more importantly, as a space to allow Trisha to comfortably remove her niqab—safely

beyond the view of male patrons. In a bubbly voice, with an accent impossible to place,

Trisha fluidly relates her scrutiny of Catholicism from an early age. She notes the

tradition of praying to statues as having been a particularly unsettling impediment to a

direct connection to God; additionally, the images themselves failed to represent the Black and Pilipino faces of her Church's congregation.

The dominance of "whiteness" within Catholicism was pointedly unreflective of her surrounding environment: "I'm like, 'Okay, why are all the statues white? Are you telling me they're the only good ones? Because, I know a lot of Black people that are good' " she says heatedly, recalling her unrest. It was while working towards her undergraduate degree, eleven years ago, that Trisha encountered and converted[18] to Islam. Having remained a devout Catholic despite her doubts, she began to read Islamic literature as an effort to dissuade her sister's coincidental interest in Islam. Thus, what began as an avid attempt to prove her sister and Islam "wrong" transfigured into an enrapture with the faith where Trisha felt *enlightened* with its texts and ultimately convinced by its "take home message" of a "one-to-one connection with God", in contrast to Christianity's *association worship*[19].

Intellectual Pursuit

A point made emphatically clear and oft-repeated throughout Aiya's interview is her *logical* and *reductive* approach to Islam, disseminating from her personal worldview which centers on "truth" rather than religion. Sitting at a distance from each other in her

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[18] Trisha also referred to herself as a "revert" (as well as a "convert") explaining that individuals are born with a natural inclination to serve God (Allah) but society molds them otherwise. Thus, she explains that to *become* Muslim is to actually return/revert to your true self. Jane Smith (1999) writes on the rationale behind some converts' embrace of the concept of *reversion* as well as the alternative meaning it may hold for Black converts: "[m]any converts to Islam...refer to the process as "reversion" rather than 'conversion'.... view[ing] their change of religion as a gradual realization of their true faith and identity.... to revert to the basics.... [f]or African Americans, the term *revert* has the added meaning of going back to the faith of their ancestors.... Muslims brought to this country in the slave trade"(Smith 1999:163).

[19] It should be noted that prior to her conversion, Trisha left Catholicism for the born-again Baptist Christian sect. The concepts within Islamic literature created a feeling of uncertainty with her natal denomination thus, the Baptist's attention to *text* rather than *ritual* was initially appealing.

home office, Aiya narrates her fascination with philosophy while earning her first

undergraduate degree--a reminiscence which quickly becomes the story of her adoption

of Islam:

> Because I loved logic and reductive reasoning--and I still do--I decided at age 20 that I was going to live my life in accordance to the *truth*. When I went to university and was so into logic and reductive reasoning, I encountered Islam around the same time and started talking to Muslims. I went to a Black youth conference in Montreal--way back--and it was a national conference and I met Black Muslim youth there who spoke to me about *why* I shouldn't eat pork; at lunch time, and I had all this ham on my plate. It was the last time I ate ham because they had a *logical reason* for why I should not eat pork. Never ate it again. So, what happened was [that] over a period of about a year I would hear different things. I would read articles. I was exposed to information, which was Islamic information. I wasn't seeking it. It was like an article would be passed to me or, I would be bored and I would pick-up a newspaper--whatever. And every single thing that was *completely logically sound* I adopted because, it was my intention to live in accordance with the truth--*if* it was completely logical. Then I ended-up *dressing* like a Muslim, *fasting* during the month of Ramadan, hanging-out with Muslims--and *not* praying and I *wasn't* a Muslim. People would say to me: 'Are you a Muslim, woman?' [laughing], 'Of course not, what would make you think such a thing?', 'Oh because[laughs] you know, you're fasting, you're dressing like a Muslim, you're this, you're this.' I would scoff and I would say, 'I'm *not*, what kind of foolishness would that be?' Then I realized *I am a Muslim* and [with] no intention of being a Muslim. And I always tell Muslims, 'I am A) not a religious person, and B) I am open to change'. I would leave Islam like this [snaps fingers] if there was an argument that was more logically sound. I'd go to that. But because Islam has not faltered in its logic in the 22, maybe 23 years, I've been Muslim--I'm *still*.

Religiosity is not a pertinent factor for Aiya, who describes her religious background as

"secularly-loose Christianity." Rather, her allegiance to the faith is fostered by Islam's

presently incontestable logic and is contingent on its capacity to not err in this attribute.

Fatima, a woman in her early 70s who marks 1952 as the year of her first of two

conversions to Islam, similarly correlates the religion's preliminary enticements with the

draw of *intellect*. "I had *two* conversions" Fatima asserts, readily explaining that the first

was an "academic experience." In an aged yet exuberant voice she recalls being initially

taken with Islam during a tenth grade field trip to the Jami Masjid in Toronto. Fatima

returned to the masjid to study Islam and was propelled into a "different frame of

reference…. [that] resonated with my core being" through an expressly academic appeal;

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she briefly practiced as a Muslim for six months during this initial conversion. These two

women's approaches to the faith acutely align with van Nieuwkerk's (2006: 3) notion of

"rational conversion" as well as Haddad (2006: 27-8) and Poston's (1992: 177)

summations on *intellectual conversion*, all of which are premised on the notion that what

begins as an intellectual search ends with a concession to Islam's seemingly advanced

logic. Nevertheless, participants in this study narratively iterate a *multi-layered patterning*

to the motivations inciting their conversions; although intellectual conclusiveness is in

fact an element intrinsically bound with some women's inclinations to convert it is not an

"independent" variable, rather it interacts with those complex forces that have shaped

participants' pre-conversion worlds and remain pronounced once they are Muslims--most

notable amongst these factors is, *race*.

Racial/Afrocentric Worldview

"Would you have been as open to Islam if it had not been *Black* Muslims you

were talking to [during university; at the Montreal conference]?" I question Aiya, noting

her mention of the racial identity of the Muslims of her indoctrination. "No", she quickly

and firmly states explaining her *Black conscious* mentality at the time, "it had to be

Black. That is the only way I would have listened because, I was only interested in Black

people. It's [Blackness/race] still my strongest interest." For Aiya, her conceptions of race

pivotally intertwine with her understanding of the world and it has been so since her six-

year old self was made to contend with severe racism. The capacity to be receptive to

Islamic thought relied upon its enunciation by individuals who were congruent with her

racialized lens. Islam thus functioned as a suture between Aiya's commitments to "logic"

and "race", therefore providing a definitive way to *place* herself in Toronto society that was akin to her values.

Fatima describes her *second* (and permanent) conversion to Islam as a "political" rather than a "religious" process. At the exciting yet turbulent time of the 1970s' Black power movement, Fatima was a university student in Toronto who felt the subtle rippling effects of the Black-American politics spilling over the Canadian border and invigorating her own "Black consciousness." Yet a *humanistic theory* presented by two African-American "draft-dodgers" (Vietnam), compelled Fatima to re-assess the primacy race held in her worldview seeing that they argued for the *uplifting of humanity* through a "spiritual consciousness" which surpassed race--made viable through Islam. "I felt that Islam had a lot to offer" Fatima proclaims, reflecting upon the politico-racial and spiritual forces inciting her second call to the religion. It is notable that an interest in race politics preceded this second spiritual encounter considering that it made Fatima well-disposed to Islam as an alternative worldview as well as a tenable solution to the socio-racial tensions that were relevant to her experiences and political conceptions at the time.

Reception by the Muslim Community

An Unwelcomed Prejudice

Writing on Toronto's Muslim population in the late 1990s Shaheen Azmi (1997) states, "[i]n Muslim communities, religion is the structuring element of society which tends to integrate and *harmonize all ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic particularities*" (Azmi 1997: 153, my italics). Over a decade later, it is difficult to process this assertion

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by Azmi as anything other than a utopian declaration. The prescription for a harmonious communion amongst all Muslims who are united under one universal religion, does in fact form a basic precept of Islam; however, these principles do not necessarily translate into life as lived for some Black-Canadian convert women. Importantly these women's encounters with definitive ethnic divides within the religious community make Azmi's statement 1. an invalidation of the very real concerns of *disharmony* framing their experiences and 2. an illusion to a Toronto Muslim community that arguably, never truly was.

We sit across from each other in the dimly lit café that is seamlessly wedged into one of the corridor-like streets overflowing with the vibrancy that is Kensington Market-- Toronto's Bohemian village. Tahisia wears a thick cotton headscarf, green with gold embroidery, that swoops behind her neck and falls at length down her back, complemented with dangling earrings--not immediately recognizable as "Muslim" attire so much as "Afrocentric" apparel. "I felt isolated from the community for a *long time*" she explains over her piece of baklava, "I wasn't embraced by the community. I assume because I wasn't part of their culture, their race…. I just didn't feel like I belonged. It wasn't like a nice, warm embrace. It really wasn't." Although seven and a half years have passed since Tahisia's conversion at eighteen, she is able to vividly relate her experiences as a fledgling Muslim within a local religious community that divides along the exclusive lines of ethnicity and culture whereby an Indo-Pakistani majority make her Zimbabwean lineage a painfully obvious minority. "I became so intimately aware of my race and my *difference* when I became Muslim in a way that made me uncomfortable and sad" she

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laments, citing older Muslim women's periodic refusals to return her "Salaam."[20] In the immediacy of these occurrences Tahisia admittedly correlates the rebuffs with her being *unacceptably Black* within a culturally segregated environment, which has consequentially made the mosque an inaccessible space aside from her functionary attendance for prayer.

Tahisia's initial response to encounters with prejudice and isolation was to occupy herself with self-directed study. Presently, however, she looks upon her "differential treatment" with an air of indifference. Underlying this consciously acquired nonchalance is the sorrowful acknowledgment that such experiences have the potential to dissuade other converts to Islam, which reflexively includes the negative effect Tahisia feels discrimination could have had on her own spiritual resolve: "When you're part of a faith and you join, you want and need a community to support you. If you don't have that it's kind of hard to orient yourself in that faith. If the community's shunning you, it can even discourage you from your spiritual growth. It didn't do that for me, thank God, but it could've." Furthermore, Tahisia hypothetically--and wistfully--postulates that had her conversion taken place within a predominantly Black Muslim community, a number of her current reservations would be non-existent. Within this imagined alternative religio-racial context Tahisia presumes that she would be more active in the religious community and that her current self-consciousness would find replacement with a certainty in her spiritual success, amidst an environment of dialogue and intellectual sharing with other Black Muslims.

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[20] An arabic word of welcome, literally meaning "peace" and "greetings."

The social ostracism which frames aspects of Tahisia's conversion experience exhibits the palpable *limits* to individual Muslims' capacity (or willingness) to fulfill the Islamic edict of universal equality and acceptance. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that in erecting social barricades (hewn from the dangerous material of racial/cultural bias) the mosque ethnic-majority are plausibly attempting to *safeguard* their homeland cultures in the immediacy of adjusting to Canada's unfamiliar nationhood; here at the very least, the religious space is ethnically (and thus, recognizably) their own. Describing an earlier version (1970s-80s) of Canada's Muslim community, Zohra Husaini (1990) affirms these patterns of *cultural preservation* and attests to their significance for understanding this minority population: "[a]ll religious or cultural groups and communities tend to develop a variety of means to preserve their cultural and religious values in a new land where these do not form the prevailing norm within public institutional life…. [i]n order to understand the Muslims in the Canadian mosaic, it is necessary to study the[ir] mechanisms for adjustment and cultural preservation" (1990: 17). Yet as Tahisia empirically illustrates, the stringent conservation of culture by Muslim immigrants may come at the detriment of converts who unavoidably fail to conform to the prized milieu.

In a similar vein, Rachel chronicles her first post-conversion encounter with the local[21] Muslim community with a confrontation of open hostility--met by her reactionary feelings of upset and fear. "Did you feel welcomed into the Muslim community at first?" I ask, "I felt welcomed by God" Rachel replies with a short sarcastic laugh; a minimalistic

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[21] Note: this incident occurred in Winnipeg, Manitoba in a mosque that is ethnically Arab. Rachel later came to Toronto during Ramadan where she counts her first "real" mosque experience since she was offered kindness and help by the diverse Muslims she met.

response which glaringly hints at the unfavourable essence of her experience. "I was yelled at by a woman in Arabic" she states, quickly recounting her first attendance at the mosque during which she was accosted by an Arab woman for having unknowingly entered the prayer space leading with the wrong foot. Rachel readily admits her ignorance of both the proper mosque protocol and of Arabic at the time. Nevertheless, the woman's anger rather than offer of assistance made this experience as a newcomer particularly disconcerting. Roald (2006) congruently argues that the convert's disappointment with the "behaviours" as well as "ideas" of born-Muslims is a distinguishable aspect of the conversion period which is a process largely marked by convert's interactions with the born Muslim population (2006: 50); although this confirmatory model conveys the "normativity" of these interpersonal religious tensions it likely provides little by way of comfort for converts upon reflection.

Reverence for Converts

African-Canadian women's indoctrination into Islam does not solely materialize as an event seething with open discrimination however, seeing as a number of participants ardently emphasize their enthusiastic embrace by Toronto's Muslim community--conveying two contrasting extremes. "They treat you like something holy," Paulita states, ruminating on the deferential treatment with which the immigrant/born Muslim population keenly met her conversion. The Muslims Paulita chanced upon were eager to accommodate and teach; she explains this gracious welcome by acknowledging 1. these Muslims' interest in aligning her with their particular school of thought, as well as 2. their predominating belief that converts are in fact "better than them"--because a convert's

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acceptance of Islam is not a result of the *blind following* of a parental religiosity (terms by which they define their own faith) but emerges from a learned decision which will be greatly rewarded by God. Trisha also emphatically describes her feelings of "extreme" acceptance by surrounding Muslims, who were competitively vying to be of service to her. Trisha recognizes this hospitality as emitting from presumptions of converts' *superior spiritual status* based on an understanding that newcomers are "clean of sin" since they are starting life anew with an innocence akin to that of an infant. In exchange for their congeniality Muslims at first requested that Trisha pray for them, believing that as a convert she is in God's favour--an indication of the "unique status" Trisha considers converts to hold within the religious community.

Ethnic Acceptability

I walk the quiet, tree-lined streets of a quaint West Toronto neighbourhood with Sara's address scribbled on a piece of paper clutched in my hand. My knock is met by a formal welcome and the offer of a seat. Sara glides about the kitchen with her dark curly hair tumbling at will; having just returned home from an aerobics class she graciously rushes to prepare tea while still sporting her athletic attire. I soon learn of her ready embrace by the Toronto Muslim community. Yet the rationale she posits for this positive reception distinctly diverges from prior participant and scholarly conclusions. Sara pointedly states,

> My acceptance in the Muslim community from day one--I would like to believe that it's rooted in the values of Islam which constantly promote, explicitly, the idea that we are all one in the eyes of God and race has no place, in *that* construct. I'd like to believe that it's coming from that positive space, but realistically I know that where it's coming from is because I don't *look different* to them [Arab Muslims].

In a tone completely matter-of-fact Sara goes on to postulate that if she physically fit the image of a "typical Black woman" (i.e. dark brown skin), her entrance into the community would have lacked its luster. "People gravitate to what they know," she elaborates by way of explanation, "I didn't represent the 'other' when Muslims looked at me…. I wasn't a capital 'O' *other*…. that gave me an opportunity to be a person first." Sara's ethnic background is of a "racially-mixed composition" so to speak, since her mother is Caucasian-Canadian while her father is African-American, which has resulted in her fair complexion that is easily mistook as an indication of Middle Eastern descent.

In this regard, Sara could not be a discernible threat to the ethnic cohesiveness of the surrounding Arab Muslim community nor a barrier to the project of maintaining their culture, seeing as she conforms to the physical standards of acceptability. Speaking from what is evidently a position of privilege, Sara keenly acknowledges the alternative conversion realities that can emerge from these tendencies of ethnic exclusivity and recognizes the conflict of contending with the *cultural constructs* within the religious sphere[22]--although she is experientially removed from these issues. Race/ethnicity are evidently interlocked with the process of conversion to the extent that it can dictate the form of introductory encounters had with(in) the religious community, whether that be one marked by warmth or struggle.

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[22] To give evidence of her second-hand knowledge of these prejudices Sara mentions the experiences of two female convert friends--one African-American, the other Caucasian-American--and the deprecating racial and/or cultural stereotypes wielded against them; the latter convert is judged for being a cultural product of white America's "immorality" while the former is racially discriminated against for not conforming to physical (i.e. straight hair) and behavioural (i.e. being demure) norms, as expected by her specific religious community.

Forming Their Identities

What is it to be a Muslim woman?

What does being a Muslim *mean* for Black women who must learn to shape their spiritual conception of self in an environment that either painfully enunciates or strategically veils their difference? What does a Muslim identity *feel like* when it is patterned on cultural conceptions of Islamic womanhood that are imported ethnic milieu? Or, conversely, what does a Muslim identity *look like* when it is made to yield to Black women's sense of self, rather than be overshadowed by these cultural dictates? Hamdon (2010) postulates that as an extension of the individual and collective search for belonging, Muslims in Canada are actively partaking in a self-reflexive investigation into the ways "their identities are conceptualized and performed within Muslim communities" (2010: 9). For converts, the definitive *locatedness* and *performance* of their novel spiritual selves must be enacted amidst and/or in counter to the "standardized" notions of *proper* comportment for Muslim women as they emit from the dominant Indo-Pakistani/Arab Muslim communities. Transplanted/(re)constructed culturally contingent moulds for *what a Muslim woman should be* are evidently coupled with a disseminating mission which materializes as the expectation that newcomers will take heed of these regulated principles, as a number of participants' experiences convey.

Tahisia describes her early instruction in the faith by immigrant Muslims as endeavours shrouded in the outward appearances of goodwill yet seething with *overtones of condescension* and ringing with *undertones of doubt*, meant to challenge both her grasp of basic precepts as well as her "level of religiosity." Such encounters illustrate the

unspoken *measure of "Muslimness"* which figuratively place the legitimacy of the

convert's spiritual membership on trial. Furthermore, it is immigrant Muslims' *ethnic*

positioning as the dominant group that "authenticates" their authority to structure the

criteria for these judgments. Despite the inconsistencies Tahisia perceives in the conduct

of these Muslims however, she still strives to align her religious practice with dominant

conceptions of *ideal Islamic femaleness*. "I try to conform to what it is to be a Muslim

woman" she plainly states, enumerating on the ways by which this task is accomplished

by citing: the covering of her hair, the expressions she allows to be composed on her face

when in public, and the modesty of her dress. While Tahisia pointedly declares that these

diligent attentions to her general conduct are foremost "for the sake of God," there is also

a consciousness that her actions are "watched" by those around her (Muslim and non-

Muslim alike), making it necessary to maintain a reputable spiritual image. In recognition

of these gendered socio-ethnic-religious realities, Sara declares that there is in fact a

pervasive expectation of Muslim women's *external passivity*—which she deems to emit

from the "cultural constructs and expectations" of the religious community. Nonetheless,

Sara poignantly affirms that this meek conduct is paired with Muslim women's "internal

strength."

Alternatively, there are those women who meet dominant constructs of "proper"

religiosity with a direct or indirect contestation of these valuations. Rachel similarly notes

a frustrating teacher-pupil dynamic in her relations with the Arab Muslim community.

Notably, she describes her confrontation with these "unequal" social structures as

summoning a compulsion to *prove* that she is "just as Muslim" and "knows as much" as

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her self-appointed instructors. Furthermore, Rachel subverts the criteria for authentic

Muslim status by functionally invoking her husband's Arab ancestry as a tool; seeing that

an Arab identity classifies Rachel's husband as a "real Muslim" within their community,

she is able to *legitimize* her own religious status by association--that is, extending the

limits of the religio-ethnic standards so that they (as a rule) envelope her as well, despite

her Blackness.

The self-constructed "brackets" of Aiya's Muslim identity involve a definitive

differentiation between the edicts particular to *culture* and *Islam*, which is a defensive by-

product of her confrontation with the crippling repercussions of culture's commanding

role in a spiritual space. During the infancy of her Islamic allegiance Indo-Pakistani and

Lebanese Muslims counseled that "a good Muslim woman": 1. wears black, 2. speaks

softly, and 3. defers to her husband in the public sphere. To recognize these standards as

cultural modifications was crucial to Aiya's project of salvaging her "individual identity"

which she felt to be destructively smothered by values so fundamentally contradictory to

her own sense of selfhood.

Being Black. Being Muslim. Being a Black Muslim.

"I started to say 'I am Black' when I became Muslim because they [Canadian

public] can't see my hair, all they can see is my skin colour and I am a Black Muslim"

Paulita asserts, describing the evolution of her ethno-racial identity within a Canadian

context. "It's only when I came to Canada that I had to think: 'What am I?' It's not

enough to say I'm from Panama, I'm Hispanic, and I speak Spanish." The dual symbols

for Paulita's *difference* (that is, 1. dark skin and 2. the hijab) had to be compartmentalized

and packaged into terminology compatible with Canadians' capacity to comprehend visible diversity. According to the public majority it is unfathomable that Paulita's dark brown skin is indicative of anything other than African ancestry, especially--as she explains--since her features fail to "fit" stereotypical images of the Hispanic, or Latina woman. Documenting the patterns of ethnicity among Muslim immigrants to Canada in the late 1970s Haddad (1978) proclaims, "many immigrants become aware of their ethnic identity only when it is ascribed to them by Canadian society" (1978: 82). Race emerged as a construct for Paulita solely at the insistence of a national climate of *racial registry*. The terms "ethnicity" and "person of colour" were absent from her Panamanian worldview where a racialized lens is nonsensical if to gaze into a stranger's face is to be met by features similar to her own. Recognizing skin colour as the only readily available signifier of her ethnicity for a Canadian public, Paulita embraces the religio-racial label "Black Muslim": "I realized I look African so I identify now as a Muslim-Afro-Hispanic…. I'm African because of my skin colour…. I am a shade of them" she conclusively states. In this regard, *Blackness* is a concomitant factor of Paulita's religious conversion in Canada, conveying it to be an identity that can at once be: ascribed, learned, and is ultimately malleable.

For Tahisia, figuring her life as a Muslim involves a perpetual struggle with the multiple aspects of herself--a process that unequivocally centers on a play between her "inseparable" racial and religious identities. Although Tahisia's religious self has viscerally taken somewhat more of a prominent position since conversion, her connection to a sense of Blackness is still uncontestably salient. Weaving through her racialized

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identity is the act of *going back*, "to what I am, what looks like me" she details. Noting the reinvigoration of her "race-centric" mentality post-conversion Tahisia expresses that it is through Blackness that she is able to locate, "a sense of belonging…. speak[ing] to a core part of myself." In this regard, the ties that draw Tahisia's racialized and spiritual selves into being are interactive, if not co-dependent. However, Toronto's meager and widely dispersed African-Canadian Muslim population is felt to lack "a strong Black identity" hence, Tahisia suggests that in order to fully "reconnect with whatever Canadian Black identity is" she must search beyond the boundaries of religion and traverse the well-established non-Muslim Black community. Thus, despite a commitment to ensure her multiple identities continue to compatibly frame her vision of the world there is the recognition that within a Canadian context "race" and "religion" may by necessity be forced to compete rather than harmoniously converge.

Conversely, Rachel's place in the Islamic world is framed by an avid effort to maintain her racial identity in the midst of a foreign mosque culture, particularly paramount since Arab influences bracket numerous aspects of her life (i.e. involvement in the Arab Muslim community, her Arab in-laws, and her youngest daughter who looks as though she is solely of Arab descent). "I'm fighting to hang onto my Black identity," she states, explaining that while born Muslims *conceive their identities* inside of/within relation to the faith, her socialization has been through other avenues which includes race as an important agent. Thus, Rachel broadly conceives that to maintain a firm grip on her racialized sense of selfhood is part of the convert's ardent project to "hold onto who you are"; "You are changing your religion, *not your identity* when you convert" she declares

in summary. Self-reflexively Rachel recognizes that, "there is less of a need to claim who you are before conversion" rather, self-affirmation has shifted to the forefront of concern as the dissipation of her racial identity appears as a potential reality--especially amidst the surrounding Muslim community's less than enthusiastic response to her efforts to retain this aspect of her pre-Muslim self. Ultimately Rachel considers 1. Blackness, 2. being a woman, and 3. religion (particularly membership in a persecuted, minority religion) as three factors that conjointly affect the ways in which she interacts with/in the world, none of which can be sacrificed to the other but as a unity form the basic and uncompromising components of her reality.

Maneuvers to claim and/or safeguard racial identity do not materialize as applicable post-conversion aspirations for all Black convert women; such labours are notably not germane for converts who wholly embrace a Muslim identity in a concentrated *opposition* to racialized labels. Hoodfar et. al (2005) estimate that as a concession to their conservative numbers (as a minority religion within Canada), Muslims are learning to "cross ethnic boundaries" and in doing so are naming themselves as "Muslim" above all other identifying factors (2005: 134). Sara's choice to chiefly identify as Muslim--before any other identity variable--partially permeates from the personal concession that ethnic divides do not have a place in her Islam. However, neatly woven into the fabric of this outlook is her decided *rejection of race as a construct*: "I don't relate very strongly to race. It's a conscious preference and a choice…. I don't feel that race is a valid construct. I don't feel that it tells you a lot…. about the person. I think it only tells you the *colour* of my skin, the *likely* colour of my mother's skin, and the *likely*

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colour of my father's skin. I don't feel that it expresses a lot about who I am or my experiences of life," she self-assuredly declares with eloquence. Sara locates the origins of her non-racialized view in 1. racially-charged experiences in early life where she felt compelled to definitively "choose" an identity despite being of mixed ancestry, and 2. the need to dissociate from "the often negative labels" that come with being racialized. "Your identity should be of your own making" Sara defiantly testifies, going on to describe that her placement into racial categories functions only as an opportunity to challenge these constructs from within the undesired positionality. Hence, racial identity takes form as a reductive classificatory scheme in Sara's worldview rather than as an empowering project of self-naming. Ultimately she attests that Islam's universal edict creates the opportunity for a "post-racial identity" where being solely *Muslim* is a sufficient claim of selfhood.

A Black Convert "Sisterhood"?

Canadian, of African ancestry, convert, Muslim, female: these are the basic variables comprising the identities of participants--alternatively converging and colliding with the labels they individually employ to *locate themselves* in society. I therefore question if to share these elementary points of socio-religious reference has the potential to generate the capacity--or more so, *the desire*--to build interpersonal coalitions. If so, I further ask whether these ties are motivated by the "project of positionality" (Walcott 2003: 140) wherein, the chance to collaborate through similar experiences and contexts allows Black-Canadian convert women to assert their *place(s)* in Islam; thus creating and

regulating their own religious space, outside of the "othering" tendencies of a

predominantly Indo-Pakistani and Arab Muslim community.

Convert Culture

> There was a year [chuckles softly], 1990, four Black Muslim Shi'a convert women had babies in 1990. Our babies were born between January and April. *All* the babies were born in that four month period and all those babies were raised together. They would lie there and sleep…. while we were doing our Quran reading or having our meals together because, we were fasting and breaking fast together. And those babies are now *twenty* [years old], right? So those points of connection, those things, weave people's lives together.

Aiya's reminiscence speaks to the affinities she feels to exist between herself and other

Black convert women arising from the connections *similar histories* procure. There is a

fluidity felt in her interactions with women with whom she is able to "check so many of

the same boxes" due to their comparable socio-religious and racial status. Moreover, Aiya

emphasizes that by sharing in the experience of conversion a platform is opened-up for

certain kinds of questions to be posed: "we have that connection of saying: how was it

when you first accepted Islam? how did your family feel about you being Muslim

(because we come from non-Muslim families, right?), how does your mother feel about

you wearing the scarf (because Black women want your hair to show)?" A forum thus

emerges patterned on these women's intersecting conversion realities which also

acknowledges the issues particular to reconciling their adopted religion with the

expectations and culture of Blackness.

A pervading sentiment among the convert women of this study is that there is an

unspoken "understanding" that is, an underlying sense of *relation* and a privilege of

acceptance with other Black convert women--based on the compilation of race, religious

status, as well as the "culture of their socialization." These women situate their similitude

in: the demands made on converts by the religious community (i.e. Rachel suggests the pressure to veil and to marry), or (as Fatima and Paulita indicate) in the uncomfortable encounters with unaccepting and/or uncomprehending non-Muslim family. Furthermore, without the culturally predicated Islam of the immigrant/born Muslim communities these women speak of forming their own culture--a "convert culture" so to speak; at once computing with Canadian frames of social reference while offering a basic *equality* that allows some to feel "more Muslim" in a way unavailable without this kinship. Paulita indicatively speaks of the production of culture as a basic premise of convert life: "As a convert you are free to create your own ways, and we have in many ways…. as a convert we don't really have a *culture per se* as [born] Muslims [do], so you kind of develop your own ways." Hence, without an established and relegated "cultural Islam" the perception here is that converts wield the capacity to envision and engineer these unspecified dynamics themselves.

Roald (2006) writes on the construction of culture by converts as a hybrid between new religious edict and pre-conversion cultural references: "new Muslims *of similar cultural backgrounds* mix and create a merged plausibility structure built mainly on the Islamic sources, but mixed with the new Muslims' pre-conversion cultural context….[thus] it is possible for new views and ideas to emerge, built on deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural concepts both from majority society and Muslim cultures" (2006: 51, my italics). Therefore, it can be surmised that within this context African-Canadian convert women are able to *decide the precepts of their own legitimacy* by fusing elements which are compatible with the ways they interact with/make sense of their past

and present socio-religious lives. Arguably, the dominant Muslim community's habitual cultural segregation thus unwittingly bestows an operative means for Black Muslim convert women to enact a form of religious agency.

'Affinity' Does not Spell 'Monolithic'

Despite the palpable similitude in the socio-religious "lens" through which Black-Canadian convert women view their worlds, some participants pointedly (and importantly) highlight the fact that, having sites of connection does not translate into their homogeneity of experience nor values. Although Sara concedes that there can be a "common culture" amongst converts she also asserts that national origins, divergent up-bringing, and previous religious leanings shape relationships. Put in another way: being a "convert" does not in and of itself create strong interpersonal ties seeing as every woman "brings their own baggage and their own experiences to the table." In a similar vein, Aiya enunciates that without *a culture of connection* [national, social] and if linguistic barriers impede a "language of connection," there are *gaps* in her relations with other Black convert women--as by-products of a discernable "disconnect." Central to Aiya's worldview is an awareness of the complexities of race therefore, she clearly defines any Black convert woman's rejection of racial constructs as indicative of "different experiences in consciousness" and thus a further impediment to their possible connection. She expressly states:

> I know some of them [Black convert women] who are not race conscious. I know some of them who have even brought that whole colonization of thought and philosophy into their lives as Muslims. They still feel like: 'Gee, too bad we're Black', 'Shucks, too bad my skin's *this* colour.' It's a personality thing, I guess. It's a consciousness.... there are points of connection but, I would never say that my experiences are aligned with another Black Muslim convert female—that's not true. Everyone has their own reason for *coming in,* everybody has their own reason for *staying in*, and everybody has their *own expression while they're in.*

Hence, it is a sloppy move of reductive analysis to conceive of African-Canadian Muslim convert women's affinities in a manner that obscures or belies their uncontestable differences. Referencing Chandra Mohanty, Hamdon (2010) relays the errors of presuming the existence of a *natural community* amongst marginalized women: "the presumption of a 'universal sisterhood'…. obscures how women experience being women…. [rather] it is their locatedness that 'trace[s] an analytic and political space' and gives rise to common action and common cause" (2010: 58). Although there are points *of relation* between converts this does not equate to them "naturally" living *in relation* to one another; common goals do not supplant their individuality. We are products of our cultural environments and social surroundings therefore, while shared religiosity/status may minimize these barriers of difference, it does not all together do away with them.

Chapter 3
"Life-long" African-Canadian Muslim Women &
the (Dis)similar Experiences of Black Convert Women

Overview

What worldviews arise when the task of negotiating a religious and racial identity is set at inception? How does one born into the socially constructed, and culturally contingent categories: "Black", "Muslim", and "female" re-shape these basic *given* variables so that they are compatible with her own sense of self? In conjunction with Bramadat's (2005) assertion that immigrants "re-create" rather than "import" religion in Canada, Hoodfar et. al (2005:134) attest to the Muslim community's unrivalled creative capacity to *re-think* and *reformat* its religiosity. I want to explore this hypothesis from *the particular* and aim to do so by uncovering the ways six African-Canadian young Muslim women--whose lives in Canada have *always* included this project of re-thinking--come to understand themselves.

Focusing this investigation on life-long[23] Black Muslim women is an in-depth analysis of three variables which (in varying degrees) mediate *specific conceptions of selfhood*: 1. "generational differences" within a familial Islam; 2. the influences of Canadian socialization; and, 3. encounters with African-Canadian convert women--which *impede* or *reinforce* this self-reflexive project. I aim to uncover the struggles, interactions, and state-of-mind which weave together to pattern these women's realities, as defined by their multiple identities and loyalties. Occupying an alternative religious *positionality*

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[23] "Life-long" is a term coined by Kose (1996) in his study of converts to Islam, to describe Muslims born into the faith.

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compared to African-Canadian converts, the experiences of life-long Muslim women offer insight into the *other side* of what it is to live as a "Black body" in Islam. Hence, the overall objective of this chapter is to imprint on the reader's mind a map which marks the evolution of these women's autonomous affirmations of self.

Generational Shifts with the Individual Construction of a Muslim Identity

It is within an urban, Canadian, secular setting that born Muslim participants learn to refine the role religion plays in their lives--that is, to conceive a self-conscious approach to Islam which is compatible with how they place themselves in their world(s). McIrvin Abu-Laban (1991:7) emphasizes that *religion* and *family* "mutually reinforce one another" in Muslim-Canadian immigrant households and thus jointly determine the shape of the individual's affirmed identity. The narratives of life-long Muslim-Canadian women however, convey that even within the family there are divergent perspectives on what criteria marks a definitive *Muslim identity*, illustrating that contrasting notions of an *ideal religiosity* exist amongst generations. Moreover, the manners by which this group of participants navigate between the Islam(s) of the home and their independent interpretations of "Muslimness" reveal the pressures impacting a younger generation of Black-Canadian Muslims.

A Familial Disconnect

As Eby briskly walks into the bustling café my eyes are immediately drawn to her immense mane of dark wavy hair, with a beret expertly balanced on top. We sit at a high wooden table colourfully littered with independent art and music newsprints. A whirl-

wind of delicious aromas waft in the air; so poignant are these buttery odours that one can almost taste the fresh cakes and pies without so much as lifting that bill from your wallet. Our conversation quickly becomes boisterous and rippling with laughter as Eby indulgently offers me temporary access into her experiences. The tape recorder is easily forgotten, on my end, as our dialogue relaxes into the rhythms of a heart-to-heart between girlfriends. It's funny--our comfort with each other begins with being scared indoors from the patio by a dangerously pesky hornet.

 "I think my sense of self is most often in a crisis of sorts," Eby says with a sigh. "Islam was pounded into my head…. I feel as if I didn't get a chance to decide. It wasn't necessarily my choice, I just went *with the flow*." Born in Somalia, Eby has resided in a North-East suburb of Toronto since the age of three, growing-up in an "Islamic orthodox" household wherein religiosity is stringently maintained by her "conservative" mother. In an effort to make sense of the Islam of her childhood Eby hypothesizes that the trauma of immigration to Canada led to an "identity crisis" for her mother who "learned religiosity" as a defensive mechanism while adjusting to an alien nation/culture. Eby's speculations as well as her mother's experience directly correlates with Hoodfar et. al's (2003:13) claim that Somalians often *emphasize their membership to the local Muslim community as a way of adjusting to a new life post-immigration* to Canada. Now twenty-two years old, Eby is attempting to reconfigure her faith so that it accords with the ways she wishes to interact with her environment, a process that centrally includes a deviation from the Islam of her upbringing. Thus, there is a notable *disconnect* in the parent-child perceptions of the faith sprouting from their diverging pressures and experiences.

Yet Eby expressly states that despite these tensions Islam is paramount to her self-proclaimed identity: "My faith is very important [to me], it's essentially wrapped up in *the essence* of who I am." Adopting the tone of one delivering a well thought-out theory she explains that a Somalian's denial of Islam is akin to "a rejection of a part of themselves" since she feels that Islam is "ingrained" in their very ethnic-cultural fabric-- which of course, includes her own. Despite the significant place Islam occupies in Eby's sense of self, she is regretful that its centrality comes from outside of herself: "I didn't get a chance to decide what I wanted…. I felt cheated out of discovering who I really was," she declares with feeling; the fact that her earliest practice of Islam was not based on a conscious, sincere spirituality but rather "mimed" behaviour is thus felt to have inhibited a clear sense of her religious self.

Notably, the hijab symbolizes the Islam of both her *past* and *future* as she initially donned the veil without self-reflection and will again take it up once sure of her own religiosity. In the midst of these declarations a wisp of Eby's hair falls across her cheek, as if on cue; now "unveiled" Eby asserts that she continues to *hold the same beliefs* of her upbringing, but is presently indulging in a project of "rediscovering them in a whole new way." For this particular African-Canadian born Muslim woman, determining her relationship to Islam through an autonomously defined process means being sure of the *genuineness* of her religiosity. Sophie Gilliat-Ray's (1998) study on *self-definition* and *positionality* amongst young Muslims living in the West, asks: "In view of the multicultural and religiously diverse society in which they live, *how are young Muslims affirming, altering, or abandoning their identity*?"(1998: 347, my italics). Eby's concerns

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enunciate the delicate terrain of vying between the religious beliefs prescribed at infancy and the individualism of Canadian-secular society--without compromising her values en route to selfhood; correlating with Sheila McDonough's (2003:119) declaration that, "[i]n opting to wear the hijab, or not, Muslim women are deciding how to relate the values they perceive in their traditional heritages to the life situations in which they currently find themselves."

For Nida, any project of "locating" or "affirming" an independent religious identity is absent from her present way of life. Contrasting experiences in her birthplace Windsor, Ontario with life in the Greater Toronto Area, Nida explains that she has allowed Islam to simply "fade into the background" within the latter setting; this is because she perceives Toronto--as a socio-cultural space where a dominant white-Christian presence is explicitly, and uncomfortably felt--to be less hospitable to her "open" expressions of a minority faith. Nida matter-of-factly relates that during high school--a period she correlates with learning to "think for yourself"--she consciously chose to suppress her outward show of religiosity. Hence, her present ties to Islam are largely "technical" seeing as they are held together solely by familial relations: "I call myself a Muslim because my parents are Muslim but, I don't think I'm *really that religious* myself. I don't really do all the things that a Muslim woman *should* do [i.e. 1. praying and 2. wearing the hijab]. So, it's just kind of a label."

Slouching slightly in her seat wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt and with bold red streaks running through her hair, Nida looks every bit the eighteen year old that she is (that is, in a Western-secular cultural sense). As we converse, a charming grin comes

readily to this woman's face whose main point of reference is high school, having graduated only a few months prior to this interview. "I went to a *pure* European Catholic high school" she declares by way of introducing her speculations that she *would probably be a stronger Muslim* if she had had Muslim peers since they would have offered an alternative/positive religious influence. To this conviction I add my own supposition that the religious and ethnic diversity offered by Muslim classmates would have likely provided some degree of relief from the exoticization Nida felt within a white-majority setting; especially considering that because her ethno-racial difference was treated by white peers as a "fascinating" show of her otherness*,* this prefaced Nida's intuition that being openly Muslim would have made her *too much of an anomaly* and thus unacceptable.

Rather*,* in recognition of an *unvoiced Islamophobia[24]* within a setting of *religio-ethnic uniformity* it became "easier to lay-low" about her Muslim identity--consequentially instigating the eventual collapse of her religious self. McIrvin Abu-Laban's (1991:21) study of Muslim immigrant families in North America provides insight (though dated) into religious identity conundrums such as Nida's: "growing up in a predominantly Christian environment with non-Muslim peers….[and] the lack of an Islamic support network, has tended to produce a second generation more loosely identified as Muslim." Hence, without the social forces to actively encourage and reinforce her faith in her primary social spheres, a Muslim identity is defensively unattached from Nida's current worldview.

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[24] Nida offers the widespread stereotype of "Muslims as terrorist" to convey her reservations here.

Consciously Muslim--a Familial Anomaly

> I started to become *consciously Muslim* after 9/11. I mean, asking questions. We [family] were always *culturally* Muslim. But there was a point…. where I actually decided: 'okay, this is my path'. There's a point where you have to *make a choice*--whether you live on the edge of *Muslim*. I decided to *be completely Muslim.*

Falah relays that following her family's immigration from Nigeria in 1998, her parents' yearning for "community" as well as a sense of "familiarity" meant that they were willing to befriend Nigerians in Canada along the lines of *nationality* oppose to *religion.* Islam therefore acquired a less prominent role in the newly adopted environment and Falah had little motivation nor cause to assert her Muslim self in this context. Nonetheless, she can vividly recall one instance of casually informing her fifth grade classmates of her faith only to be met by their immediate discomfort. "It was kind of like I had told them I was the boogey monster" she says with a chuckle, recalling what would come to be a pivotal turning point in her religiosity. Falah's "difference" reflected back to her upon the faces of her white peers who gaped in shock. This encounter sparked her initial recognition that there are aspects of herself that are distinctly "other" and thus demand *consideration*; the events of 9/11 jolted this introspection into full force.

Writing on the effects of September 11th, 2001 on the Canadian-Muslim communities, Khan (2009:31) and Leonard (2005:473) detail a fortified faith in those Muslims who learnt to *scrutinize* and *clarify* their identities while under the harsh gaze of a non-Muslim public. Falah's decisive approach to her Muslim identity is often narrated in the language of a religious "awakening" of sorts since she began to both *own* and to *self-define* by her Muslim identity following the traumatic event; she now pointedly

declares: "the primary way I identify myself is as a Muslim," reflecting the upsurge of religiosity in a younger Canadian generation.

We sit crammed into a corner of the bakery and are so close together that I fleetingly consider that our foreheads threaten to touch; although unintentional this pose becomes necessary to ensure that I catch every nuance in the voice of this soft spoken woman, amidst the insistent buzz of the room. I notice that fellow patrons furtively look-up from their hot frothy drinks to quizzically stare at Falah's conspicuous dress. Wearing a black hijab paired with a long black skirt, Falah appears unconcerned with the attention but continues to relate her experiences in a tone which conveys that each word is coming from a place of serious reflection. She explains that donning the hijab acted as the most direct means to her assertions of self seeing as, this outward display of Islamic allegiance both *focused* and *reinforced* her "religious commitment." Notably, this woman's experiences weave together scholarly suppositions on the forces igniting 1. faith-based identity formation in general and 2. Muslim-Canadian identity in particular.

In an investigation of the Muslim diaspora in Canada Haideh et. al (2009) includes Lori Peek's stages of "religious identity development", which are as follows: "1. Religion as *ascribed identity*, 2. Religion as *chosen identity*, and 3. Religion as *declared identity, in response to a crisis*"(2009:90). In its reactionary sense Falah's religious consciousness categorically correlates with the third stage of Peek's theory. Yet on a deeper level, her mindful embrace of Islam (and by extension, the hijab) exemplifies a type of mechanism scholars recognize young born Muslim-Canadians to be utilizing in the process of conceiving, locating, and defining the self. For Falah these formative exploits take shape

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by thoughtfully enwrapping herself in Islamic practice and allowing its corresponding values to act as the guide to her interactions with a non-Muslim society. According to Reem Meshal (2003:98) Muslim women in Canada are decidedly acquiring the hijab in recognition of its *symbolic* benefits. That is, taking advantage of its high visibility to proclaim *ideological* cues for religious community and establish "a firm sense of [individual] identity"---including "defining their sense of self in reaction to, or against, societal currents" (2003: 98,102), all of which Falah is taking advantage.

An outcome of Falah's purposeful uptake of Islam is its transformative effects on her parents' religiosity which has increased by association. Paralleling her invigorated religious practice with the "fervour of a convert" Falah explains that in witnessing the extent of her *zeal*, her mother and father have been "shaken into thinking" about their own Islam. Likely as a direct result of her socialization within Canada, there is a self-assurance in Falah's assertions of faith; specifically, I propose that because her formative years have been spent in a socio-cultural setting wherein anti-Islamic sentiment is simply made *to appear as normative*, affirming her Islam in this environment may seem less oppressive than it would for persons from an divergent, Muslim-majority context. By extension this "confidence" appears to lend a space for her parents to reclaim their faith, once willfully hidden in a desperate attempt to locate themselves as immigrants in an *(anti-Islamic) white supremacist society*. Falah conclusively states, "I think their [parents'] sense of belonging to the [Toronto] Muslim community has *increased* with mine"--wherein her religiosity acts as an influential force on the worldview of this older generation of Muslims

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A Middle Ground between Familial Islam and an Independent Identity

Jameerah's experiences illustrate an almost seamless suture of the dual forms of Islamic practice simultaneously vying for her commitment; instead of choosing one, Jameerah lives her realities from the middle--synchronizing 1. an appreciation of the Islam of her upbringing with 2. the autonomous values and perceptions that are foremost in her project of self-construction. "Basically your religion is for your parents when you are a kid," Jameerah remarks, elaborating that she imagines *doing what your are told* to style the undeveloped spirituality of children in *any* religious household. As her views matured, however, Jameerah began to recognize the necessity of situating herself *in the world* and in *Islam* in a manner that is both independently meaningful and compatible with her burgeoning sense of selfhood: "I had to start deciding for myself *why I am doing what I am doing* [practicing Islam]. So…. I started *thinking* and *searching* and I felt that I wanted this [Islam] *for myself* because, of what it *represents:* the morals, the total *serenity,* and *power*, and *almighty* of one Creator kind of spoke to me." Jameerah relates the blossom of her spiritual independence between small bites of her vanilla cake and sips of water; a lingering cold has made her voice raspy, yet this lends a certain melodious huskiness to her words that grips my attention.

Born and raised in Toronto by race-conscious Muslim-Canadian convert parents, Jameerah marks her individual commitment to Islam with a initial unrest with the injustices wielded against Black peoples on a contemporary global scale which eventually produced her conviction that Islam is *the solution* to these innumerable socio-economic-racial brutalities. My pen moves furiously across the page of my open notebook as I try

to capture a clear picture of this woman's religio-racial epiphany--a humbling feat

considering that I have been granted one precious hour of access into a process that has

taken half of her life to define. With a furrowed brow she states:

> When I was growing-up and I was reading about slavery and I was looking at our people--Black people--in our *current world* (I'm not *even* talking about *historically*). I just think that this element of *justice* that I find in Islam [pause] is what *keeps me bound to it*…. to *me* the answer to injustice (men's domination over other men, or what I like to call "mental slavery" or "neo-slavery") would be answered through submission to God.

To Jameerah's racialized and religious self/ves, the oppression of Black peoples is

nonsensical to her conceptions of morality and humanity. Thus, I propose that in order to

mentally digest these traumas and to *reconcile their very existence* with her values, Islam

is deductively taken-up by this woman as a viable "spiritual tool" to end the plight of

Blacks. Hence, connecting with a *pan-Black identity* through a *critical race awareness* is

instrumental to a personally meaningful Islam since it provides a vehicle to render her

world(s) commensurable.

Life-long Muslim Women and their Interactions with Black Converts to Islam

As members of a religion that readily seeks converts, African-Canadian born

Muslim women's experiences in the Toronto Muslim community are often coupled with

their interactions with those who have joined Islam in their adulthood. The perceptions of

Black convert women held by life-long Muslim participants discernibly reflects the

standards by which this group of interviewees 1. assess their own religiosity, and in turn

2. how they feel it to be judged in their religious communities. The ways in which

converts' religious comportment are understood to *align with* or *diverge from* born

Muslim women's individual notions of Islamic practice, can determine the dynamics of

these relations. Generally, these interactions are largely dependent upon whether Black

female converts are felt to *sympathize with* the "particular struggles" plaguing young,

Black, life-long women's negotiation of a Muslim identity in a secular-cultural space.

Admiration for the Conviction of Converts by Comparison

Patterning life-long participants' reflections on Black converts is an underlying

respect for and *fascination with* these women's religious fortitude. Converts to Islam

relinquish a former way of life that these born Muslim women have *never known*. As

such, the convert's decided and absolute commitment to a spiritual belief over and against

secular-cultural norms are expounded on with obvious awe by born Muslim women.

Zahra specifically relays the admiration her religious community holds for converts:

"everybody always says that a convert is a *better Muslim* because it was their decision

and they had something to compare it to. Nobody forced them. There was a learning

process." However, this "awe" or "respect" can quickly evolve into feelings of

inadequacy for born Muslims who sense that their level of spirituality pales in

comparison to the convert's. Again with reference to Zahra, there is the uncomfortable

sense that she is *less Muslim*[25] while in the presence of the Black convert women of her

acquaintance seeing as--unlike herself--they "never waver in [their] faith" but appear to

maintain a steady *conviction*.

Eby also measures her religious practice against converts in a way that speaks of

self-deprecation; she directly contrasts the steadfast faith she perceives converts to hold

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[25] This is in response to my interview question, "Do you ever feel *more* or *less* Muslim than convert Black Muslim women? If so, how?" It should therefore be noted that Zahra was using the language here made available but, explained that she did not quite agree with the "less than" or "more than" dichotomous framework of this query; a binary I came to admittedly recognize as inapplicable to some women's experiences/worldviews.

with the "weakened" or "faltered" state in which she considers her own. Additionally, her "fascination" with converts reinforces the idea that they are in fact *better Muslims*--Eby states, "I feel almost as if they have a *clearer* understanding of what Islam is than someone who was born into a Muslim family because they decided…. what direction they wanted their life to head." These Muslim women's sentiments speak of converts almost in sorrowful tones since they believe converts hold a level of religiosity against which they can not compete. In this way, the admiration for conversion appears as part of a communal edict but is also rooted in the direct juxtaposition of born-convert religiosity. Amongst life-long participants[26] there ruminates an acknowledgment of an undeniable strength bound with conversion and an intrigue with the kind of self-direction the adoption of a new faith entails. However, I question the effect the idealization of converts has on the still maturing faith of young born Muslim women wherein, converts are positioned as a constant reminder that their own religious commitment is inferior; moreover, I speculate that this opposition hampers the level of intimacy possible between born-convert women within a religious community that places them at odds.

Acknowledging the Gradual Process Towards a Religious Consciousness

A vernacular frequently used by born Muslim participants to describe their approach to and/or definition of their faith is that of a "process"--emphasizing the *gradual journey* to a religious identity that they can autonomously affirm with ease. In terms of their encounters with Black convert women, this equates to: A) a sense that there is a

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[26] In addition to Zahra and Eby, Jameerah and Carmen also express these sentiments in their interviews; specifically, they commend the fortitude of converts which allows them to give up their "old ways." For Jameerah this means abandoning "pleasurable things" in favour of God and despite ragging Islamophobia while, Carmen sees this as leaving behind, "their old way of living, culture, and religion."

mutual understanding that religious identity develops over a period of time, B) a conscientious comportment of self in the presence of the "faith-in-progress" of newer converts and/or, C) tension, emitting from judgmental (and at times, over-zealous) converts who appear insensitive to their struggles.

A) Rambo's (1993:2) introductory text to (Judeo-Christian) religious conversion defines "conversion" as: "[1.] [the] change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, [or] [2.] from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, [or] [3.] from one orientation to another within a single faith system." The *awakening* of a religious consciousness amongst life-long Muslim women raised in nominally Islamic households collapses the definitive lines dividing born-convert religio-positioning since, the dynamics marking their embrace of Islam often overlap. Rambo's third interpretation of conversion thus speaks to the religiosity of Falah and Carmen to whom I accord the classificatory term, "reborn Muslim"[27] wherein Islam shifts from *the margin to the center*[28] of their worldviews.

Carmen's devout practice arose after the queries of non-Muslim high school peers glaringly revealed her ignorance of Islam's most basic principles. The parallels she is able to draw between the development of her faith and that of African-Canadian converts allows Carmen to feel a palpable relation with these women: "I find that converts can *sympathize* with you because they went from not being Muslim at all to becoming Muslim so, they can identify with *the stretch* or *the struggle* of becoming a Muslim. It's not an overnight process." The transitional schema patterning Carmen's *return to Islam*

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[27] A term used by Allevia Stefano (2006: 145)
[28] Paraphrasing hooks (2000).

(i.e. first incorporating the five prayers; eventually putting on the hijab) is one felt to be appreciated by converts who have experienced similar spiritual trials. Furthermore, she perceives that the *exchange of knowledge* during these processes "creates bridges" which reach across the diverging/multiple identities held by herself, converts, and other African-Canadian born Muslims--diminishing the gaps that may exist between the groups by establishing *a common space, a common mentality*.

B) "With converts I feel that I have to be a lot more careful in my interactions with them because their hearts are still *fragile*" Falah declares, explaining that she consciously avoids 1. criticizing converts or 2. using Islamic phrases they may not yet understand, all in her effort to temper the "overwhelming" conversion process. Despite a discernible *likeness* in the spiritual development of "reborn" and convert Black Muslim women, Falah illustrates that there are nonetheless *felt differences* that stimulate an almost paternalistic approach to those newly converted to Islam. I argue that her attempts to ease convert women's transition to Islam emerges from a "retrospective survey" of the difficulties that have marked her own spiritual journey; paired with the acknowledgment that her Islamic heritage has advantageously made this process less traumatic than it may be for a convert, who must undergo a drastic re-negotiation of self.

Correspondingly, Carmen conveys a sense of responsibility to "lead by example": "I find that [with converts] I want to exemplify that *good Muslim* [comportment] so, I don't want to *say* something *inappropriate,* or *do* something *inappropriate*" she testifies. There is a *sponge-like* quality given to the religiosity of new convert women here that inspires Carmen's "compassion" as well as her careful conduction of self. As such, the

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seniority of her Muslim status (in direct comparison to new converts) materializes with an acquiescence to the role of *sympathetic representative of the faith*[29].

C) Notwithstanding the fact that Carmen's duty-bound approach to converts is self-imposed, the *sheer pressure* of being an upstanding model degrades the quality of her relationships with these women. A compulsion to maintain her image as a "good Muslim" erects interpersonal barricades which inhibits converts' access to Carmen's *natural* (unreserved) *self*. That is, by regulating her imprint on these women, sharing certain opinions and interests becomes unfathomable. Yet Carmen explains to me that this cautionary conduct is less of an example of "altruism" than it is an effect of the biting *criticism* felt from those converts who adopt an ultra-orthodox approach to Islam. Conjointly, Eby expresses that the absence or presence of these "policing" judgements determines the extent of her affinity with convert women:

> I feel that with converts there are two types: there are the moderate (allowing Islam to seep into their lives slowly) and then there are those that jump into it head first so, they become *ultra-orthodox*. That type [latter] I have a hard time relating to because I feel this *condescension* of, "why aren't you doing what you're suppose to be doing?" And that bothers me because, it's like "*I'm glad* that you've experienced the beauty of Islam but at the same time [pause] we're all on the same journey and some of us get there faster or slower than others. So, *don't judge me*!"

Eby's final exclamation is laden with frustration--undisguised by her curt laugh. Hence, the *religious-patrolling* adopted by some Black convert women creates a "divide" that is felt by their life-long (moderate) counterparts. Specifically, a lack of empathy adds pressure to the already weighty feat of locating an autonomous spirituality.

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[29] Carmen explains that a further incentive to adopt this role is to waylay the tendency of other born Muslims to "dictate" to converts *proper* Muslim comportment based on their own perceptions. During her transition to a "conscious Islam" Carmen felt the pressures of these Muslims' commanding approach therefore, she now endeavours to offer an *alternative insight* for converts. Specifically, she explains to converts that the parameters of their faith are strictly between themself and God, which is a defensive conclusion she has arrived at for her own spiritual well-being.

The socio-cultural dynamics of Toronto dictate the ways that these life-long Muslim women experience life within the nation. Its secular space is a force for their socialization as well as the setting for their eventual conceptions of selfhood--particularly the negotiation of a Muslim identity. Both Jameerah and Zahra convey that their unsolicited critique by converts thus works only to accentuate the feelings of *disconnect* that already exist because of born-convert women's dissimilar socio-cultural and religious experiences. Here Jameerah alludes to the pressures of upholding her Islamic values as she simultaneously attempts to participate in Black-Canadian "youth culture"; that is, meshing the desire to *live fully* in the realm of the latter without compromising the principles of the former--tensions felt to be incomprehensible to converts. Clearly perplexed Jameerah expounds on the expectation that she "should be less tempted" in straying from her faith than a convert who is a novice to Islam--with a hint of sarcasm Jameerah adds, "converts are just expected to be *sublime*."

The most pressing point to take from this (and one in which Zahra shares), is that: born Muslim status is felt to be "bound" with the assumption that they are able to *easily resist* the non-Islamic practices/norms of surrounding society. However this view overlooks the reality that converts have the opportunity to *first indulge* in these things prior to a decided resignation. In this regard, converts' judgement of life-long Muslim women's socio-religious comportment seems frustratingly misplaced. Jameerah presumes that born Muslim women at times long for, "a piece of that life, which is the life that everybody else *just lives*" which in turn adds to the seeming hypocrisy of being made to feel spiritually inferior for wanting what converts once had and likely took for granted.

It is important to note that these women *do not long for non-Muslim status* but, are instead playing with the *possibilities* of partaking in aspects of "normative" culture, which include: 1. an alternative lens to view their worlds, but more importantly 2. to experience the type of *religious conviction* that can arise from wilfully leaving the secular world for Islam. Zahra admittedly "envies" her convert mother's spiritual fortitude and believes that such unwavering faith comes with experiencing another lifestyle. Moreover, this life-long Muslim woman identifies the prerequisite "soul search" of converts as the cementing agent of their resolute faith, while Zahra must define herself within a religious system *handed to her* at infancy without the additional benefits of "hav[ing] had a taste of one world."

The avenue(s) to born Muslims' definitive spiritual selves will necessarily be different from that of converts. Notably, Jameerah declares that Black convert women can not grasp the socio-religious trials of being a young Muslim woman since *they themselves never were young Muslim women* and as such, "they don't know what it's like." Ultimately these life-long Muslim women ask for the basic recognition that there are *differences in spiritual growth* and *diverging evolutions of faith* between persons who adopt Islam in adulthood and those who have to figure it out--*figure themselves out*--from their permanent positions within.

Chapter Four
Black Like Me?:
Negotiating Racial (Dis)harmony Contending with Anti-Islamic Prejudice

Overview

According to Bannerji (2000), "within 'the community of the excluded'….

internal differences are suppressed and homogeneity is privileged as a defensive

maneuver" (2000:155,158 [*in*, Hamdon 2010: 58]). This assertion resonates with one of

the most acute realities of African-Canadian women in Islam. Black Muslims in Toronto

are undoubtedly *a minority within a minority* and "born Muslim status" does not override

the conspicuous *anti-Black* prejudice of the dominant Muslim and non-Muslim

communities. Thus, this chapter is prefaced with the premise that the tensions felt

between life-long and convert women fall away when their unity appears as the most

positive counter to their racial marginalization. As the divisions between these women

collapse, the issues facing African-Canadian Muslim women at large are brought into

direct focus--and Blackness appears as the nucleus of their realities. Hence, this chapter

reveals the complexities of affirming a Black self within and/or against: 1. an ethnic-

mosque majority, 2. the non-Muslim Black community, and 3. a white supremacist

society--while simultaneously asserting a Muslim female identity. Finally, the narratives

of these women offer glimpses into life as the perpetually *persecuted* and *unwanted*

"other" within a nation committed to maintaining the white, Eurocentric status quo.

A Defensive Camaraderie

First: Growing-up with Discrimination in the Mosque

"I *hate* going to mosques because they are so damn racist!" Zahra exclaims with obvious disdain. In the heart of downtown Toronto we sit at a table laden with a Lebanese feast. The restaurant is uproarious and bursting to its seams with patrons; even so, I am less convinced that Zahra's raised voice is in response to the present environment than the surfacing of her exasperation with Indo-Pakistani/Arab Muslims' prejudice. Forgetting her steaming plate and with cheeks now rosy with feeling Zahra leans forward to explain that, the religious uniformity of the mosque makes it plain that the ethnic majority's discrimination is *targeting* her racial-ethnic identity. Seeing that *Islam celebrates difference* and is to be *a unifying force,* the racism she contends with is a baffling contradiction. As she has come into her own Zahra has had to condition herself to "separate *people* from the *faith*" to ensure that her Islam is not blemished by these negative experiences, yet the mosque remains tainted as a hostile space.

The racial prejudice felt from the mosque majority by African-Canadian born Muslim women since their childhood has had repercussions on how they reflect upon their racialized selves. Falah feels that she is "always secondary" in the Arab Muslim community; as such, she articulates the trials of maintaining a strong ethnic identity amidst the allure of overshadowing her phenotypical difference through a *puppetry* of the dominant group's ethnic-cultural norms. Echoing this way of thinking Carmen states, "I think it's *very hard not to become Arabfied* because that's just a dominant culture in the religion." Carmen goes on to explain that "Arabfied" describes Black Muslims' adoption

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of a Middle Eastern identity in an attempt to become "religiously acceptable." [30] A

devaluation of Blackness amongst the Muslim community's ethnic-majority therefore

threatens African-Canadian Muslims' ability to comfortably assert their racial identity

since it can act as a cue for their ostracization.

To be Black is to occupy an "inauthentic" Muslim status which is a reality perhaps

made most plain by life-long participants' repeated complaint that, the dominant Muslim

groups readily presume that they as *Black* persons "must" be *converts*--meaning that*,* they

are not lineally (that is, genealogically) rooted in Islam and are thus *lesser than* the Indo-

Pakistani/Arab majority. Jameerah deduces that the *racialization of society* logically

extends into the Muslim community and this can explain the marginalization of Blacks

within it. However, her grasp of race theory does not make the task of "proving" the

legitimacy of her *Muslimness* any less painful especially since it is a burden that has

plagued her since childhood:

> People who are born Muslim and come from Muslim countries.... see me and I say "I'm born
> Muslim" but they still refer to me as a *convert*. This is because first of all, my family doesn't come
> from a history of sheiks…. [and] a lot of us don't know how to fluently read the Quran since
> Arabic is not our first language…. they make you feel like you're not *really* Muslim…. we're
> generally not accepted. Black Muslims still experience *a whole lot* of racism within the Muslim
> community

Azmi (1997) writes that although mosques in Toronto are "established and run by specific

ethnic communities" it is uncommon for membership to be *exclusive* to a particular ethnic

group (1997:163). To the contrary, Jameerah indicates that the dominion of these ethnic

groups establishes an alienating atmosphere, so that "although the doors aren't *closed* to

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[30] Although Carmen reflects upon her own challenge to avoid being "Arabfied", she speaks of this
concept at length in reference to Black converts whom she observes to relinquish their cultures in hopes of
gaining general acceptance through an *imaginar*y Arab identity.

you, the people aren't necessarily *open*." The hostility of the dominant group is tangible in the air of the mosque; during her childhood this manifested as racial slurs hurled at her and her siblings (by Indo-Pakistani children) while, in her adulthood there is an unshakeable feeling of "isolation." In order to salvage any positive sense of self from the hateful clutches of this form of discrimination, Jameerah has essentially *self-segregated*-- that is, she has withdrawn into the nurturing folds of a separate Black center for worship. It is in this act of self-preservation that the realities of convert and born Muslims most obviously begin to converge.

Spiritual Survival through Separatism

Anti-Black discrimination is not detachable from the African-Canadian experience particularly since it structures the ways society responds to Black persons and subsequently determines how Blacks view/place themselves within it. Mensah (2010:4) remarks that despite the *immense heterogeneity* of Black Canadians "the injuries and dehumanization of skin-colour racism in Canada" is a truth they share in common. To encounter racial prejudice in society's religious sphere therefore, naturally follows suit. Nonetheless this reality can be difficult to swallow--said best in the words of Zahra: "I think that it [racism] *exists more* in the non-Muslim community. It takes a different form. But I think it *hurts more* in the Muslim community." For a number of African-Canadian Muslims, joining a separate *Black focused Muslim cente*r has become the most viable means for "relief" from Indo-Pakistani/Arab mosque discrimination and hence, the best solution to ensuring the spiritual space truly is a realm of solace.

Jameerah and Aiya's sentiments on this *reactionary separatism* intermingle with

one another, conveying that these issues are not distinct to "born" or "convert" Muslims

but can rather be seen as a conundrum *shared* by African-Canadian Muslims:

Jameerah states,

> The *isolation* in these places [ethnic-majority mosques]is completely *horrible* sometimes. It's to the point that we would rather collect amongst ourselves. Being with Black Muslims is *so* much more comfortable. You have people who understand you. Well, *not* understand *you* because they don't know you but--when you're with your people, you're *with your people*. And Black Muslims *are* your people. Being around Muslims who *aren't Black* [pause], unless they are *truly* open-minded, genuine people, who accept people for *who they are* not for the colour of their skin--apart from that, I don't like it *at all*

Aiya declares,

> I think what's primary is a *vision for tomorrow* and an acknowledgement that, in other mosques and other religious gatherings Black people are often seen as "other" and disrespected in that capacity. So we are making a *conscious* decision to build our own thing and to establish the first Black Muslim center of worship--if not a mosque--in Canada. That's a *conscious* thing that we've embarked upon as a group of people. It's bigger than my interactions with women…. that's secondary to the political… that is, an effort to establish ourselves as a Black community that has its *own* in Canada. So that we don't *always* have to be at the other mosques like the *guests*; and people are looking like [they are thinking]: "who invited *you*?" or "you *still* here?" You know (laughs softly), you've got to be at *your own home* at some point so that nobody can ask you those questions, right?

Toni Morrison (1998:21) describes "home" as "a place where oppression does not hurt so

much," which speaks directly to the hearts of these Black Muslim persons. It is not that an

ethnic-racial divide is privileged/sought after in itself, but it is a *counteraction*. To realize

that a "cross-ethnic" and "unified religious community" is *an ideal*, is for Black Muslims

to rescue their own humanity from the degradation of those who equate it with little to no

value. The Muslim majority population invariably expresses that the Black minority is

unwanted and *unwelcomed*. As such, African-Canadian Muslims must, for themselves,

create the spaces where they are allowed to feel that they belong; they must become the

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type of Toronto Muslim community they so desire. The survival of their racialized/spiritual selves is understood to be a project that Black Muslims must lead.

You Look Like My Sister, You Look Like Me

A "natural" bond or, "likeness" can not intrinsically be found amongst African-Canadian Muslim women seeing as the ways individuals respond to one another is more than *skin deep* and is dependent upon: culture, language, national origins, and worldview--as a number of participants express. Nevertheless, there are *points of connection* that these women may share which emerge from the *specific experience* of being 1. an anomaly within Toronto's socio-cultural context and 2. a minority within the Muslim community. In this manner, encountering a woman who can relate to and understand your realities because in these ways they *reflect her own*, can inspire a sense of camaraderie.

Within the Indo-Pakistani/Arab dominated mosques Tahisia describes that on the rare occasion that there is another Black Muslim woman in attendance, she finds herself sharing a moment of "long eye contact" as they acknowledge each other's presence. Tahisia feels that in this act much is said without having to utter a word. She explains, "You're *aware.* You know where they're sitting, you know where they're praying. There's this contact--eye contact. An extra: 'yeah, we understand, we're in this together'…. it feels nice." Additionally, Tahisia's has had in-depth conversations with Black-African women she is *not* acquainted with and she perceives that the reason they approach her is because, together, they make-up the entire Black Muslim population of the mosque at the time.

Aiya also relates experiences of communion with Black Muslim women in the context of an ethnic majority mosque. She states, "if I see a sister [a Black woman] when I walk into mosque.... I'll make a little mental note. At the end of the prayer…. I'll check for her. She'll *probably* be checking for me *too*. She'll probably be *walking towards me while I'm walking towards her*…. we'll definitely have a conversation because we're both anomalies, in that case." There is a sense of mutual *respect* felt in these instances which temporarily overrides the different "histories" and "cultural lens" Aiya knows to stand between herself and other Black Muslim women--for in these moments they are simply "sister." Such experiences illustrate that Black Muslim women may connect in the event of their "heightened difference," that is, at times when their minority status is most palpable. Furthermore, I speculate that in acknowledging each other's presence these women are giving one another *a moment to be seen*, *a moment to feel welcomed* in a mosque that pointedly ignores their existence.

There are also certain kinds of connections that arise from the *familiarity of Blackness*. Paulita holds a unique tenderness for other Black Muslim women that is based on the *physical likeness* she feels they share. In these women's faces she sees her own image as well as the faces of her sisters in Panama thus, to be amongst Black Muslim women is to feel as though she is amongst her kin. Moreover Paulita, Falah and Jameerah express a sense of *ease* while in the presence of women who share their religio-racial status since, within these spaces, they are safe from certain types of discrimination. Falah clearly states that similar racial/national origins is not enough to form "the basis of any personal relationships" with Black Muslim women. Nonetheless, she feels that with these

women "there's just a different way of speaking. A different way of interacting"; more specifically, Falah notes the luxury of being able to relax into a dialect of slang without being pegged as the stereotypical "ghetto Black girl." Alternatively, in the presence of non-Black Muslim women she carefully *censures* her speech to avoid any negative racial labels while these pretenses are unnecessary with African-Canadians--"even if I've just met them" she concludes.

hooks (1981: 83) states that locating "affirming images of Black femaleness" is particularly difficult in *white-supremacist patriarchal society*. Hence, it is within/against a society with the uninhibited power to fabricate Black womanhood that African-Canadian Muslim women must attempt to create their worlds--from "psychic landscapes" already *wearied* from a lifetime of harassment with these negative depictions (Lorde 1983:155). Falah therefore illustrates a conscious refusal to offer the dominant group ammunition for its war against Blackness. Correspondingly, it is only in the company of women who are also made to contend with these forms of discrimination that she feels secure enough to let down her guard by relaxing into a dialect that would otherwise be used against her to affirm degrading conjectures of Black females.

"That's *all* I *ever* wanted growing-up: *a Black Muslim girlfriend*," Jameerah says with undisguised longing as she slowly pronounces each word for emphasis. She explains that as a Shi'a Muslim, the Shi'a/Sunni sectarian divide kept her estranged from the majority of African-Canadian Muslims throughout her childhood; alternatively, dissimilar cultural references/struggles creates a disconnect with her Indo-Pakistani Shi'a Muslim peers. Relationships with Black Muslim women are now placed on a pedestal by

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Jameerah who feels that, a "genuine happiness" to see each other is shared between herself and the Black Muslim women she encounters at random in public spaces. In particular there is the sense that as *one Black Muslim woman to another* they can relate on multiple levels. Specifically, overlapping experiences of 1. Blackness in Toronto and 2. struggles with a Muslim identity, open-up a space for "certain kinds" of intimate discourse. Ultimately, Jameerah holds the sentiment that aspects of herself are reflected back to her through the lives of women who share in her religio-racial positioning: "I love Black Muslim women" Jameerah declares, "because *that's who I am*."

The *Boundaries of Blackness* for Black-Canadian Muslim Women

Who Belongs to "their" Blackness?

Smith's (1997) Black feminist criticism proposes that although Black women are not willing objects of oppression and racialization they are *obliged to share* in these experiences with each other--often coming together "for the sake of barest survival" so that they can have the *courage to create themselves* (1997:13,15). Black women inhabit the margins of society yet these spaces become seats of productivity as they are used to shape a firm sense of self, with their fellows as lifelines. Who, though, is encompassed in this sorority? According to Anthias et. al (1989;1992: 10) women are central to the project of *ethnic reproduction* because they act as "[the] markers of the boundaries of collectivities." In this regard, the lines of "Blackness" are malleable and subjective which indicates that membership into the racial-ethnic group is not a "given." Rather, affiliation to the group is wholly dependent upon the personal criteria that inspires one woman of

colour to draw another into her "inner realm." The women of this study indicate that *dark skin* and *African ancestry* are not always enough to feel that another Muslim women legitimately shares in their socio-cultural positioning. Thus, participants' narration of their encounters with other "Black" Muslim women is contingent upon the *diverse, contextual, and relational* (Anthias et. al 1992:5) parameters of ethnic lines.

Who these women consider to be "Black" shapes the content of their stories wherein one national origin may at once be accepted or rejected as *true Blackness* depending on the narrator. Notably, Tahisia believes that Somalians and Ethiopians are "not *that Black*" and therefore she excludes them from consideration; Falah joins her in discounting the former ethnic-national group. Alternatively, Trisha and Paulita specifically count interactions with Somalians amongst their most positive communions with *Black* Muslim peoples. Jameerah includes *all* persons of Caribbean and African origins as sharing in a Black identity while, the cultural distance Aiya feels between herself and continental-Africans means that Black-Canadians mainly people her stories. Writing on a younger generation of "Black"-African immigrants to Toronto, Martha Kumsa (2005) declares, "Blackness proves to be a deeply contested territory where boundaries are moved and re-moved, displaced and re-placed.... [a] discursive multiplicity and fluidity affirm[s] the claim that Blackness is a historical category rather than a skin colour (Hall 1996)" (2005:188). Kumsa proclaims that the dominion of Canada's *white nationhood* does not necessitate that the Black minority bond together; rather, Blackness is "contested" and "earned" as an identity before one can be accepted as *Black enough* by a surrounding "Black" community (2005:188). I propose that a similar

system of *gauging Blackness* translates into the Black Muslim community as well and

determines the ways participants think of themselves as Black bodies.

Contentions with a "Black" Identity

From about the age of fourteen Falah saw her world through what she calls, a

"pan-Africanistic" lens. Her early politico-racial consciousness connected her to the

history of enslaved Africans and their descendants wherein, *the unity of Black people*

through skin colour formed the center of her worldview--inspired by the "African

Nationalism" of Marcus Garvey. Yet with the awakening of her religious self the unity of

all peoples through Islam overcame the *grievances* fueling her internal chant: "I'm a

Black person, I'm a Black person, Black nationalism"; comparing her spiritual evolution

to that of Malcolm X, she adopted an inclusive Islam which made it nonsensical to divide

by race. Presently Falah's racial woes center on her critique of the identifying terms made

available to people of African descent since she feels that this language fails to take into

account their actual diversity. She states,

> Nigeria…. is a country created by colonialists, there are *no people called* "Nigerian." I call myself
> Nigerian because there is no other way to identify myself—but I don't like it. I don't like the term
> "African-Canadian". I'm Black, and I'm African, *and* I'm Canadian. But all those definitions are
> kind of secondary to me because the primary way I identify myself is as a Muslim. But if I *have to*
> define myself officially—I like defining myself as African [pause] more than anything, because I
> am recently *from Africa.* The term *Black* is a wide racial group. If you look at the different people
> that are called Black: in the Caribbean, in Africa itself, in the Americas--it's such a wide range. It
> doesn't make sense. It doesn't take into account my background, or my own sense of *my actual*
> *community*. I don't know. Race is such a tricky thing [pause] for Africans. For the [Black-African]
> diaspora as well

Falah conveys these concerns in a tone of absolute disheartenment, illustrating the mental

and emotional strain of attempting to define herself with a vocabulary pre-decided by

colonialist and imperialist forces. "Black" peoples must somehow undertake the project

of *naming* their unique selves although the vernacular (and agency) for doing so has

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already been restricted by powers outside of the racial conglomerate. Falah obligatorily

labels herself as an African/Black/Nigerian person but a Muslim identity best aligns with

the ways she sees both herself and her community.

You're Black, But You're Not: The Dictation of Blackness by the Religio-Racial

Communities

Affirming a racial identity for Eby is a difficult undertaking seeing as non-Muslim

Black-Canadian *and* second-generation Somalian Muslim peers both refuse to

acknowledge (or adamantly contest) her self-definition as a Black person. She explains,

> Once you're classified as an "outsider" it's really hard to self-identify…. I was not accepted by
> one group, and rejected by the other. The number of fights I would get into in high school because
> of this question…. it would be the same thing being told [by Black-Canadians]over and over again:
> "you're not Black because you're Somalian." And that goes back to Somalian girls *saying they're
> not Black* themselves. It was a vicious cycle…. it was like a way for each group to self-guard their
> own *identity*, their own *insecurities*. What really pissed me off was "you're not Black." I was
> like…. "What?! I'm from *the Motherland*, do you understand? I'm from *the hold* of Africa. How
> am I *not* Black? I'm *more* Black than you!"

Eby strongly associates her national origins with a Black identity however, because her

phenotypical features do not *fit* these individuals' ideas of "standard" Blackness she is

ostracized for trying to assert this self. She speculates that these specific Black-

Canadians' conceptions of race stem from stereotypical signifiers of *Black culture* (i.e.

hip-hop music) and physical traits (i.e. kinky hair)--neither of which Eby aligns with.

Additionally, she presumes that Somalian Muslim immigrants *self-segregate* from Black

Canada due to 1. racist ideology internalized during colonialism, but more specifically 2.

an attempt to dissociate from Blackness to *avoid the discriminatory treatment* African-

Canadians endure within the nation. Eby is therefore in a state of *socio-racial limbo* since,

she does not satisfy the criteria by which surrounding non-Muslim Blacks decide

admission into their collective while she is an uncomfortable reminder for Somalian

Muslims of what they wish *not* to be.

It is important to recognize that it is within these self-regulated clusters that either

ethnic group (Black-Canadians, Somalians) shapes their own identity. Eby's exclusion is

therefore an unfortunate (yet likely, necessary) side effect of the project of maintaining an

independent space within/against the dominant socio-cultural environment. I speculate

that within a nation that indirectly suggests that their presence is illegitimate, the

exclusivity of the ethno-racial collective allows members to garner some sense of *power*

and/or *agency* by deciding who does/does not belong to their ranks--a project that may

partially ensure their psychological survival in the white nation-state.

On a different note, Zahra illustrates what affirming a Black identity can look like

when one is embraced as a "legitimate" member of the racial collective considering that,

her sense of Blackness arose only after being *told* by the Black community that she

belongs amongst their numbers. "I didn't grow-up thinking I was Black. The idea of

Blackness is very new to me" Zahra declares, going on to narrate her awakening to a

Black self during university. "Someone came up to me [a Black student] and he was like,

'Zahra, are you Black first, Hispanic first, or Muslim first?' I was like, '*Black first*? I'm

not Black!' But then I was like 'Oh, I *have to* be. I didn't get this colour by the sun. There

has to be slavery in my history *somewhere* that has made me, me'." Despite the fact that

Zahra positioned herself through Islam and her (immediate) Hispanic heritage, Blackness

was presented to her as if it were "fact" that is, as an *obvious* or *natural* component of her

overall identity. "It's almost as if society chooses your identity *for you*" Zahra says with

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incredulity, indicating that society's mechanisms to organize its members may not compute with the individual's notions of selfhood--which appear as secondary to the project of *classifying visible difference*.

Although assumptions of Zahra's Blackness did in fact come from an African-Canadian individual, she concedes that general society had *already* categorized her in these terms. Thus, adopting a Black identity allowed Zahra to *re-think* her past experiences through this new racial lens. Encounters with discrimination (in the Muslim and non-Muslim communities) and the *difference* she detects between herself and her Indo-Pakistani Muslim peers, finally has a viable *racialized* explanation. At the same time, however, Zahra believes that because she wears the hijab society primarily *responds* to her as a "Muslim" which has consequentially shrouded her Blackness. Therefore, she now speaks with resentment of her late acquisition of a Black identity which has left her ill-equipped to handle anti-Black racism since she does not have the "lived experience" of other Black (Muslim/non-Muslim) women--as such, she feels "not Black *enough*" by comparison and "robbed" of a Black consciousness.

It is seemingly inconceivable to mainstream society that persons can simultaneously live with numerous identities. Rather, aspects of the self must be ranked as *lesser than* or *more than* so that the components making-up the individual's essence are *competitively* instead of, *equally* at play. Zahra's dark skin as well as her hijab are both highly visible signifiers to society that she *matches* notions of the "other." Even so, I suggest that a heightened climate of Islamophobia makes the hijab a more *relevant* symbol of difference therefore, dominant society has "chosen" it as the most appropriate

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label for Zahra's "foreignness." Moreover, as one socialized in such a setting Zahra has

internalized this thinking--obscuring other aspects of her identity even from herself.

The Hijab as Unfathomably Aligned with Blackness, to:

A. General Toronto Society

According to Jasmine Zine (2006) the dominant cultural discourse utilizes

"reductionist and essentialized paradigms" to *narrate, define, and regulate* the bodies of

Muslim women (2006: 244). Zine's study of "gendered Islamophobia"[31] in Toronto

specifies that these women's bodies are "marked" as Muslim by the hijab which is made

synonymous with *social difference* and a *social threat* (2006: 242, 246). The lived

experiences of African-Canadian Muslim women indicates that non-Muslim society's

fear of/*aversion* to the hijab (2006: 241) is inextricably bound up with images of the

Indo-Pakistani/Arab "other." Hence, "Blackness" is *incompatible* with these essentialized

notions which treat "Muslim" and "South Asian/Middle Eastern origins" as synonymous

identity markers. A "Black Muslim woman" is therefore an incomprehensible body to the

public mind--making it a sometimes difficult task for these women to proclaim their

religio-racial selves. In particular, Falah and Aiya note that the hijab *forfeits* or "cancels

out" their Blackness for a white, non-Muslim nation that places stereotypical conceptions

of *what a Muslim woman should look like* (i.e. Arab) above the obvious physical cues of

their Black-African ancestry. For Falah (who considers herself to have "standard" Black

facial features) this means that surrounding society ignorantly "categorizes" her as a

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[31] *Gendered Islamophobia*: "specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination
leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform
individual and systemic forms of oppression" (Zine 2006: 240). Zine locates the *root* of this form of
discrimination within, "[o]rientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward,
oppressed victims of misogynist societies (Hoodfar, 1993; Said, 1979)" (2006: 240).

South Asian, indicating that pre-decided images of a Muslim woman win over the actual

attributes of the physical person[32].

Alternatively, Tahisia and Jameerah find that despite the fact that they wear the

hijab the Toronto non-Muslim public does not comprehend that they are Muslim but

solely processes their Blackness. Neither woman wears the hijab in a "traditional" (or

"conservative") manner[33] which evidently confuses a non-Muslim society whose cultural

constructions of hijabi women can not account for such variations. Moreover, there

appears to be socio-cultural *limits* to the amount of "otherness" an individual can inhabit

at one time since, a *choice* is essentially being made between these women's Islam and

their racial identity. A hijabi African-Canadian is seen as either 1. Muslim (and thus,

Indo-Pakistani--not Black) *or*, 2. Black (and thus, *not Muslim*); that such persons as *Black*

Muslims exist simply does not compute. As such, these women's ethnic origins must

either be fictionalised or their religious allegiance ignored so that they can be "properly"

organized within Toronto society. A commitment to maintaining compartmentalized

images of the "other" blinds non-Muslim Torontonians to the ethnic-racial truth right in

front of them.

B. Non-Muslim Black Women

There is a clear note of resignation in the voices of participants who describe the

obscuring of their religious and racial/ethnic identities by Toronto society. However, it is

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[32] Interestingly, *without* the hijab Falah becomes a "*real* Black person" in the public eye (to non-Muslims and non-Black Muslims alike). Falah narrates that the visibility of her *hair* (specifically, the texture of it) operates as the "source" of her Black identity for others; kinky hair *makes* her Black while the hijab (which covers her hair) "transforms" her into a person of Indo-Pakistani origins.

[33] That is, neither Jameerah nor Tahisia wear the hijab so that it frames their faces and covers their necks. Rather, their hijabs are worn tightly against their scalps and the extra material is swept to the back of their heads; for Tahisia this style is often mistaken as a show of Afrocentricism. Refer to chapter two, p. 64.

when their Blackness is unrecognizable to non-Muslim *Black women* that the unfavourable effects of this reductionism are deeply felt. Aiya and Falah speak of their exclusion from the "impulsive camaraderie" between Black women who meet as strangers on the streets of Toronto. Specifically, they suspect that where there would otherwise be *elation*--inspired by seeing another woman of African descent in a white-majority setting--there is instead *puzzlement* or *confusion*. Falah expounds on this: "Just walking down the street or, on the subway…. someone [Black woman] turns and sees you--there's a smile. Then they see the hijab and it's like, 'oh!' [laughs] They're kind of confused, right? I think there's that feeling to connect to other people of African descent but I feel that I am excluded from it to an extent because, the smiles drop." Essentially, her skin colour pulls at the strings of a "racial sorority" but this dissipates with the hijab. It can be said that non-Muslim Black women have internalized dominant culture's imaginings of the Indo-Pakistani/ Arab hijabi woman to the extent they are also unable to reconcile the hijab with Blackness and opportunities for spontaneous camaraderie are lost.

Aiya reads an uncertainty in non-Muslim Black women upon encountering 1. her "physical features" which indicate a *likeness* and 2. her "hijab" which signifies *difference*. She declares, "I think when Black women who are not Muslim see me, they see me as *Muslim* and *different* and step back a little bit--because of the scarf. I'm sure if I had no scarf on they'd be like, 'hey! It's a sister!'" *Normative notions of Blackness* evidently do not align with the hijab nor, Islam. Consequently, these Muslim women are denied access to certain realms of Black "sisterhood" which is an exclusion they recognize as a loss. However, for Trisha it is less the polarization of the hijab and a Black identity that

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embitters her than the mutation of these patterns into discrimination *led by* non-Muslim

Black women. According to her racial sensibilities there should be a basic understanding

among *all* Black women that their oppression by/fight against racist-sexist society is

mutual, therefore, as a rule, they are not to facilitate their fellow's subjugation. Trisha

heatedly states,

> When it's [prejudice] coming from another Black woman, it really makes me livid because--if you look at it--I'm at the *real* bottom of the bottom of the rung. If you're a white male you're the *it*. Then white women. Then Black men and then Black women. Now, Black Muslim *covered* women--you're at the *bottom of it all*. The way I feel when I see a Black women doing that [discriminating against Black hijabi women], I'm like: "You've had struggles girlfriend. You've had racism thrown at you and yet you're doing it to me! It makes you a hypocrite. You're not part of the group [of Black women]. You're not working for my advancement because, if *you* advance *I* advance. If I get put down, guess what? That same society that puts you down, is the same one that puts me down. So, why go into that same belief as society and feed it?"

Trisha is incredulous that the forms of discrimination created by dominant white society

finds embodiment in Black women considering that, experiences of socio-racial tyranny

are *mutually endured* by African-Canadian women regardless of their individual

differences.

Pauline Bullen (2007), however, perceives the repetition of oppressive systems

within the communities of the oppressed as part of African-Canadians' desperate struggle

to find acceptance and belonging in Toronto. Hence, Bullen asks: "What happens when

the 'enemy without' becomes the 'enemy within' as oppressed people begin to judge

themselves and each other by the yardstick tainted by racism, classism and various other

oppressive thinking?"(2007: 14). In answer to this, Trisha conveys the breakdown of the

safe spaces wherein Black women can contribute to each others' human flourishing. Yet,

Trisha's expectation of camaraderie may ask for more than she is aware of since a hijabi

woman (Black or, otherwise) creates a landscape for non-Muslim Black woman to feel

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greater than another class of persons after a lifetime of experiencing social devaluation. hooks (2000:16) states that unlike white men, white women and Black men, Black women do not have an institutionalized "other" that they can exploit, but are instead the exploited. I argue that the *otherness* of hijabi women fills this "void" by providing non-Muslim Black women a target against which they can direct discrimination. African-Canadian women have *learnt* from white supremacist society that the worth of an individual is determined by a hierarchical social value system which is regulated by the dominant group and as such, their loathing of hijabi women exhibits the internalization of this edict.

By participating in the marginalization of Muslim women who wear the hijab (that is, making them an "other" and thus, *lesser than* themselves according to the hierarchical model) non-Muslim Black women therefore, gain temporary access to the type of power oppressive society *always* possesses. However, this example of discrimination extends further than Collins' (1991: 225) "both/and conceptual stance" theory which claims persons can *at once* be the oppressor and the oppressed; the *absolute degradation* of Black women in/by the nation means that for them to believe that they can *share in* white supremacist power is a show of self-deception. The ostracization of hijabi women does not alter non-Muslim Black women's social positioning by/within the nation--neither group "advances," as Trisha acutely points out. Hence, this form of discrimination can be understood to touch issues deeply embedded in Black women's wounded psyches.

Discrimination As Part of Life in Toronto

Haideh et. al (2009: 13) argues that dominant society perceives the Muslim

diaspora through an "ethnic absolutism" which *demonizes* all Muslims without exception;

according to Hamdon (2010: 37) this essentialism produces a *fear* of Islam among the

general Canadian populace which solely sees the Muslim community through a "distorted

lens." It is this pervading mentality that creates a setting for the non-Muslim public's

reductionist approach to hijabi women. Zine (2006: 246) explores mainstream Canadian

society's *open-hostility* to the hijab which "create[s] a fragile narrative of 'Canadianness'

and belonging" for Muslim women. The *social unacceptability* of the veil becomes a

means for dominant culture to challenge the legitimacy of these women's places within

the Canadian social fabric by "*locat[ing] them as 'foreigners'*"(2006: 246). Moreover,

this *discourse of otherness and foreignness* effects how Muslim women *place themselves*

within the racialized nation as social actors seeing as, their "multiple identities" and

"gendered positions" act as sites for their marginalization (2006: 240, 246). Experiences

of marginalization and discrimination are therefore far from novelties for the African-

Canadian Muslim women of this study who are constantly contending with the non-

Muslim public's Islamophobia which frequently centers on the hijab.

Muslim Women "Must" Be Oppressed

Carmen donned the hijab in the twelfth grade as a testament to her newly

invigorated faith. The responses from her non-Muslim teachers and peers the first day of

wearing the hijab to school were swift and fraught with prejudice: "A lot of teachers

assumed that it was something my parents had *forced* on me. I actually got pulled aside

by one who said, 'You know, you're old enough to make that choice now where you

don't have to wear it [hijab].' He took it upon himself to 'help' me" Carmen recalls in a

tone laced with irony. It is evidently incomprehensible that veiling is a *choice;* rather, the

appearance of Carmen in hijab was interpreted as an opportunity to "rescue" a Muslim

woman from the clutches of domineering religious forces. Hoodfar (2003) suggests that

the non-Muslim Canadian public is "fixated on the hijab as a mark of 'Islam's oppression

of women'"(2003:85)--a frame of thought which inspires good, white, *real* Canadians to

act as their "liberators." Eby also narrates an encounter with a non-Muslim white

Canadian doing her "civic duty" in the feigned interest of hijabi women. This occurred

while riding the subway. I find it necessary to present this incident verbatim to convey its

full weight:

> Woman (in a patronizing tone): Honey, you realize that you don't *have to* wear this [hijab], right?
> Eby (in casual, but guarded tone): Yeah, I know
> Woman [in a serious, investigative voice]: So, *why do you*?
> Eby: Because I want to
> Woman: Are you sure your *father* doesn't *force you*?
> Eby: *No*, I'm not forced
> Woman: Okay. I just wanted to make sure.

As she retells this experience, Eby's voice is dripping with disgust at the audacity

and ignorance of this random woman. However Zine's (2006) study of young hijabi

women in Toronto[34] indicates that the space of: 1. *the school*, is often the stage for

"negative orientalist assumptions" by teachers that Muslim girls are oppressed at home

(2006: 244) and 2. *public transit*, typically unleashes *racist, xenophobic, and*

Islamophobic attitudes (2006: 245)--unfortunately making Carmen and Eby's experiences

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[34] Zine's study includes women between the ages of sixteen to nineteen of South Asian, Arab, and Somali ethnic background (2006: 239-40)

part of the statistics. However the irony for these two women is that their parents *do not support the hijab* but oppose it with a foresight for the struggles their daughters are likely to endure as veiled women in an anti-Islamic nation[35]; paralleling Hoodfar et. al's (2003) findings that, contrary to stereotypical nationalist claims, "many young women ha[ve] to fight their parents…. for the right *to wear the veil* (2003:15, my italics)." The actual constructs of hijabi women's realities are, of course, irrelevant to a mainstream society which is already convinced of the evils behind the veil. *Female oppression*, *patriarchy* and *backwards religio-cultural practices* are what make the practice of veiling commensurable within a white-secular setting and in turn frames how mainstream society interacts with Muslim women.

In this regard, African-Canadian converts note a non-Muslim public's inability to reconcile their decision to embrace Islam--as "strong," "free" Westerners--with pervading notions of "demonic" Islam and its *abused veiled women*. Fatima insistently faced the query, "Why would a Western woman become Muslim?" by non-Muslims[36] who understood her conversion as a relinquishing of her many freedoms (graciously bestowed by a *liberal West*) for a lifestyle encased by misogyny. Sara senses a complete shift in how non-Muslims respond to her once it becomes known that she is a convert to Islam. In these instances Sara metaphorically watches as any/all impressions of her being

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[35] Carmen reports that her family (but specifically, her mother) are constantly questioning and critiquing her decision to wear the hijab while, Eby relates that her father begged her to reconsider when she first voiced her decision to veil.

[36] It should be noted that Fatima's conversion to Islam also dumbfounded Muslims from totalitarian Islamic countries for whom Islam has come to symbolize "a lack of freedom." Fatima believes that these individual have confused *Islam* with *culture* wherein the traumas they have endured in their home countries (in the name of Islam) have obscured the "true" faith.

autonomous, smart, and strong "evaporate" as she is met with the question: "As an intelligent woman, how can you do that [convert]?"

Saba Mahmood's (2008) critique of the imperialistic agenda of liberal discourses explores Western feminisms' *secular liberal model of religion* which, universalizes "Western values of autonomy and freedom" as the norm and ridicules women whose worldviews/religious goals do not correlate with "the telos of a liberal lifestyle" (2008: 81-2, 103). Within this neo-colonialist framework Muslim women's support of 1. Islamic movements as well as 2. the practice of veiling, are dismissed as examples of the "false consciousness" of the oppressed (2008: 102-3, 105). As a counter, Mahmood argues that "the consensus about Islam's unparalleled misogyny--its inherent fundamentalism--is secured through an equally reductionist representation of 'the West' as the space of ever-increasing possibilities and liberation for women" (2008: 99).

In the imaginings of liberal discourses Muslim women appear as voiceless and powerless victims of their religion. Thus as *the patron of "freedom,"* the West is entrusted with safeguarding these women's fate as part of, what Mahmood calls "the project of 'Saving Muslim Women'"(2008: 94). In the same move, the personal beliefs/desires *Muslim women identify* as motivating their religious practices are invalidated. Hence, I argue it is irrelevant to mainstream society that African-Canadian Muslim women are in fact "Westerners" because, liberal discourses place "Islam" and "the West" at odds. Similar to hijabi women being either Black *or* Muslim in the public mind an "allegiance" to Islam *and* to the West can not exist simultaneously. In converting and/or donning the hijab African-Canadian women are regarded as *forfeiting* their "Western liberties,"

meaning that they are both condemned for aligning with an "unprogressive" worldview *and* become objects in the nation's imperialistic efforts to rescue Muslim women--which plays out in their everyday encounters with the dominant culture.

English "Must" Be Hijabi Women's Second Language

One of the most consistent issues for participants is mainstream Canadian society's conviction that as hijabi women they come from "outside the nation" and as such have an *inexpert grasp of the English language*. Although I did not specifically ask the women about such experiences it almost always surfaced in their narratives--at times paired with the added assumption that the hijab is indicative of subpar mental capacities. The following are participants statements presented in sequence to illustrate how this recurring theme so strikingly binds their *stories* and thus, their *realities* together:

> *Carmen:*
> Now wearing the hijab…. I find that people are almost shocked when they hear me speak English because they're like, "I didn't know that you could do *that*!"

> *Sara:*
> I did wear the hijab for sometime and certainly experienced discrimination through that…. from something as innocuous as people being surprised that I speak English as a first language…. [it happened] *all* the time. *All the time*

> *Rachel:*
> As a Black woman wearing the hijab, people speak to me slowly as if I don't understand English

> *Trisha:*
> I went to buy a skirt… because I was going to become Muslim…. the following week I went back to the same store [now wearing the hijab] and the same girl [sales clerk]--she was *enunciating her words*…. as if I had [language] problems…. from that day on I was like, "Ok, *this* is my reality"

> *Zahra:*
> The non-Muslim population is always *very surprised* that I can put words into sentences. And *very surprised* that I can have an opinion--that I'm somewhat articulate. People are *always in awe* that I have an opinion

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Paulita:
When I came to Canada I suffered from racism because: I have dark skin, and I had a language barrier, and I was a single mom…. because of my accent [people thought], "You're on welfare, you're an immigrant, you're a refugee--so you're poor or ignorant." Being a refugee or immigrant *was bad*. And being a Muslim is *visible* so they see the hijab and they don't expect me to *speak well,* or to *have an intellect,* or *an opinion*

Falah:
I find that people tend to expect *very little* when they encounter me because, apparently the hijab covers my brain. I'm Black so people don't expect for me *to be much.…* [I wear the] hijab so *I'm oppressed* [she says sarcastically]. And *on top of that* I dress conservatively so, people are like: "Oh my gosh, she just *walked out of the third world.*" And then I open my mouth and they're like "Oh!"

Eby:
I went my whole life with white people kind of patting me on my head whenever I spoke and saying, "Wow! You're *so eloquent*. You're *so articulate*. It's such a *surprise!*" What do you mean it's such a surprise? Am I an *exception*? Am I the only person [Black Muslim] that you've ever met that can string together a sentence? I don't understand, you know? I think the hijab further pronounced how *different* I was in their eyes, especially to *white society*. They were just like, "Wow, you can speak English and you can speak it *well*!"

Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Black racism and sexism govern the ways dominant society responds to African-Canadian hijabi women which in turn, reverberates in how they decode their encounters with the white nation. What can be read below the threshold of these women's experiences is a memo from white supremacist society that declares: "Bona fide Canadians do not wear the hijab rather, it is 'imported' and as such is *unnatural to Canadian culture*. Furthermore, hijabi women are simpleminded and demure persons who are unskilled in English which is the mark of the immigrant and the inferior body *in*, not *of* Canada." By segregating Muslim women who veil from authentic citizenship I speculate that this diminishes the "threat" of their presence to pristine images of white, Eurocentric Canada. Moreover, I argue that the astonishment of the dominant group that these women can in fact communicate in the "organic" tongue of the land does not override stereotypical conceptions of the oppressed Muslim immigrant woman.

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Instead, the dissonance created in the minds of the dominant group is easily set aright by distinguishing *the particular* Muslim woman as a *peculiar yet, singular* "exception" to the rule; this is but one of the many faces of "the culture of racism in Canada"(Bullen 2007: 52).

Responding to Anti-Islamic Stereotypes and Discrimination

"Indifference": Because as Black Women in a White Society, They're Already Prepared

Running late for an Eid celebration Aiya pulls her car up to the front of the department store; in her haste, she stops in the pedestrian walkway with the hope that her daughter Shazia--the missing member of the family caravan--will quickly jump into the vehicle so that they can be on their way. But Shazia is nowhere in sight. Another car pulls up alongside their own and the window rolls down; stretching over his front seat passenger a white man begins an onslaught of insults demanding that Aiya move her car. Almost breathless in his rage he concludes this attack with, "Wel-come to Can-a-da," sneering as he slowly pronounces each syllable before driving off. Aiya listens calmly, *feeling completely unperturbed* by this man's display of prejudice however, sensing that her husband is bothered, Aiya decides to act. The gears are smoothly shifted from "park" to "drive" and the family is off--the aggressor's vehicle has already been spotted in a neighbouring lot; Shazia is left behind for the sake of this mission.

Aware of Islamophobic notions of the *voiceless hijabi woman* Aiya asks her husband to remain silent that is, to not speak for her despite his indignation as she steps out to face this venomous stranger. "You just saw me outside of the [store], did you not?"

she demands of the man, who nods in baffled acknowledgment. "You're an ignorant man so, *I'm here* to *teach you*. I was born in Hamilton, Ontario which for your information *is* in Canada. Where were you born?" Aiya poses the question in a consciously composed voice, the man's mumbled reply is that he was born in Toronto. "Good. *Part one* of the lesson: not everybody in Canada looks *the same*. Secondly, this that I am wearing on my head is *a hijab* which indicates that I am a Muslim woman. It has *nothing to do with*: whether I know how to drive, where I was born, what language I speak--it's a *religious symbol*. Religion surpasses nationality, language *and driving skills*. I was wrong to stop where I did, I acknowledge that. You're wrong to assume that I can't speak English properly and that I just got here. I am not an immigrant…. you've followed the lesson enough now to know that what you did was purely out of ignorance and I assume that you *don't want to remain ignorant*…. next time don't speak to people like that."

Abu-Laban (1980; 1981) asserts that minority groups respond to "prejudice and stereotyping" in one of three ways: "[1.] ignoring both the offender and the offense; [2.] fighting back (and thereby affirming ethnic identity); [3.] or assimilating into the host society (and thereby weakening or denying ethnic identity).... [a]ll of these tendencies [are].... at work among Muslims in Canada" (1980; 1981: 104). Although in this instance Aiya confronts anti-Islamic sentiment and is thus, "fighting back" this is atypical of her general philosophy of *indifference* or, "ignoring" the offense. Essentially, the sense of *peace, human dignity, and human worth* Islam affords her makes it unnecessary to fret over the white nation's show of ignorance. Conversion to Islam has transformed Aiya's worldview which was once shaped by a hatred of white peoples in reaction to the extreme

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racism she endured while growing-up in a "predominately white neighbour" within the GTA. She explains,

> When I was six, I encountered such *severe racism* because of where I was living…. I hated all white people by the time I was *eleven years old*….because, *they conveyed* to me the message that I wasn't fine. So, instead of *me* feeling like I wasn't fine--I hated them. I *never* at any point felt like they might be *right* and started to dislike myself, dislike my Blackness.

Aiya points out that Islam *allowed* her to "stop hating"; likening her metamorphosis to that of Malcolm X (who is "pivotal" to her understanding of life) she began to perceive that "God's meaning of race" is *devoid* of both *racism and strata*. Thus, Aiya suspends judgment of white persons, giving them first a chance to prove or disprove themselves as conscious human beings.

Now "anchored with Allah" Aiya retains a shield of *strength* that enables her to "walk with confidence" as she "expects to be respected." Hence, she simply "does not care" when met by people's prejudice because, these scenes speak to the *perpetrator's own issues* but do not penetrate Aiya who refuses to act in anyway that is *below her dignity*. In utilizing Islam to overcome the racial hatred *within* and *outside* of herself Aiya already has the psychic tools to handle anti-Islamic sentiment. Hamdon (2010: 46) proclaims that one of the challenges facing Muslims in Canada is the task of *developing a counter discourse to orientalist thought*; this Black Muslim woman illustrates that one mechanism for accomplishing this is to "mentally" place oneself *beyond the reach* of discriminating forces. In doing so Aiya erects a barrier that separates her peaceful reality from the rancor of the dominant group--making it an *unreality* that these forces can dictate or compromise her conceptions of selfhood.

Similarly, Fatima's early exposure to anti-Black racism in the Eurocentric suburbs of Toronto called attention to her difference yet did not materialize into self-deprecation. Through conversion she discovered that the "inherently pluralistic" tenets of Islam indicate that, "differences in skin colour, ethnicity, and culture are *never* reasons to feel *inferior* or *superior*"--seeing as, the only thing truly separating one individual from another are *levels of God-consciousness*. Under the umbrella of this personal philosophy Fatima therefore declares "no one can make you feel inferior *without your permission*." Fatima has enwrapped herself in Islam in a manner that also divides her from a hostile non-Muslim public. Specifically, she feels that it is the "prerogative" of other peoples *to make judgments based on appearance* but this is not a practice she will partake in nor hold herself to. Again, growing-up as a Black person in a white supremacist nation equipped Fatima with the armour to confront discrimination while remaining unruffled: "I'm *used* to being the odd person out. I'm *always* the 'other'" Fatima says off-handedly. Due to the fact that this woman has *always* occupied the margins of society mainstream Canada's Islamophobia is not felt to have the power to degrade her seeing as she has already mastered a firm sense of self from her social-cultural position.

For Paulita and Tahisia a degree of cynicism patterns their indifference to dominant society's discriminatory acts, as a necessity to *comprehend* and *mentally survive* the white supremacist nation's war against Islam and Blackness. In particular, Tahisia feels that "small prejudices" targeting Islam and the hijab are simply part of life in Toronto and are therefore too insignificant to give serious attention to, especially

considering that "as a Black women you're already prepared for this. *You already know the deal*." Paulita echoes this form of anticipation:

> It is *expected* for me to meet somebody that's going to *stereotype me*, that's going to *oppress me*, that's going to *not like me*, that's not going to want to *sit next to me. I expect it* and I've encountered it many times in university, in college, on the subway…. they are the ignorant ones, not me…. one thing that I've learned is that there is racism against Black people whether they wear the hijab or not. One more reason--the hijab. Why not?

Ultimately, these women convey that the pain of discrimination can not register if one is *ready for it*. Malak (2008) writes, "Muslim women, whether in Canada or elsewhere…. pursue their just struggle according to their own visions and within the contexts of their own culture and conditions" (2008: 83). Being *mentally on guard* but *emotionally removed* from dominant culture's prejudice allows Paulita and Tahisia to manage the more bitter aspects of their African-Canadian Muslim realities. They are aware that Canadian society at large does not value them as members. I speculate that, recognizing this enables them to *compartmentalize* discrimination by relegating it to a specific area of their psyches in order to function *within* this oppressive system.

Embracing the "Benefits" of Being Unrecognizably Muslim

Donning the hijab can *increase* the amount of discrimination and/or harassment a Muslim women faces (Hoodfar 2003: 94) within a socio-cultural space that uses the *high visibility* of the veil to distinguish the "Islamic other"; as such, women who decide to *take off* the veil subdue the intensity of public prejudice. Eby initially chose to take-up the hijab at the age six to "combat the exclusion" she felt in the schoolyard wherein, the white children created a miniature replica of larger society by ostracizing the children of colour or holding them to a hierarchical structure that placed dark skin at lesser value than

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whiteness. Eby's hijab therefore symbolized a rebellion against these systems by proudly

owning her difference. Now this young Muslim women can speak from "both sides" by

contrasting what it is to live as an African-Canadian in Toronto *with* and *without* explicit

"bait" for an Islamophobic culture. Eby shares the differences she observes,

> This is what I find with Canadian society: racism here is very *polite*. It's like, "how are you doing [asked in enthusiastically friendly tone]? *Stay over there* [she stretches out her arms to indicate a barrier]." There is this *distance* that you *can not cross*. When I wore the hijab it was more pronounced. I could *feel it*. I still got jobs, I still got along with people but, there was this *tension* you could always feel. Taking off the hijab has decreased that tension. Now, *all* I have to worry about is *the colour of my skin*. White people are more willing to overlook *that* [dark skin] than they are the hijab. Especially with the "culture of terrorism" and anti-Islam sentiment…. I *hated* my first year of university I remember that during frosh week I literally felt like I had *an alligator for a head*…. there was this feeling [from white peers] of, 'why are *you here*?', 'how *dare you* feel comfortable around us.' I know that now…. they would be more welcoming because *there is less of me* for them to *feel uncomfortable with*. I'm *still a Black woman* but I find that that is less of a 'stressor' than *Muslim*--an *obvious Muslim*.

Blackness is treated as a "tolerable" deviation from the white norm by mainstream society

which has had hundreds of years to adjust to (read: subjugate) Blacks in Canada. I argue

that while Blackness has been assimilated into popular notions of what "acceptable

otherness" looks like, Islam is still an *alien* presence. As such, without the hijab Eby has

the "advantage" of solely contending with anti-Black racism without the added variable

of Islamophobia. There is a decrease in the forms of overt discrimination she must endure

seeing as, Blackness and Islam trigger different "codes" for persecution in the nation's

mind.

Tahisia also recognizes the variations in how the majority group responds to

Blacks in comparison to Muslims. Nonetheless, she explains that she is unbothered by the

general public's inability to distinguish her veil as a hijab (opposed to a Black-centric

symbol) because, this error saves her from the *negative attention* that being "noticed as a

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Muslim" garners. Tahisia embraces this miscalculation of her identity as an opportunity

to have relief from Islamophobia since the white nation is unaware that it is overlooking a

prime target for prejudice. Nevertheless, I question the toll such concessions take on the

shaping of these women's religious selves considering the reality that Toronto is not a

setting that encourages the flourishing of a Muslim identity, but in many ways

necessitates that it remain undercover.

Consciously Challenging the Stereotype

Hamdon (2010) proclaims, "Muslims who live in the West are affected by

essentialism and binaries imposed from both outside and within their communities, but

they also challenge them…. [o]ne way that they are doing this is by organizing for the

express purpose of educating, advocating, and becoming active in the public

sphere"(2010: 46). Trisha uses available public mediums to directly confront

discrimination and in this regard she is in accord with Hamdon's estimations. Firstly,

Trisha explains that she gains encouragement from the Prophet Muhammad's teachings

that Muslims who do not work to *break their bondage* actually: 1. empower the

oppressor, 2. continue their own oppression, and 3. allow the oppressor to maintain

beliefs that are *detrimental* to their well-being--therefore, Muslims must "do right and

stop the oppression." Acting on this religious edict, she proactively contests anti-hijabi

prejudice by *using the tools of the system to challenge the mentality within the system*.

Specifically, she makes use of media (writing commentaries to local newspapers) as well

as public services (reporting harassment to the police) to both combat discriminating

forces and create public awareness. Trisha points out that her encounters with prejudice

are not targeting her *as an individual* but rather, *Muslim women in general* considering that the hijab inspires these attacks; hence she works to confront her aggressors and to subvert stereotypes in order inhibit the longevity of this discrimination.

A common thread running through a number of women's narratives is the adoption of the role of "ambassador of Islam" in the effort to subvert "normative" images of the hijabi woman as well as to oppose oversimplified perceptions of Islam. For Trisha this is a conscious and focused project that includes 1. wearing the niqab to demonstrate that women who wear this *can in fact be strong* and 2. placing her daughters in the local hockey league to challenge conceptions of what a Muslim women *is* or, *is not* for a younger generation of Canadians. However, for Rachel it is the recognition that her actions are likely to be essentialized by non-Muslim society that motivates her careful comportment of self so that she challenges rather than feeds the stereotype.

Commenting on this conundrum Zine (2006: 246) reports that her participants echo the feeling that their behaviour will be "essentialized to represent all Muslims" thus they must be cautious in how they carry themselves in public spaces. In Rachel's case this particularly means that she attempts be a "better person" so that the mainstream public does not *get what they expect* and is therefore made to reconsider its opinions. For these women, combating discrimination is bound up with a sense of responsibility that takes into account the benefits or repercussions their actions will have for their Muslim-Canadian female fellows; this is a *faceless comradeship* but one inspired by knowing what it is to be persecuted not for *who you are* but for *what you symbolize* to white supremacist secular society.

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Conclusion
Point of Departure: This End Marks A Beginning

Where We Stand Now: What This Thesis Has Contributed
Explaining Patterns of Religio-Racial Ostracization

It is through the *life stories* of Muslim women that Hamdon (2010) envisions the ways by which Muslim-Canadians are "resist[ing] the pressures of imposed stereotypes and [the] very real effects on their lives" to be most keenly illustrated (2010:12). Throughout the pages of this thesis I have resolutely adopted and expanded upon Hamdon's hypothesis by: narratively traversing through the racialized realities of Black Muslim women; literarily prospecting for the devices shaping their sense of identity, belonging, and personhood; surveying the avenues which lead *towards* and *away* from their camaraderie; orienting Blackness, and Black-Canadian womanhood; and scrutinizing the discriminatory tactics of a white supremacist society. By plunging into the socio-cultural-racial *truths* of thirteen African-Canadian women who are *living their Islam*, *living their Blackness* in Toronto this work offers a brief gaze into how marginalized persons attain self-actualization in spite of the anti-Islam and/or anti-Black productions of the racist imagination.

Ultimately, I am able to declare that the mechanisms through which convert and life-long African-Canadian Muslim women (re)configure/assert their racial identity and religiosity are directly (or, indirectly) influenced by how surrounding communities respond to them. Specifically, these communities are Toronto's: 1. ethnic-majority Muslim population, 2. the non-Muslim Black communities, and 3. Eurocentric secular society at large. Each socio-cultural network has the power to "nurture" or "assault"

Black Muslim women's affirmations of self depending on the dynamic it adopts in relation to these women (*positive* [i.e. congenial] or, *negative* [i.e. racial/religious ostracization]). However it is only the final group, Eurocentric society, that acts *independently* in this system of "inclusion" and "exclusion" as the *dominant* power.

The Muslim ethnic-majority as well as the non-Muslim Black communities are both minority groups within the nation. My research indicates that these populations attempt to garner a sense of power by safeguarding their boundaries through an *exclusive membership*--that is, by regulating which individuals are "legitimately" Muslim or Black. These maneuvers act as defensive and/or reactionary measures by the group *against their own marginal positionality* which is enforced by dominant culture. As such, either minority groups' responses to African-Canadian Muslim women are in fact variables that depend upon (or, are "by-products" of) the socio-racial hierarchical constructs of white supremacist secular society.

Camaraderie

A factor bound up with this off-putting social equation is the manner in which the individual Black-Canadian Muslim woman reacts to/interprets her treatment--which can: reveal the effect(s) she considers it to have on her daily existence; highlight the personal strategies employed to mitigate rebuffs *or* explain her admittance; account for the particular shape of her worldview. The *fortitude* participants exhibit in the face of social onslaughts targeting their religio-racial selves conveys that these obstacles are not thought to be insurmountable. However I argue that they *do* influence 1. how each woman places herself in her numerous environments as well as 2. the ways one Black Muslim woman

perceives another. Hence, it is in African-Canadian women's "communions" or "disunions" that dominant culture's crusade against Blackness and Black womanhood pointedly comes to a head in this thesis.

Through participants' narratives the venom of anti-Black racism shows itself; it breaths its foulness into the crevices of Black women's "sisterhoods", rotting their foundations so that non-Muslim Black women do not see a comrade in the struggle against racist-oppression when they gaze into the face of a hijabi Black woman, but can only perceive an "other." In this way, racist society virally infects non-Muslim Black women with its Islamophobic-sexist imaginings and successfully confuses any sense of racial-gendered community. But, why is this happening? What would it mean for African-Canadian women to forge ties despite religio-cultural differences--whereby the hijab is understood for what it is, a religious symbol, and not a barrier to keep Toronto's Black women at a distance from one another? What sort of power would this kind of bonding unleash that causes white supremacist society to so relentlessly (and, fearfully?) keep these women apart?

Perhaps the answer to these queries appears in the subtle strengths African-Canadian Muslim women offer each other from within their religio-racial coalitions which form *because of/from* their marginality. This thesis demonstrates that Black-Canadian Muslim women's camaraderie can be an alternative outcome of anti-Black/anti-Islam prejudice seeing as, this malevolence actually helps to induce a "we", a *togetherness*, which does not mean any sort of "natural" affinity between Black Muslim women but rather a *necessary*, defensive solidarity. These women act as their fellows'

psychic life preservers, coming together to caress one another's wearied hearts and minds--at times through gestures as simple as eyes locking across a room. Thus African-Canadian Muslim women invigorate each other with the capacity to challenge or minimize the impact of oppressive forces.

Multiculturalism

The national edict of multiculturalism has not overridden the racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic ethos that underlies its inviting soft exterior. Prejudice continues to prevail within the nation including at its urban center for diversity, Toronto--the lived experiences of participants confirms this as fact and my thesis cements it in writing, *this truth can not be erased*. Walcott (2003) wishes to speak on Black Canadian cultures in a way that extends beyond what he calls, "the narrow and dreary confines of an anti-racism discourse" in order to bestow attention upon *the various Black selves* "which enhanc[e] lives lived far beyond the clutches of racism" (2003: 156). On this note, recognizing the prevalence of racism in Toronto as well as the hypocrisy of "multiculturalism" is used in this thesis as *a stepping stone* to first make certain realities visible and then address some pressing issues.

I want to acknowledge the presence of discrimination in the daily lives of African-Canadian Muslim women but, taking a cue from Walcott I have engaged with the *numerous complexities* framing their existence as well as the plethora of personal philosophies they employ to carry them through their struggles. Yes, racist-oppression is a unwelcome exponent of Black-Canadian Muslim women's experiences in the nation yet it does not define who they are, nor is it the sole (or, even the primary) concept through

which they establish a sense of selfhood. There is indeed more to the Black-Canadian

story than racism and this is partially what I hope to have conveyed.

I Concede That There Are In Fact Problems with this Thesis….

Issues with Participant Numbers and Demographic

This study has indicated that African-Canadian Muslims generally do not

congregate as a single community within the Black-African diaspora in Canada rather, the

individuals who wield this identity are scattered throughout the Greater Toronto Area and

dispersed amongst the general Muslim populous, oddly numbered throughout the city's

ethnic-majority mosques[37]. Hence, my participant numbers reflect these trends since the

lack of an *exclusively* Black Muslim mosque and/or community has made it difficult to

accumulate volunteers--especially with the added obstacle of Imams (justifiably) acting as

vigilant gatekeepers between their congregants and non-Muslim outsiders.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that these obstacles have adversely affected the

quality of this study. Of the fourteen women interviewed I have been able to use thirteen

of their stories in great detail and each narrative was pregnant with valuable data. The

vast variation between participants' national, ethnic, and cultural origins as well as their

socio-geographical situation within Toronto has allowed for a considerable diversity of

experiences and perspectives. Thus, this thesis offers an in-depth gaze into the

specificities of life as a Black-Canadian Muslim woman that is as unique as each

individual woman. My work was never meant to be a "general survey" of African-

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[37] Otherwise participants refuse to attend these institutions all together to avoid racist-discrimination

Canadian Muslim women's realities, instead it seeks to center on the *particular* and at this endeavour I believe it has been successful.

The methods for acquiring research participants made available to me as an outsider to the Muslim community were encased in *unpredictability* (i.e. depending on the goodwill of Muslim leaders and the chance referral of an acquaintance by confirmed subjects). Hence, I could not risk the possibility of reducing an already narrow participant pool by requiring prospective subjects to satisfy demographic variables that were any more specific than being "Black" and "Canadian"; therefore, free of age regulations this study has unwittingly settled into one on *young* life-long Muslim women and a mix of younger *and* older converts. What is interesting about either participant group is that they reveal what an autonomous Muslim identity *looks like in progress*, as seen in 1. young born Muslim women's on-going efforts to assert their religious selves within/against a familial Islam and secular society, as well as 2. the linearity of converts' narratives which track their call to Islam, the development of their faith, and the ways they situate themselves within the religious community.

However, what is missing in this investigation are the voices of *older born Muslim women.* Each life-long Muslim participant spoke of her parents' religiosity, particularly dwelling on her mother's faith--even so, this second-hand glimpse at an older generations' challenges/spiritual growth (as heard from their daughters' lips) is simply not sufficient. It would have been beneficial to document the alternative viewpoints of women *born into* and *fully matured* in their Islam especially since I presume their

approach to Black convert women differs from young life-long Muslim women who have been fully socialized in contemporary Canadian society.

Falling into the Neo-Imperialistic Trappings of Liberalism

"Why have you decided to study Islam?" Sara asks me from across her dining room table as I quickly set-up the audio-recorder for our interview. I give a summary of the experiences I have laid out in the introduction of this thesis by way of an answer-- almost as an afterthought I also mention the offensive comments made by my undergraduate peers in a senior seminar on Islam and my desire to challenge such ignorance. Sara's eyes are piercing as she carefully observes me; her voice comes out steady but with an unmistakable edge as she says, "I want to make one thing clear, Muslim women *do not need saving.*" I am completely taken aback. I immediately guess by her tone and the *readiness* of her response that it is one held on mental reserve and likely used numerous times to curb Islamophobic conjectures on "oppressed" Muslim women. I stumble over my words as I try to repair any damage, "That is not my intention, by any means" I say aloud, "I'm not one of *them;* I am *not* one of those ignorant people!" I defensively exclaim in my head.

Yet, Sara's reaction now has me questioning whether research steeped in the narratives of Muslims, such as my own, can still participate in the paternalistic/neo-imperialistic tropes of liberalist discourses. Mahmood (2008) criticizes the Western liberalist agenda that strategically uses *Muslim women's suffering* to "justify [its] interventions" (2008: 95); whereby its *political projects* are disguised by a pseudo-effort to "empower Muslim women" (2008: 95, 99) through the disastrous neo-colonial practice

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of "impos[ing] 'women's freedom' from above" (2008: 95). I decry these imperialistic and Islamophobic tactics along with Mahmood. However, I must acknowledge that although I am not engaging in the corrupt project of "Saving Muslim Women"(2008: 94) from their supposed "Islamic culture" (2008:96) my work could be interpreted in a way I do not intend for it to be. That is, as *paternalistically intervening on behalf of Muslim women* by challenging white supremacist Islamophobic forces, as if these women "need" me as representative to have their voices and struggles heard, and their battles fought.

I am literarily running from this paternalism but am unsure how to completely sever my work from it aside from consciously recognizing these possibilities and making it clear that--as I explained to Sara--*this is not my intention, by any means*. Participants have *led me* in this investigation, *telling me like it is* and I have listened. Racial and religious minority groups are constantly sparring with the oppressive powers of white society so, in the case of Black Muslim women I *do not* hope to fight their battles (nor, do they need me to) but I *do* intend to inform academic/non-academic audiences "how" these women are performing these labours for themselves.

For Whose Advantage?: Placing this Thesis in Space, Deciding Ownership

"Who is this thesis for?", "Who is to benefit from this research? Black-Canadian Muslims? Academia? Myself?" these are questions I am left to ponder at this final stage of analysis. Sajida Alvi et. al (2003) points out that academic investigations into North America's Muslim communities are generally not conducted for the benefit of Muslims themselves but instead serve non-Muslims' objectives; therefore, research subjects'

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concerns and *priorities* go unheard in works that are "about them rather than for them" (2003: xv). The stories and perspectives of Muslim women form the body of my work, they are the fabric *and* the thread holding it together and directing where it leads. African-Canadian Muslim women's opinions stand as the *primary authorities* in this study while scholars' propositions are used to complement their declarations, it is therefore through these maneuvers that I have attempted to distance this thesis from the unsettling research trends Alvi et. al draws to our attention.

Although the academic world will admittedly be the first surveyors of this work I have no intention of allowing it to remain exclusive to this elitist realm--whether that be in analysis or, by having it merely filed away as yet another Religious Studies M.A. thesis completed. This thesis is *for me* in so far as it has 1. provided a platform to explore my own Blackness by listening to and contemplating what other Black-Canadian women have to say about race, and 2. established a base on which my future research can build. Even so, this research is not *about me* so I give it back to the women from whom it came; Paulita hopes to use it to secure funding from the city for the Muslim women's community organization she heads; Rachel wants to bring it to the Muslim women's discussion panel she leads; Falah has asked me to present at a meeting of the Muslim Students' Association; while every other woman has requested a summary of my findings and can use them as she sees fit. I endeavor to subvert the status quo by offering an alternative take on Blackness, Black womanhood and Islam, in Canada--wiping off the layers of dust that have accumulated from years of neglect, which have clouded both the academic and public mind and can therefore be useful for either.

Topics for Future Study

There are a few points that arose during interviews that I either did not have the space to expand upon or could not be neatly fit into the themes of each chapter, but nevertheless deserve attention. These are as follows:

1. The preferential treatment given to white Muslims: a number of participants off-handedly mentioned the preference for white Muslims they have observed amongst the ethnic-mosque majority. By way of evidencing the anti-Black racism they face in the mosque Tahisia and Zahra compare the contempt with which Indo-Pakistani/Arab Muslims respond to them with the geniality they witness their white female friends to receive. While Eby and Falah note a tangible eagerness or excitement in the mosque community's embrace of white converts; Falah calls this a "jackpot mentality" whereby the *inferiority complex* of third world persons places whiteness on a pedestal as the "ideal" therefore, a white convert is seen as a compliment to Islam. It would be interesting to explore these trends in a study of the neo-colonized mind, internalized racism, or in future work on the effects of anti-Black discrimination on the psyches of African-Canadian Muslims.

2. *Discrimination as an obstacle to Black Muslim women's marriageability:* being Black is understood to diminish one's marriage prospects in a religious space dominated by an Indo-Pakistani/Arab population that 1. attempts to preserve their homeland cultures in a Canadian setting, yet also 2. revers whiteness. Falah and Tahisia each declare that fair complexioned persons are coveted by the Muslim community as ideal mates thus, Black women receive a clear message that their dark skin is undesirable and hence it is unlikely

that they will be sought after as spouses. Furthermore, in speaking of their eventual engagements to members of the Muslim ethnic-majority Tahisia and Rachel describe the outcry of soon-to-be in-laws against their sons' marriage to a Black woman. A useful analysis of this prejudice would perhaps survey the history of the ethnic majority's devaluation of Blacks and/or interview members of this group to gather their views on this apparent system of eugenics.

3. *Recognizing Blacks' historical place in Islam*: although uncovering Black peoples' allegiance to Islam before and during the slave trade was one of my early objectives this thesis changed shape as I began to write therefore, this history is only briefly touched upon in chapter one. However, several participants draw on this past and mark its importance: they comment on the frequent portrayal of Islam as a Middle-Eastern religion so that Black-African people's long-standing history in/contribution to the faith (dating back to the time of the Prophet) is overlooked, unknown, or denied; they also emphasize the significance of knowing about this Islamic ancestry in forming their Muslim identities and acquiring a feeling of "rootedness" in Islam. An investigation of African-Canadian women's responses to an ancient Black Muslim presence (through interview questions that directly target this past, unlike my own) would be revealing for queries of identity/personhood.

Acknowledging My Status as Insider/Outsider; Placing Myself in Academia

When I am called upon to explain my research--whether that be in the introduction class of a graduate seminar, during an academic luncheon, at a party, or even

during polite chitchat at the Doctor's office--I am typically asked if I am Muslim. "No" I reply, "but I am Black and I am a woman." This is the statement I found myself falling back upon each time I was requested to *legitimate* my interest in Islam. Demanded to *validate* my "right" to study Muslim women I relied on a point of "sameness" between myself and research subjects wherein, I *justify* my work by drawing on the racial-gendered similarities I felt we shared, to quiet skeptics. Today I write this paragraph highly critical of this impulsive blurring of difference. Black womanhood is by no means a monolithic identity so even with this marker *I can not be the same* as the women whose histories I have recorded; the experiences that have sculpted my conceptions of Blackness are not identical to their own and thus have given it an alternate "flavour," so to speak. Furthermore, to rely on Black womanhood alone to establish ties between us ignores the significance that *being Muslim* holds, while dismissing the ways an allegiance to Islam molds a sense of a "Black" and "female" self.

I take on the responsibility of *questioning* and *challenging* my dual insider/outsider status to ensure that I do not overstep its very real limits by over-extending the privileges that can come with this standing. At the same time however, *I am* indeed a racialized person and this *does* in fact influence my investigative approach as well as the ways I interpret participants' experiences. Rai Reece (2007) self-reflexively writes on her own position as an insider/outsider Black female researcher in a tone I feel to acutely speak to my situation:

> My research will involve me writing about the Other from the viewpoint of the Other. I am writing as a neo-colonized body, with particular educational, class, and ability privileges, yet I am simultaneously writing as a marginalized and racialized woman re/articulating the experiences of other marginalized and racialized women…. occupy[ing] the simultaneous positions of academic privilege *and* racial marginality in the academy (2007: 269).

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Reece beautifully articulates the multiple selves that come into play as a Black scholar writing on women whose socio-racial status converge and retract with her own. As Blacks and thus racial "others" *we the researchers* and *they the participants* are both thrust to the peripheries of society. Even so, this marginal relegation happens in different ways, further, the demographic variables typically dividing one person from another also separates researcher and subject--including, the "academic privilege" unique to the scholar's social positioning. There is most undoubtedly a *privilege* that comes with writing this thesis: I have been given the opportunity and the means to document others' lives; to immerse myself in the literature and devote months to nothing but contemplation and the composition of script--I do not forget to be grateful for the places this work has taken me.

Nevertheless, there is a discomfort in all this because it is from within the privileged, academic realm that my marginality (and that of my work) becomes most pronounced. I am writing on Blackness from a white hegemonic space that is, within a institution that is a miniature replica of larger white supremacist society. I problematize and criticize the oppressive tendencies of dominant society, attempting to unsettle its normativity and dethrone the policies it blindly prides itself on; yet, I need the *permission* of the white hegemonic institution to do these things. I must write in a language, in a format that *it approves* of--I need the *consent of whiteness to challenge whiteness* and this makes me nervous.

I am nervous because I am considering what it means to be one of five students of colour--and the sole Black person--in a department with forty graduate students. I am

nervous because *Blackness is a novelty* and *Islam a rarity* in this space, so I question if my work is appreciated for its quality or as a "requisite diversity"--an (un)conscious implementation of affirmative action. In this way I am made into the "representative" of Blackness amongst the graduate student body and in this cohort of Religious Studies MA theses. This makes me nervous as I consider what this may mean for the *depth* of the critique I will receive when, somehow, I stand as the only "expert" on Blackness in this academic setting. What I am able to do is this: offer up my words with confidence, assert the independent importance of African-Canadian Muslim women's realities, continue to write, present what topics still need to be explored, and hope someone else also sees their value. I can not continue to be the only one who asks these questions, I can not be the only one troubled by these things.

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