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Politics of Resistance: On Muslim Women Advancing a Collective Critical Faith-Based Epistemic

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By

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ABSTRACT

Hegemonic anti-Muslim rhetoric, entangled with global structures of white supremacy, imperialism, and colonialism, constructs Islam as culturally and civilizationally critical to the instability of supposedly peaceful secular western societies. Muslim women's bodies, specifically, become sites where the Muslim is socio-politically constructed as Other, disconnected from her religiosity and constituted as a racialized Other. This dissertation contributes to the nuanced and intersectional body of scholarship examining the complexities of the Muslim experience in Canada today by analyzing the creation and power of a group of Muslim women engaged in impactful resistances as they seek to create change within and for their communities. Analyses of subjectivities, resistance, and power relations unpack how individuals navigate between externalized constructions of Self and internalized constructions of Self, through strategies that embrace, confront, adopt, and modify.

This dissertation analyzes a community-based project in which I invited four Muslim women activists in Windsor-Essex to together plan, implement, and evaluate a social action to address anti-Muslim racism. Component One comprised of the community project, where the women decided to create a wellness-centered space for Muslim women to unburden the challenges in their lives, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, global racist and antiracist movements, and their various intersecting responsibilities. This group, Circles of Wisdom, was to be a safe space of support, care, and feminist community. Component Two comprised of the research project, in which, as a researcher, I thematically analyzed secondary data from Component One in addition to scheduling follow-up

individual interviews with the community members who participated in Component One. This research component explored the following research question: *How do Muslim women activists in Windsor-Essex develop a collective political consciousness to resist the challenges they face as gendered religious subjects in Canada?*

In this dissertation, I theorize that Circles of Wisdom constitutes a collective critical faith-based epistemic resistance (Zine, 2004), a novel strategy for engaging in resistance founded on shared faith, shared social justice values, and shared longing for community, created by and for Muslim women. Through the women's simultaneous embrace and refusal of various power relations that externally sought to construct their subjectivities, I theorize how the participants navigate and strategize to create a new collective subjectivity that reclaims their sense of self and more authentically reflects who they are and who they want to be as Muslim women. This resistance was characterized by three primary components: (1) constructing an alternative collective subjectivity based on a new set of social relations rooted in wellness; (2) meeting in a transcendental digital space; and, (3) demonstrating responsibility to community. Circles of Wisdom demonstrates that prioritization of community and reclamation of Self are foundational for Muslim women as they navigate a world dominated by neoliberal anti-Muslim racism.

In addition to contributing to the fields of political sociology and social movements, transnational feminism, community-engaged methodologies, and critical Muslim studies, this project inspires the creation of additional community-centred spaces for Muslim women focused on care, community, and wellness.

DEDICATION

To my dear Nani Jan, who always wanted to be a doctor and passed away before she could see me become one.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon.

Surely, to Allah we belong and to Allah shall we return.

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

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CHAPTER ONE: ROOTS & IMAGININGS

Epistemological Defiance

In January 2022, I had the privilege of attending a virtual conference, *Alhamdu*, which was a Muslim futurisms conference named after the Arabic word for praise. This collective of artists, academics, and visionaries built on the work of Afrofuturisms and, through poetry, literature, research, music, fashion, and art, collectively imagined a life outside of domination, outside of hegemonic politicization, and outside of control over one's sense of self. The collective imagined

> a future where our dignity, flourishing, and imaginations as Muslims are actualized … The chronic suffering of yesterday and the compounded acute traumas of each day are constant affronts to the Muslim spirit—restricting us from conceiving and building toward a utopia of our own. May **the process of boldly asserting our existence** disrupt the hegemonic powers of today and serve as a portal to another planet where our joy is championed, our spirits are revitalized, and our commitments to flourishing and justice are re-energized. (Mipsterz, 2023)

This epistemological defiance was powerful — an encapsulation of desires to not only break away from the confines of this world but to imagine a vastly different world. Never before had I encountered such a bold imagining and, while attending that conference, I realized that the possibilities for a different future lie within us, those who have been directly impacted by hegemonic neoliberal white supremacist heteropatriarchal structures of domination. And these possibilities rely on that bold assertion of existence – a radical reclamation and exclamation of self. Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2021)

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defines epistemological resistance or the challenging of knowledge as a process "where thinkers aim to step outside the epistemological spaces of Western social theory to imagine new possibilities for knowledge and power relations" (p. 57). Accordingly, the possibilities for epistemological transformation lie in re-forging relationships of solidarity and care so that we create not only new relationships but also new knowledges about ourselves and about what needs to be done in order to put those new possibilities into practice. I resolved to use my sociological imagination to put into practice a transformative project attentive to defiance, innovation, and reclaiming a sense of collective Muslimness lost to many of my community members.

Stolen Lands & Lives

This project takes place on Turtle Island, which is land that was stolen from the Indigenous peoples. The region of Windsor-Essex, Ontario, specifically, is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg people of the Three Fires Confederacy, comprised of the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie. Narratives of how myself and the women in this project arrived on these lands as settlers must be rooted in a deep and critical understanding of the history of the creation of this nation through the theft of land, cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the attempted eradication of their cultures, languages, and heritage. As this dissertation is tied to a university institution, it must also be recognized at the outset that in North America, "the institution was founded by the missionary and settler projects engaged in the genocide of Indigenous peoples across the Americas" (Thobani, 2022, p. 11). Correspondingly, the institution benefitted directly from Indigenous dispossession and enslaved Black labour and, within its structures, continued to reproduce

a racialized and gendered hierarchical order that maintained coloniality, white supremacy, and racism. This is connected to "an international system of racial governance … that knits together white and nonwhite nations into a global white supremacy anchored in imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism" (Razack, 2022, p. 6). In this way, challenges to the global racial logics that construct the Muslim Other must also challenge the ongoing settler colonial projects that continue to construct Indigenous and Black communities as Other.

Windsor-Essex is uniquely located on the banks of the Detroit River and has a rich history as the site where John Freeman Walls, formerly enslaved, and Henry Bibb, an abolitionist, established an Underground Railroad terminal to provide refuge to others escaping enslavement in the United States in the nineteenth century (John Freeman Walls Historic Site, n.d.). Today, Windsor is also home to a large Muslim community from a range of nationalities, ethnicities, and linguistic backgrounds, comprising 7.1% of the Windsor-Essex population (Statistics Canada, 2023). Although Muslims have been immigrating to Essex County since the early twentieth century, Windsor's first official mosque, the Windsor Islamic Youth Association, was not built until 1956 (Windsor Islamic Association, 2022). Windsor's proximity to Dearborn, Michigan, which comprises the largest Arab and Muslim population in the United States, also contributes to the strong feeling of Muslim community in Windsor-Essex. Finally, the University of Windsor also has a significant international, Muslim, and Black student body yet there is still much work to be done to transform institutionalized racial logics that maintain settler coloniality, white supremacy, and racism in the region.

Muslim Embodiment

My embodiment as a millenial Muslim woman who practices *hijab* is inevitably shaped by the events of September 11, 2001. I recall watching the horrific images on the morning news, shocked by the utter disregard for human life. As a teenager grappling with the impact of that day, I could not have predicted the sociopolitical repercussions of this monumental event on the lives of myself and others in "the 9/11 generation," a term coined by Jasmin Zine (2022b) to represent the Muslim youth who "have a unique legacy because they have not known a world before the aftermath and backlash surrounding these events" (p. 3).

Angry that words such as *jihad* and *hijab*, words that represented core tenets of my religion, were being misused and misrepresented in the media, I began my own counter-education campaign to change public perceptions about my faith. I asked my grade ten social studies teacher if I could deliver a presentation to our class on the topic "Clearing Misconceptions about Islam." My teacher supported the idea and, with the help of my parents and community members, I prepared a slideshow where I delved into women's rights in Islam and my understanding of the concept of *jihad*. My primary motivation was to teach my friends that Islam was a religion of peace and so I incorporated whatever material would help them to differentiate between Muslims like me and the construction of "those" other Muslims on the news. In the weeks following 9/11, I read in the news and heard from acquaintances about incidents of verbal and physical harassment of Muslims, particularly of Muslim women who were identifiable as Muslim through their practice of *hijab* or *niqab*. Vandalism of mosques increased. Friends of my parents advised me to stop

practicing *hijab* so that I would not be so immediately identifiable as Muslim. Fears surrounding safety became a common concern.

Twenty years later, on June 6, 2021, while taking an evening walk in their neighbourhood, the Afzaal family was murdered in London, Ontario. A white man deliberately drove his car into the six family members while they were waiting at an intersection (Dubinski, 2023). This act of violence was enacted by sheer hatred for Islam and Muslims and immediately, Muslims across Canada spoke out about their fears of leaving their homes. The next day, I was scheduled for a day surgery in London, Ontario and recall the simultaneous grief and dread, not wanting to leave my house much less travel to that same city where this horrific Islamophobic violence had just occurred. I recall being overwhelmed by messages and emails from colleagues and friends expressing their concerns, unsure of how to process such violence. My fears were exacerbated by the vulnerabilities I felt as a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a sect within the Islamic community, which experiences state-sanctioned persecution in South and Southeast Asia. Even in the diaspora, as a South Asian Ahmadi Muslim, intergenerational fear and caution impacts my everyday negotiations (Mian Akram, 2022). The more I speak out and become visible, the more I potentially become a target.

I realize that I have to choose: Do I let the fears supersede my responsibilities to my community? What about my responsibilities to my faith to seek justice and goodness? Most times, I have to remember Sara Ahmed's (2016) wisdom that even "survival can be protest" (p. 237).

Representation in Question

My Muslimness becomes complicated in my work as an educator, particularly when it comes to the notion of "representation" as a racialized *hijabi* Muslim woman. As a racialized *hijabi* Muslim woman, I am visible. As a racialized and visibly Muslim woman who is both a graduate student and an instructor, I am a minority in the academy and therefore hyper-visible. And during the COVID-19 pandemic, twenty years post-9/11, amidst the backdrop of growing racial violence and anti-racist organizing, I embodied a very particular type of simultaneous invisibility and visibility (Puwar, 2004) in academia. My *hijab*, both in a seat and at the front of the classroom, remains politicized and rooted in neo-Orientalist racial logics that frame Muslim women as submissive, homogenous, and fundamentalist. Law professor Nadia Ahmad (2021) wittily describes this as "the trope of the anti-intellectual illiterate Islamist terrorist hijabi" (p. 31). To this point, Nirmal Puwar (2004) writes that those who are hypervisible and hypermarked as other through their bodies come under question, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, for their lack of rationality and mind (read: mechanized rigour, quantifiable hours, and numerical output) with little margin for personal circumstance or humanity.

I recently experienced a moment of affirmation while teaching an undergraduate course as a sessional instructor. A Muslim student approached me at the end of the first class to tell me that I was the reason they chose to stay in the course as they were so proud to see a Muslim woman professor in *hijab*, which they had never seen before, and felt like it was possible for them to one day also teach in higher education. Nervous for the first day of a new course, this comment affirmed my commitment to a career in academia. This student's experience is consistent with Henry et al. (2017)'s study which reports that

Indigenous and racialized students rarely see themselves reflected within the faculty composition or within university leadership positions, especially in the social science and humanities departments.

Embodying an academic position, however, also comes with a particular kind of responsibility, part of which is having to respond to questions of credibility. A few weeks later, this same student visited my office hours to discuss the topic for their final project. After a lengthy discussion, they asked, "How do you keep your personal beliefs and opinions as a Muslim out of your lessons, especially when you teach about more 'controversial' topics such as same sex marriage or cisnormativity?" I was surprised. The same student who commended me for paving the way for Muslim students like them was questioning me on how I kept what they considered to be my personal beliefs out of the class material when teaching about gender and race—never mind that I spent countless hours every week curating material for my lectures to encourage critical thinking, amplify Indigenous, Black, and racialized voices, women, queer and trans voices, use a range of sources from around the world to challenge Eurocentric normativity, and so on. This student assumed that because I was Muslim, my classes would be rooted in Islamic scripture, or I would not be comfortable teaching about gender and sexuality-based identities. Academia's whiteness and Christianness is so often invisible and ubiquitous, even to this Muslim student. The privilege extended to white male Christian professors— that of objectivity and rationality—was not extended to me.

Puwar's (2004) work is useful here for contextualizing this conversation, as my credibility and professionalism, my ability to teach course material and not my personal

beliefs, was easily called into question by this student. Puwar (2004) writes that circumstances of those who are simultaneously invisible and visible in the institution are complicated by four aspects: "A burden of doubt, infantilisation, super-surveillance and a burden of representation" (p. 58). They are simultaneously conspicuous and selected for representing a certain category as well as invisible in their abilities as capable – this makes for a complicated concept of "representation."

The COVID-19 Pandemic & Racial Logics

Since the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, the world has seen fatalities in the millions, overburdened healthcare systems, the subsuming of small businesses by multinational corporations, and the physical and mental health effects of enduring months of social isolation and economic stress. Indigenous and racialized populations were more susceptible to the impacts of the pandemic due to the burden of intergenerational structural racism (Jiwani, 2020) with additional intersecting risk factors such as housing discrimination, overrepresentation in low-wage and precarious employment situations, and limited access to adequate healthcare. Women were even further disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, not only in terms of their overrepresentation as essential and frontline workers (and therefore increased exposure to the virus) but also in terms of added domestic and childcare responsibilities as they were pressured back into positions they had deliberately left (Whiley, Sayer, & Juanchich, 2021, p. 4). This burden was not felt evenly though, even amongst racialized populations. For example, staying-at-home during the pandemic was conceived as "liberating and restorative," providing a unique moment for Somali Muslim

mothers in Canada to retreat to private spaces and seek respite from Islamophobia and anti-Black racism (Yusuf, 2022, p. 123).

The early onset of the pandemic rendered "those most vulnerable as those most disposable" (Jiwani, 2020, p. 116). Structural violence which targeted those at the bottom of Canada's racial hierarchy manifested through the oxymoron of declaring them as pandemic heroes in their roles as "essential" and "frontline" workers. These were predominately racialized populations and women who were not afforded the luxury of working from home and therefore protecting themselves and their families from exposure to the virus. Anti-Asian racism, tied to the "yellow" peril of the virus, resurfaced historical racist constructions of Asians that led to forced internment during World War II and the use of their cheap labour to build the Canadian Pacific Railway (Jiwani, 2020). Even the concept of masking was rooted in racial logics (Bullock, 2020; Mian Akram, 2020; Zine, 2020). Zine (2020) argues, "Masks are part of a visual symbolic system that affirms the social and cultural registers of liberal civility, social responsibility and public safety on one hand, and inscribes racial and cultural exclusion on the other" (p. 23). The good citizen concerned with public safety, the wearer who wore their mask religiously during the pandemic, was commended. The racial other who oozed danger and thwarted the white masculine gaze through the practice of *niqabi*, on the other hand, was vilified.

And so as the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the world's new normal towards social distancing, masking, and quarantining upon the first onset of symptoms, the racial pandemic shifted towards a new normal of amplifying all instances of racial injustice in every sector and space. In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by Minneapolis Police and the death of Regis Porchinski-Paquette on May 27, 2020, the

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world witnessed a racial awakening (and reckoning) and global mobilization of anti-Black racism protests and activism gaining momentum, fueled by pandemic restrictions and social media awareness. This unique moment comprised of battles between hope and despair, change and complacency, community and isolation, and informs the setting upon which this project takes place and from which a new epistemic could be imagined.

Muslim Motherhood

The COVID-19 pandemic hit while I was on my second parental leave from my PhD program. Like other families, my spouse and I were forced to pivot. As parents to two children under the age of five, we had many difficult decisions to make, all related to the fears and anxieties of potentially catching and spreading the virus while keeping up with our work, school, and home demands. Almost a year later, I returned to my program from parental leave, amidst ongoing lockdowns, school closures, and fluctuating public health guidelines. My spouse and I had some difficult decisions to make about how to effectively work-from-home (recognizing the immense privilege we had to WFH during this time). Playing parenting tag ("it's your turn now"), hyper-scheduling, and figuring out how to keep the kids busy and quiet while lecturing or during a meeting were our everyday considerations. It was just the two of us, without breaks – work, kids, home, repeat; work, kids, home, repeat. Seeing videos online of how some people's lives had slowed down during the early days of the pandemic (which provided them with more time to bake bread and find new hobbies such as cross-stitching) made me anxious and jealous.

As a Muslim mother, I am also responsible for raising my children in an environment that generally does not understand nor embrace who they are. There is a

growing body of scholarship that unpacks how Muslim parents navigate whiteness and anti-Muslim racism in the diaspora (Abdalla & Chen, 2023; Özdemir, 2022; Saleh, 2019). For example, Abdalla and Chen (2023) explore how Muslim parents navigate being hypervisible politicized Muslim subjects, which is complicated by the challenging task of parenting minoritized children who are growing up with widespread anti-Muslim racism in their schools. Saleh (2019) elucidates the concept of relational resistance to narratives of the "good" Muslim mother through narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and co-composing stories. Özdemir (2022) shares an autoethnographic account of the challenges of raising a Muslim child while navigating global racial logics. This scholarship reflects the growing research that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how global sociopolitical contexts related to colonial-racial logics shape the everyday decision-making and experiences of Muslim parents with their children, such as ongoing conversations that affirm their identities and provide strategies for navigating their own lives in anti-Muslim contexts. On a backdrop of growing anti-Muslim violence and targeting, the fears as a parent exacerbate and it can become overwhelming and exhausting – which is another emotional and mental labour that inspired me to create this project and, in doing so, hope to imagine a different future for my children and others' children.

The Project & The Women

This dissertation analyzes a transformative, feminist community-engaged project with two components: Component One comprised a community project where myself and other Muslim women community members organized a social action project to challenge anti-Muslim racism; Component Two comprised a research project where I, as a

researcher, analyzed secondary data from Component One and conducted follow-up interviews with the women that participated in Component One to evaluate their experience of organizing that action. This dissertation contains my thematic analysis, as a researcher, of secondary data from Component One as well as primary data from Component Two. The ethical considerations of both components were carefully determined in close consultation with the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board and are analyzed in detail in Chapter Six. Due to the emergent nature of this project, I also relied on constant and continual advice from my supervisor, who is an experienced feminist community-based researcher and scholar. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the various components of the project but elaborate on all of these aspects in subsequent chapters in this dissertation, particularly in Chapter Six.

Component One, or the community project, stems from my imagination as a Muslim woman and community member. I wanted to invite Muslim women that I knew – women who were active, vocal, and committed to making change within and for their communities – to gather and plan a social action together, something to address the anti-Muslimness impacting our communities. The women were all engaged in important work in their communities; I wondered, what would happen if I invited them to collaborate together? Imagine, what could we accomplish *together*? I reached out to the women that I knew guided not by a research question but by an interest in creating a new activist collective, one that could together plan a social action to address the anti-Muslim hate and violence in our society. Upon advice from my institutional ethics board, I sought the women's verbal consent to digitally record our discussions and take notes during the group

meetings; the women were also made aware at the outset that their information could be used in my doctoral dissertation analysis.

Four women – with the pseudonyms Zainab, Fatima, Aliya, and Sumayya – and I met virtually four times on Zoom© in spring 2022. Although all four women were well-educated millennials who practiced *hijab*, there were differing intersecting factors in each of their positionalities. Zainab is a graduate student of East African heritage who is active on her campus. Fatima is a recently married professional of West Asian heritage. Aliya is a mother of two of South Asian heritage who is currently on maternity leave. And Sumayya, also of South Asian heritage, publicly engages in anti-Islamophobia work. Over the course of our discussions, the women reflected on their complicated experiences as Muslim women, even more complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the current sociopolitical moment. During our discussions, a number of topics were raised by the women, from racist incidents to career plans to recipes to relationships with family members to plans for Ramadan. The space was reminiscent of women's *halaqas* in Muslim communities, which are women's gatherings at the mosque, in community centres, or in homes, often with young children in attendance, to learn about religion and build friendships. Our particular group was rooted in similar principles of community but instead of discussions of scripture and theology, the group used the space to reflect on their individual experiences, build connections with one another, and imagine societal and community-based changes. When asked what our group's social action should be, the women collectively decided that they wanted to create spaces focused on Muslim women's wellness and care, spaces that would provide safety and sisterhood for one another. Although I had initially imagined that we would plan an external, public-facing action to

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challenge anti-Muslim racism, the women expressed strongly that they wanted to focus inwards, on rebuilding a sense of community that had been lost during the pandemic. While discussing what to name the group, Fatima suggests "Circles of Wisdom," describing the rationale as follows:

It sounds very cliché right now, I dunno but I'm just thinking of circles, like just reminds of you of something you attend at a mosque I guess so like a *halaqa* kind of idea and then wisdom, it's just, **people are just sharing advice**, I dunno. Kind of cliché, I dunno maybe it's just a starting point to think of something.

The initial impetus for this project was to collectively plan a public social action to be taken up by the group but instead, the women took the project in a direction focused on relationships, solidarity, and developing community. By deciding to prioritize a space of wellness, relationships, and shared solidarity, they suggest a novel and innovative way of thinking through how Muslim women construct wellness as part of a longer term strategy for community-based responsibility.

After the fourth group conversation, I switched into my role as a researcher, which moved this project into its second component: the research component. I reviewed the digital recordings, transcripts, and my written notes and memos from before, during and after the group meetings to determine a research question that could be used to analyze the power of this collective. The following research question emerged: *How do Muslim women activists in Windsor-Essex develop a collective political consciousness to resist the challenges they face as gendered religious subjects in Canada?* I submitted an application to the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board for secondary use of data for analysis

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to analyze the digital recordings, written transcripts, and my notes and memos before, during and after the group meetings. After receiving clearance, I also applied to the REB for approval to conduct individual follow-up interviews with each of the women to evaluate their experience of being part of the group. Once this was granted, I contacted participants for interview recruitment. The length of time (about eight months) and corresponding space between the last of the community group discussions and the recruitment for interviews signaled a conscientious shift in the project from a community space into a research space, and provided the women with space to make an informed decision about whether or not they felt comfortable participating in the research phase of the project. I conducted interviews with three of the women to evaluate their experiences of participating in the collective. What emerged was a critical faith-based epistemic, reflective of a reclamation of a collective Muslim feminist subjecthood comprised of nuanced embraces and refusals of power relations, which ultimately challenged essentialist and reductionist categorizations of "the Muslimwoman" and drew attention to the power relations that converged in their complicated subjecthoods. These arguments are developed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five of this dissertation. In doing so, the women demonstrated pre-conditions for transformative change as well as the transformative possibilities when women come together to work collectively and dialogue with one another, determining what they need to create for themselves in order to navigate their complex worlds.

As an innovative piece of research conducted at an unusual sociopolitical time, this analysis extends the body of existing literature on political sociology and social movements, transnational feminism, and critical Muslim studies by not only considering

the importance of collective-building to the work of women's organizing but actually creating and nurturing that collective in order to embody the spirit, principles, and social change objectives deemed important to the Muslim women activists in this project. In their analysis of the movement No One is Illegal, which relied on solidarities between migrant and Indigenous populations, Harsha Walia describes the concept of "prefiguration as an anticapitalist practice," defined as "the idea we have to build our movement cultures and our leftist institutions in the model of the world we are seeking to create" (CES Journal & Walia, 2020, p. 21-2). This model, one built on feminist, queer, and Indigenous communities of care, counters the exploitative, extractive, competitive, and individualist capitalist colonial agenda. It relies on "kinship as a political process" and moves "from competition to interdependence" (CES Journal & Walia, 2020, p. 22). This "communal ethic" of prefiguration reliant on interdependence, kinship, and care was palpable in Circles of Wisdom, the group created by the women in this project. Defying what tried to pull them apart and pull them down, the women sought friendship, support, and wellness. In doing so, they prefigured and modeled what change could look like. Thus, the notion of imagination guides this project, specifically, the hope of reimagining a different future through the permission to consider and enact, "What if?"

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One introduced readers to the inspirations for the project, providing accounts from my positionality as a researcher as well as the sociopolitical challenges that informed its inception. Chapter Two explicates the theoretical framework that informs this research, which lies at the nexus of four

theoretical areas: (1) between political sociology and social movements, and transnational feminist theory to investigate power, subjectivity, resistance, and social change for gendered religious subjects; (2) amid the backdrop of global racial neoliberal logics that define secularity through the construction of the racial Other; (3) as a product of systemic Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism which politicizes and racializes Muslim subjectivities to uphold white supremacy; and, (4) Muslim feminist organizing and solidarity which attends to the particular intersectional ways in which Muslim women's embodiments and subjectivities can be both sites of limitation and resistance. Chapter Three presents community member profiles for Zainab, Fatima, Aliya, and Sumayya. In doing so, the reader garners an understanding of the membership of Circles of Wisdom and their intersectional individual experiences which formed the basis for the collective decision to prioritize building communities of care for Muslim women as the group's social action project. Chapter Four analyzes how the participants reflected on their individual subjectivities and resistances through their simultaneous embrace and refusal of power relations in their everyday lives, specifically in four areas: (1) refusal to veil religious subjectivities in secular spaces; (2) navigating anti-Muslim racism; (3) refusal to embrace being faith ambassadors and reimagining resistance; and, (4) refusal to be complicit in internalized oppressions. This analysis demonstrates that the very production of the women's Muslim subjectivities sets out the possibilities for the type of Muslim subject they can and want to be. Chapter Five analyzes the space created in Circles of Wisdom and demonstrates how this critical and collective space of epistemological advancement is representative of a novel resistance that simultaneously embraces and refuses the exercise of power relations and is rooted in shared social relations rooted in wellness, a shared

transcendental digital space, and shared responsibility for community. Chapter Six describes the methodological innovations required to design and implement this project. Placing this methodology chapter at the end of the dissertation after the data analysis is unconventional but doing so reinforces the innovation of the methodological approach and allows for reference to the data as evidence of the methodological decision-making. This chapter describes in detail the two components of the project: the community project and the research project. These components are guided by principles of a transformative, community-engaged feminist ethic of care. Finally, Chapter Seven summarizes the arguments in this dissertation and present possibilities for continued imaginings rooted in transformation, community, and wellness.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I explicate the intersecting conceptual areas that inform this project and demonstrate how their intersections culminate in the unique space in which this project originates. These areas include: political sociology and social movements; transnational feminist theory; secularity and religious subjectivities; systemic Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, and the politicization of Muslims in Canada; and, Muslim feminist organizing and intersectional solidarity-building.

Conceptual Framework

Social theory requires "seeing theoretically" (Woodiwiss, 2005), and so I begin by elucidating the theoretical frameworks from which I draw my current knowledge base and by explicating the concepts I seek to investigate (Datta, Frauley, & Pearce, 2010). The concepts stem from two primary fields of research: political sociology and social movements, and transnational feminist theory. The frameworks from political sociology and social movements explicate sociological concepts including politics, subjectivity, resistance, and social change, and the frameworks from transnational feminist theory guide my investigation of Muslim women as gendered religious subjects navigating and redefining their individual and collective subject formations amidst global constructions and discourses around Islam and Muslims. My study converges at the nexus of these two scholarly traditions and advances scholarship in both fields.

Political Sociology & Social Movements

As a discipline, political sociology has shifted from concerning how members or groups in society (parties, movements, voters, and classes) affect the state to a broader

understanding of unlimited "politics" that affect individuals in many complicated ways (Béland, Ramos, & Stanbridge, 2016, p. 337). It is a field that is interdisciplinary and emergent, allowing for concepts to develop multiple meanings. Carroll (2016) writes, "In this rich ambiguity lies its promise" (p. 346). Contemporary political sociology advances analyses of "cultural politics," or how changing meanings are attributed to social actors within social structures (Nash, 2010, p. 37). Contemporary political sociologists uncover and explicate the complicated and contested intersections and contradictions in "how symbols are interpreted and re-interpreted in social life" (Nash, 2010, p. 34), untangling and making visible the embeddedness (and embodiedness) of subjects within sets of social relations. The use of the term "subject" in this dissertation, as elaborated below, signifies how individuals are constructed relationally through social processes both within and outside of the control of the individual. Its usage reflects the politicization of the individual. Situating sociological research within political sociology allows sociologists to analyze "the contestation and transformation of social identities and structures" (Nash, 2010, p. 4). These notions of political sociology are rooted in critical social theory which Collins (2021) defines as:

> Encompass[ing] bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people who are differentially placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterised by injustice. What makes critical social theory 'critical' is its commitment to justice. (pp. 53-4)

It is significant to situate my research within political sociology as a means of studying how gendered Muslim subjects are discursively formed (and informed) by structural constructs, and how these same subjects can subvert these structural constructions.

Power, Subject, Resistance

As a political sociologist, to understand how subjects are formed and re-formed, I must consider the interconnectedness of the subject with discourse, power relations, and resistance. The foundational works of scholars such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Homi Bhabha together provide useful visualizations of these abstract concepts (López, 2003).

The subject is one who is "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to [her] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 2003a, p. 130). Thus, the signifier "subject" has two distinct meanings: the subject is both "the person who is the subject of action and the person who is subjected to something" (Benton & Craib, 2011, p. 167). Foucault analogizes subjectivization with the surgical suturing of the wound in which there is both precision and space for a gap (Benton & Craib, 2011). The subject, then, is one who is constituted at the point of suture with simultaneous meticulousness and void. The assignation of subjectivity, through interpellation or hailing an individual as a concrete subject (Althusser, 2014), fixes that subject into that position. When a subject is hailed through language and fixed into a certain position, what are her possibilities for subversion? As Butler (1993) questions, "if one comes into discursive life through being called or hailed in injurious terms, how might one occupy the interpellation by which one is already occupied to direct the possibilities of resignification against the aims of violation" (p. 123)? This suggests the inherent link between a subject and her resistance;

her resistance is rooted in her very subjectivity. Thus, though attempts at signification may be an external form of control and domination, they may also constitute an important marker of identity and self-determination. Therefore, subjectivities are relational, created in "slippage," "excess," and "difference" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). This process of subjectivization is reflective of the construction of the individual within processes of politicization and, in this dissertation, the term "subject" is used intentionally for these reasons.

Further, to interrogate subjectivity is to interrogate power relations as Foucault (2003b) argues "power relations are exercised … through the production and exchange of signs" (p. 136). Subjectivity and power are also tied to discourse for Foucault (1990), who argues that discourse "transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p. 101). This suggests that power is related to epistemic production and re-production. In Saba Mahmood's (2005) foundational study of Muslim women's agency in Egypt, she draws on the work of Butler who uses Foucault's delineation of power not as a form of domination but as an exercise of power relations through which subjects are formed and re-formed, writing, "the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (p. 17). This relationship between subjectivity, resistance, and power relations is key for this analysis.

Processes of subject identification, re-identification, formation and re-formation are "never completed – always 'in process'" (Hall, 2000, p. 16), and thus a subject's understandings of her Self (as well as her responses to other's understandings of her Self)

are also always "in-process." One strategy for negotiating this "in-process" space is ambivalence, which Butler (1993) defines as "being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (p. 125). This simultaneous implication and opposition is both enabling and violating (Butler, 1993). Facing an impossibility of choice, the subject goes back and forth at the ambivalent site of discursive formation "which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds-and fails to proceed" (Butler, 1993, p. 124). This space of ambivalence is open to negotiation, is a site of appropriation and subversion, and is a potential site of resistance. This process is messy and not linear: "This is not first an appropriation and then a subversion. Sometimes it is both at once; sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place" (Butler, 1993, p. 128). This site is dangerous, but a necessary risk that an ambivalent body must take in order to respond to external subjectivation. The possibilities opened at the boundary are immense; as Ku (2019) writes, "borders are zones of both privileges and miseries. … Borders can thus be sites of radical political subjectivity, even as they limit" (p. 6). What ambivalence suggests is that ties that bind subjects into their positioning can be the very means by which the political subject can resist her constructions as Other, albeit at potential risk to her very ontological understanding of Self.

Resistance varies immensely with regards to its form, content, impact, and sources. At the outset, it's imperative to dis-engage the concept of resistance from colonial representations. To do this, Collins (2021) poses important questions:

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What lies beyond resistance? How do you know when resistance is successful? Is resistance aiming for some higher goal that is theoretically possible yet politically impractical, e.g., emancipation, social justice, freedom? How will the world look different if resistance and the domination that it engenders are not central to human behaviour? Is this even possible? (p. 57)

Further, Collins (2021) explicates the importance of determining where resistance is directed, writing, "What is being resisted is straightforward: resistance is opposition to oppression. Capitalism, racism, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, nationalism, and similar systems of power can all be seen as forms of political domination that engender resistance," adding that intersectional power relations differently organize systems of domination (p. 56). Emphasizing the relationship between resistance and subjectivity, Mahmood (2005) questions "whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning" (9). Thus, investigations of resistance also require investigations of subjecthood and the sociopolitical contexts in which the formation and re-formation occurs. Drawing on Foucault, Abu-Lughod (1990) cautions about the romanticization of resistance, in that resistance tends to be constructed "as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (p. 41-2). Rather, Abu-Lughod (1990) urges researchers to "use resistance as a *diagnostic* of power" (p. 42, italics in original) such that power need not always be interpreted as negative and to develop more nuanced analyses of power relations as indicative of more nuanced understandings of resistance. This analysis in the context of this study will be explicated in detail in Chapter Four.

Social Change

In this project, I investigate how gendered Muslim subjects seek to resist through the development of collectives. The notion of transforming social relations through collective action is central to new social movements (Nash, 2010) in which individuals forge bonds based on their shared marginalization. As such, the subjectivities and embeddedness (and embodiedness) of the social actors engaged in social movements is important, but also important is how they connect and relate to one another across their shared conditions to determine means of resistance. How do subjects work together (and off of one another) to create different possibilities for the future? This space is founded on a sense of solidarity and critique that seeks to "[destabilize] those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice" (Butler, 2016, p. 20). Embedded in the notion of resistance is the dream of a different future. One in which the conditions differ and fail to reproduce structures of inequity. Yet how that social change comes about and what that looks like ranges remarkably. For example, social change could occur remarkably quickly through moments of collective effervescence where communities are united through an intense, sacred moment which results in a changed sense of collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1995). This moment differs from more subtle yet powerful forms of agency that actually maintain stability. In her work with grassroots women's piety movements in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2001), whose work challenges liberal feminist definitions of agency, argues that,

> What may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a
> progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency - one that must be
> understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that

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create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability. (p. 212).

Broadened conceptual understandings of key terms such as subject and resistance which are key to this analysis require looking to the work of other racialized feminist scholars who have experience exploring the unique ways in which participants describe their sense of being, context, and change. It is this community-based approach to investigating resistance which I analyze in this dissertation and explore further in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Transnational Feminist Theory

For this project, I also draw on transnational feminist scholarship (Grewal, 2005; Jamal, 2005; Kaplan & Grewal, 1994; Ku, 2019; Mahmood, 2016; Mohanty, 2003; Sharify-Funk, 2008; Taylor & Zine, 2014; Zine, Taylor, & Davis, 2007) to investigate how gendered religious bodies in post-modern contexts navigate their subjectivities, develop collectives, and transform social relations tied to heteropatriarchies, racisms, colonialism, and capitalism. To do this, it is necessary to understand the connections between the global and the local, particularly the ways in which gendered and racialized subjecthood is constructed and re-constructed. Transnational feminism focuses specifically on "how patriarchies are recast in diasporic conditions of postmodernity — how we ourselves are complicit in these relations, as well as how we negotiate with them and develop strategies of resistances" (Kaplan & Grewal, 1994, p. 439). This focus of inquiry aligns with

sociological inquiry in the recognition that we are always negotiating "in both a connected and a specific field of conflict and contradiction" (Kaplan & Grewal, 1994, p. 439).

Importantly, for transnational feminist scholars such as Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), feminist theorists "must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 223). In this way, scholars theorize connections between feminisms and political organizing as well as the complicated relationships between "the particular" and "the universal" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224). The work also provides foundations for analyses that make connections between transnational structures of heteropatriarchies, racism, and neoliberalism with local subjectivities, particularly subjectivities that both transgress borders and boundaries but also exist within liminalities and ambiguities (Ku, 2019). The transnational feminist imagery of "scattered hegemonies" (Kaplan & Grewal, 1994) is particularly poignant to illustrate the local contextualization of transnational structures of marginalization. This is perhaps why so many scholars studying Muslim women and intersections between religion, secularity, cultural politics, and feminist communities situate themselves within this field (Jamal, 2005; Mahmood, 2016; Razack, 2018; Zine, 2004). This theoretical body, as will be demonstrated in this analysis, offers a framework for investigating anti-Muslim racism as both a localized and transnational/global phenomenon. In other words, though political organizing may be localized, it is motivated by and intends to interrupt how local and global structures and hegemonies come together to facilitate the maintenance of anti-Muslim racism.

A critical feminist concept necessary for understanding how Muslim women's experiences in Canada are raced, gendered, classed, and sexualized is intersectionality.

Though conceptually the framework of "intersectionality" gained significance in the twentieth century during periods of monumental global social change, intersectionality as a metaphor and form of critical inquiry was explicated by Black feminist scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2019). By attending to the particular junctures of power, oppression, and resistance in Black women's lives, "Intersectionality named the structural convergence among intersecting systems of power that created blind spots in antiracist and feminist activism" (Collins, 2019, p. 26). Intersectionality as critical inquiry was required to extend past inquiry focused solely on gender *or* race *or* class *or* sexuality to rather consider how these structures converged in particular ways in the lives of individuals and communities who were raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized at unique points of intersection. The scholarship on critical intersectionality as a metaphor and mode of inquiry offers a significant theoretical framework for scholars investigating complex feminist politics within, across, and between communities of racialized women.

Intersectionality further offers a framework for investigating gendered religious subjects such as Muslim women at unique intersections in their lives. This fundamentally challenges western patriarchal secularized conceptions of Muslim women as "unidimensional" or indistinguishable, conceptions that ultimately "den[y] these women the agency and political maturity to act as subjects of change on their own terms" (Zine, 2004, p. 168). In addition, intersectionality and transnational feminist frameworks provide analytical possibility for redefining and reimagining that is rooted in an understanding of Muslim women as complicated, contradictory, and multilayered. Embedded in this redefining is the fundamental challenge to the notion of universality of the Muslim woman experience. Zine (2004) writes, "The role of Muslim women scholars has now become one

of rewriting the scripts according to which our identities have been framed. This means regaining control over how our bodies are represented and regulated" (p. 169). Specifically, scholarship that advances knowledges at the nexus of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia (Akande, 2023; Ali, El-Sherif, & Mire, 2023; Jackson-Best, 2019; Massa, 2020; Mohamad, 2017; Mugabo, 2016) supports challenging the notion of universality of oppression, even amongst and within Muslim populations. For instance, Ali, El-Sherif, and Mire (2023) write,

> Although much of the anti-Islamophobia efforts – academic and community-based – work to combat the reductiveness of *a universalized Muslim figure*, these efforts tend to uncritically take up the brown Muslim figure as the starting point of inquiry, thereby further reifying the homogenizing racialization of dominant discourses. (p. 78, emphasis in original).

Being conscious of this reification is something I try to attend to in this analysis on the way to "a more precise, transformative politics" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 107) rooted in intersectional solidarity and care. Having established the conceptual framework by defining the concepts I will be analyzing, in the subsequent sections, I further elaborate on secularity and religious subjectivities in the nation-state of Canada, systemic Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslims, and Muslim women's resistances and organizing.

Nation-State, Secularity & Religious Subjectivities

Explicating contemporary and historical global dynamics is important for framing the impact of global sociopolitical contexts on the lives and experiences of Muslim women today. In this section, I describe the founding of the settler colonial nation-state of Canada

as well as the racial logics that continue to dominate seemingly-secular Canadian institutions and societal sociopolitical climate.

The Nation-State of Canada

Global white supremacist colonial capitalist forces have led to the colonization, genocide and dispossession of Indigenous, Black and racialized peoples and land across the globe. As a settler nation, the nation-state of Canada is founded upon the colonization of and ongoing violence against Indigenous communities (Battiste & Henderson, 2018; Jacobs, 2018; Razack, 2015; Satzewich & Liodakis, 2017; Thobani, 2022). The premise of "discovery" that underlies the settler colonial narrative is egregious in its colonial superiority, attempting to eliminate thriving pre-contact Indigenous communities and systems of being (Horn, 2021). Post-Confederation, this attempt to void was implemented through legislation such as the federal Indian Act which, through a patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist system of domination, restricted Indigenous peoples' rights and legal statuses through, for example, the regulation of interracial marital relations and the rights of mixed-race offspring (Thompson, 2009). The mass theft of Indigenous children from their homes by the Canadian government and various denominations of Catholic and Protestant churches in the late nineteenth and through to the end of the twentieth century under the pretext of "schooling" attempted to erase Indigenous knowledges, languages, cultures, livelihoods, and intergenerational support from the first communities (Battiste & Henderson, 2018). The dehumanization of Indigenous lives and continued systemic violence against Indigenous communities continues through the disproportionate loss of life of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit peoples (Anderson,

Campbell, & Belcourt, 2018). So while colonization also intersects with structural racism and violence for racialized populations, Indigenous peoples in Canada are uniquely positioned relative to the Canadian state (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This is also evidenced by the distressing incompleteness of the commitment to fulfill the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada from 2015 (Jewell & Mosby, 2019).

Contemporary racial hierarchies in Canada are maintained through white supremacy, which is rooted in continued targeted systemic violence against Black and Indigenous communities (Cole, 2020). As early as the seventeenth century, the violent enslavement of Black and African peoples and their forced transatlantic migration into North America provided the stolen labour necessary for cultivating the land and constructing the infrastructure for what were to be established as Canada and the United States (Shadd, Cooper, & Frost, 2005). Today, continued state violence against Black communities is maintained through structural injustices in criminal and immigration law, access to equitable employment, health care, and housing, and opportunities in education (Maynard, 2017). Canada's immigration policies, which encouraged immigrants from around the world to seek new lives in Canada, failed to disclose racism and structural discrimination in Canadian society, the labour market, schools, and higher education institutions, legal systems, and other institutions leading to further precarity and loss of opportunity (Bannerji, 2000; Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Henry et al., 2017; Satzewich & Liodakis, 2017). Research demonstrates that had some of these precarious workers known about the dismal lack of protections, poor working conditions, structural racism, and lack of mobility they would face, they would have decided not to immigrate to Canada (Hande,

Mian Akram & Condratto, 2020). Canada's global pride in its multicultural mosaic served as a convenient contrast to its American neighbours in so far as the historic denial of racism and colonialism as a Canadian problem has been a hegemonic means of neoliberalizing race and other issues of discrimination so that they remain an individual issue rather than a structural one (Hirji, Jiwani, & McAllister, 2020). This façade continues to support the invisibility of whiteness and allows white supremacy to remain the "natural" order of the nation.

Secularity & Religious Subjectivities in Canada

An interrogation of the concept of secularity is necessary for understanding the construction and embodiment of religious subjectivities in contexts where religion is generally presumed to be a private matter, relegated to homes and churches, outside of the purview of and regulation by the state. Classical sociologists in nineteenth century Europe endeavoring to explain the decline of the influence of religion in a modern context advanced the secularization thesis, which includes three aspects: (1) "the decline of religious beliefs and practices," (2) "privatization of religion;" and, (3) "differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science) … from religious institutions and norms" (Casanova, 2006, p. 7, emphasis in original). However, the secularization thesis was abandoned in its entirety by the end of the twentieth century with the conclusion that "religion, far from declining, is central to modern political life" (Turner, 2006, p. 441). As Berger (2001) notes, the world "is as religious as it has ever been, and in some places is more religious than ever" (p. 445). Contemporary sociologists of religion, then, seek to

make sense of the "paradoxical condition in which currents of disenchantment and re-enchantment co-exist" (Graham, 2012, p. 236).

Asad (2003) traces the formation of "the secular" through a post-modern anthropological analysis. He begins with Said's (1979) argument that when classical social theorists refer to the secular, they reference "a secular post-Enlightenment myth whose outlines are unmistakeably Christian" (p. 115). This elucidates the notion that even the concept of secularity is rooted in religion and further problematizes generalized notions of the secular as "champion of freedom and rights, tolerance, equality and peaceful co-existence" and the religious as "orthodoxy, fundamentalism, intolerance, oppression and violent existence" (Davids, 2014, p. 305). Asad (2003) argues, instead, for a situating of the secular within post-modern spaces of nuance, ambiguity and liminality, which account for living "in uncertainty, without fixed moorings even for the believer" (p. 64). Habermas (2008, 2010) argues for a more fixed post-secular modernity in which "religion maintains a public influence and relevance" and "the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground" (2008, p. 21). This post-secular framework argues for "the impossibility of neutrality" (Hashemi, 2016, p. 465). Although Habermas' arguments are critiqued (Rosati, 2014) for their limited and fixed definitions of secular and sacred, by together considering the work of Asad and Habermas, along with Rosati's critiques, sociologists of religion investigating contemporary society can consider the overlaps, erasures, and liminalities between the post-secular, the religious, and the social. Despite its limitations, the post-secular offers an important theoretical sensibility

that critiques how the religious/secular divide is deployed as a political discursive tool for interpellating political-religious subjects, primarily Muslims.

For religious subjects who seek to embody and practice their religiosity in seemingly secular contexts, religious-secular conflicts must be strategically navigated and managed. In particular, Muslim women in western societies continue to be caught in the liberal dichotomy of "secular individualism-feminism-state versus pious woman-community" (Jamal, 2015, p. 56), which unrealistically separates a woman's religiosity from her everyday self. This demarcation, argues Jamal (2015), is severely lacking in its attention to the challenges and contradictions faced by post-modern religious subjects in Canada and fails to capture how religion becomes meaningful and significant as a core element of their subjectivities. In this regard, Benhabib (2010) warns,

> Women's bodies in particular have become the site of symbolic confrontations between a re-essentialized understanding of religious and cultural difference and the forces of state power, whether in their civic-republican, liberal-democratic or multicultural form. (p. 453)

Racialized women's bodies strategically deployed as a site and source of capitalist misogynist racism to maintain structures of domination is not a new revelation (Arat-Koç, 2012); and yet in Canada, an endless slough of national conversations and legislations continue to revolve around the legislation of Muslim women's bodies and rights including but not limited to the Sharia law debates in Ontario (Razack, 2007; Ruby, 2019), the reasonable accommodation debates in schools (Mahrouse, 2010; Selby, Barras, & Beaman, 2018), and the right of women to practice *niqab* while taking the oath of citizenship (Ishaq,

2015; Razack, 2018). In each of these instances, religious subjectivities in public spaces are categorized as a problem to be managed, accommodated, or fundamentally deemed as incompatible with Canadian society.

In Québec, "racial secularism" strives to preserve its Francophone heritage by "reinforcing the sovereignty of the Québec colonial state, and thus colonialism, by racializing Muslims" (Benhadjoudja, 2022, p. 184). For example, Bill 21 ("An Act respecting the laicity of the State") was enacted in Québec in June 2019, restricting public employees in authority positions (such as lawyers, police officers, and teachers) from wearing religious symbols such as *hijab*s, turbans, yarmulkes, and crosses. Although the inclusion of all religious symbols in the restrictions (including crosses) attempts to demonstrate non-targeting of a particular population, Bill 21 is a prime example by which racialized communities are required to sacrifice their religious beliefs and practices to demonstrate their loyalty and belonging to the state and results in disproportionate harm to Muslim women and members of other minority religions such as Sikhs and Jews (Aviv, 2021). As they seek to be religious, their religious beliefs and practices are politicized as tools for nation-building and moral ethos. These contradictions are further elaborated on in the section "Muslim Women as Gendered Religious/Political Subjects."

Islamophobia, Racialization, and the Politicization of Muslims in Canada

Muslims have a long standing history in the nation-state of Canada. The first recorded Muslims migrated to North America in the sixteenth century (Waugh, Abu-Laban, & Qureshi, 1983). Canada's first mosque, Al Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, was built in 1938 and bears tribute to the Muslim community that found settlement in western

Canada. Today, the Muslim population in Canada is close to 1.8 million, constituting about 4.9% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2023). Islam is the second-largest reported religion in Canada with nearly one in twenty Canadians identifying Islam as their religion (Statistics Canada, 2021). The diversity of the community is reflected in the countries of origin and languages spoken, ranging from origins across the African and Asian continents, as well as second and third generations immigrating from European and American contexts. In this section, I explicate the process of politicization of Muslim communities in the west and the systemic Islamophobia that underlies Canadian institutions. Further, I describe how Muslims are racialized in order to demonstrate how Muslim subjecthood is constructed in the west.

The Politicization of Muslims in the West

Islam is a "transnational religious civilization" (Rosati, 2010, p. 414), with believers spread across every nation and community. No longer residing exclusively in Islamic countries, the transnational and diasporic breadth of the Muslim *ummah* means that Muslims navigate their religious beings and practices in very different sociopolitical contexts while maintaining economic, political, cultural, and familial connections to "back home" (Hasan & Khan, 2023).

Regardless of this diversity, Muslims in the west are constructed singularly. Historical trajectories of Orientalism demonstrate how communities in West Asia, South Asia, and North Africa were depicted in western writing and artwork from as early as the eighteenth century as barbaric, inferior, and sexualized (Said, 1979). In *Contesting Islam, Constructing Race and Sexuality: The Inordinate Desire of the West*, Sunera Thobani

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(2021) untangles the historical trajectory of the intricate interweaving of race, sexuality, gender, and religion in the construction of Islam and Muslims in the West, arguing that these logics remain "centred on phantasmic constructs of Islam and fetishization of the figure of the Muslim" (p. 8). She argues that this reveals more about the obsessions and desires of western subjects than of the practices of Muslim communities.

The events of September 11, 2001 and the primacy of "the clash of civilizations" discourse rooted in a US-led "War on Terror" constructed Muslims as a civilization inherently antithetical to a western or Christian civilization (Huntington, 2003) and led to the overt and covert targeting and discrimination of Muslims and all those perceived to be Muslim in an unprecedented manner. The emergence of novel security and surveillance measures targeting black and brown bodies were marketed as pre-emptively necessary for citizen safety and essential for the purposes of "national security" (Bahdi, 2003, 2018; Jamil, 2016; Nagra, 2019). Targeted racial profiling of those that looked Muslim and/or Arab (Bahdi, 2003; Poynting & Perry, 2007), alongside global media depictions of the cases of Maher Arar, Hassan Almrei, and others, equated Islam with violence and terrorism (Razack, 2007). The relationship between imperialism, colonialism, and the War on Terror forever changed the sociopolitical landscape in which Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim existed in the west. Mass media functioned to reinforce and promote these constructions to the general public. Farokhi and Jiwani (2023) write, "In a practice that precedes the 9/11 attacks, Western media outlets have consistently perpetuated unbalanced, prejudicial, and unfair reporting on Muslims, which has largely contributed to the legitimization of Islamophobia" (p. 96); this is underpinned by a "terror template" in which

Muslims are depicted as barbaric, untrustworthy, patriarchal, and violent. There is a gendered angle to this media coverage in which oppressed Muslim women must be saved from their oppressive Muslim men (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2023). These contributions to anti-Muslim sentiment perpetuate the notion that Islam is culturally and civilizationally critical to the instability of the supposedly peaceful western hegemonic world.

The discourses reinforced in mass media and other institutions impact heavily on Muslim subjecthood in the west. The material impacts are captured in Jasmin Zine's (2022b) research on "the 9/11 generation," youth that grew up in a post-9/11 world existing day-to-day with the consequences of these surveillance and securitization measures. These include impacts on belonging and identity, citizenship, and experiences at schools, universities, and places of work. Twenty years after 9/11, violence against Muslims remains commonplace. For example, in January 2017, Andre Bissonnette, a 27-year-old white man, entered the Islamic Cultural Centre of Québec City, murdering six and injuring 19 worshippers gathered for *Isha* prayers. Despite Bissonnette's "anti-immigrant," "pro-Trump," and "anti-feminist ideologies," the courts and general public continued to debate whether the attack was racially motivated (Mahrouse, 2018, p. 472). In June 2021, four members of the Afzaal family were murdered in London, Ontario when another white man drove his pickup truck onto the sidewalk where the family was awaiting a red light. As the trial of Nathanial Veltman began in September 2023, evidence emerged that he had planned the attack in advance and intended to kill Muslims that day (Dubinski, 2023). These barbaric acts of terror reflect disturbing anti-Muslim violence motivated by deeply

engrained hatred of Muslims in the west and suggest that anti-Muslimness remains systemically embedded in the fabric of Canadian society.

Systemic Islamophobia

A clear definition of the term "Islamophobia" is necessary prior to engaging in an analysis of its impacts. Bahdi and Kanji (2009) advance the following definition of Islamophobia in the Canadian context: Islamophobia

> is perpetuated by private actors; is motivated; is historically rooted in Orientalism; draws on and perpetuates stereotypes about a Muslim propensity for violence; draws on and perpetuates gendered stereotypes about roles and the nature of Muslim women; is state-driven; and, persists through a dialectical process of private and state action. (p. 323)

This last point specifically connects to other forms of racism which manifest simultaneously at individual, structural, and state levels. Their analysis expands on Khaled Beydoun's definition in the American context, which diverges from sensationalist conceptions of the fear of Islam and moves towards uncovering and investigating the systemic discrimination which targets Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim (Bahdi & Kanji, 2009). Further, the role of the state in perpetuating and maintaining Islamophobia becomes a key point of investigation.

Correspondingly, Anwer Emon's (2023) volume *Systemic Islamophobia in Canada: A Research Agenda* identifies how and under what conditions Islamophobia is produced, enabled, perpetuated, and rendered respectable through government policy and action in Canada. Emon (2023) and other contributors tease out how respectable

Islamophobia in education, civil society, and policing and the law permit discrimination against Muslims to persist. Despite "Islamophobia" containing the lexicon of "phobia" – which signifies an irrational fear – the term is deeply political and can be deployed strategically to uncover how Islamophobia in Canada "is instrumentally weaponized for political gain" (Emon, 2023, p. 2). Given that the term has become "domesticated" through its use in official spaces, such as the Government of Canada's National Summit on Islamophobia in 2021, scholars are then urged to focus their efforts not on debating terminology but on continuing to dismantle systemic Islamophobia (Emon, 2023, p. 3). Further, in a recent report entitled "The Canadian Islamophobia Industry: Mapping Islamophobia's Ecosystem in the Great White North," Jasmin Zine (2022a) systematically traces how Islamophobia is maintained through a complicated network of political, ideological, institutional, and economic networks in Canada. These five networks include: (1) media outlets and Islamophobia influencers; (2) white nationalist groups; (3) pro-Israel, fringe-right groups; (4) Muslim dissidents and ex-Muslims; and, (5) think tanks and their designated security experts (Zine, 2022a, p. 4). Collectively, these networks comprise a powerful industry with self-serving interests tied to the upholding of Islamophobia in Canada and demonstrate deeply embedded institutionalized anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination. Considered collectively, scholarly advancements in the field of Islamophobia studies in Canada provide a robust theoretical framework upon which to initiate further research concerning Muslim communities.

The Racialization of Muslims

Scholarship in critical Muslim studies in North America demonstrates that some scholars prefer to use the term "anti-Muslim racism" instead of Islamophobia to analyze the intentional targeting of communities based on their racialized subjectivities. Omi and Winant (2015) define racialization as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (p. 111). This shift in terminology is relevant to the racialization of Muslims in the west (Bakali, 2016; Rana, 2007, 2011; Selod, 2019) whereby neo-Orientalist discursive processes detach Muslim communities from their roots in the religion of Islam and alternatively construct them as a singular race – a politicized community – effectively constituting the believing subject as the political subject. Muslims, then, are subjected into an ambiguous liminal space between race and religion, as both adherents to a global community of believers and impacted by systemic Islamophobia tied to neoliberal state interests. Deploying the language of anti-racism, therefore, enables scholars and activists to connect the systemic Islamophobia facing Muslims to white supremacy. For instance, in *Nothing Has to Make Sense: Upholding White Supremacy through Anti-Muslim Racism*, Sherene Razack (2022) questions why the presence of Muslims in the west inspires visceral affective responses of fear, disgust, and hatred. Razack's (2022) analysis traces how this racism is a means of maintaining the supremacy of whiteness as it is through incessant public vilification of the Muslim Other that the cohesiveness and authority of whiteness is maintained. This maintenance relies on the universalization of "the Muslim" and positions the Muslim race as homogenous, irrespective of intersectionalities within the Muslim community (Hamdon, 2010). Analyses of anti-Muslim racism therefore must be cognizant and attentive to

intersections of racisms facing Muslim communities, for instance with regards to anti-Black racism (Akande, 2023; Ali, El-Sherif, & Mire, 2023; Massa, 2020; Mugabo, 2016) and anti-Palestinian racism (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2022; Majid, 2022).

The theoretical framework explicated in this section offers a concrete foundation upon which to embark on a study of Muslim women as gendered religious political subjects in Canada.

Muslim Women as Gendered Religious/Political Subjects

There is a robust body of scholarship on Islamic feminism which comprehensively attends to Muslim women's experiences in West Asian and Islamic societies (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Ahmed, 1992; al-Hibri, 2000; Lazreg, 1990; Mernissi, 1987). Scholarship studying the intersections of race, gender, religion, and sexuality in the Canadian context provide a foundation for investigating the connections between systemic Islamophobia and the localized subjectivities and experiences of Muslim women as they navigate their complicated everyday terrains. In this section, I introduce a gendered analysis to the previous framework on systemic Islamophobia to understand how Muslim women become constructed as political subjects in Canada.

Despite the diversity of Muslim women's subjectivities at the intersections of race, gender, religion, sexuality, class, ability, and other categorizations, Muslim women in Canada are "always/already constructed" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 519) through a caricature of "The Muslimwoman" (Cooke, 2007), which is a static figure constructed by the western-centric imagination in contrast with the lived realities of Muslim women in plural (Razack, 2008; 2018). According to Razack (2008), three allegorical characters emerged from the

War on Terror discourse: (1) the dangerous Muslim man; (2) the imperiled Muslim woman; and, (3) the civilized white person. Though these figures continue to dominate public discourses about Muslims, Razack (2018) posits that the figure of The Muslimwoman has evolved to become more aggressor than imperiled. The Muslim woman "haunts us because she represents the possibility that the nation is not governed by the male gaze and that it is not Christian" (Razack, 2018, p. 182). Further, the woman in *niqab* is dangerous in her relentless need to cover herself and thus is an offence to "Canadian values." In her unwillingness to yield to the "white masculine gaze" (Razack, 2018, p. 172) and by making herself unavailable for public observation and consumption, women who choose to practice veiling inspire a visceral emotional response. For example, out of the various forms of religious garb worn by persons in authority, Canadians report feeling least comfortable with a Muslim woman in *hijab* (Woodley et al., 2018). Razack (2018) writes,

> Fascination, anger, and frustration coalesce around the idea that the veiled woman is refusing to yield herself to the Western gaze. Unavailable, she is an enigma who is simultaneously feared and desired. Without her unveiling, the Western man and the Western woman cannot know himself or herself as being in control, sovereign, and desired. (p. 179)

The western subject is unable to construct themselves without constructing who they are not, and Muslim women's bodies thus become sights and sites of contestation over belongingness and shared values. This is one of the ways in which Muslim women in Canada experience anti-Muslim racism, through incessant public obsession over their bodies (Mian Akram, 2018). Moreover, Muslim women experience structural

discrimination based on their unique intersectionalities, including, for example, the challenges faced by Muslim women who are sexually and gender diverse (Shah & Khan, 2023). Sarah Shah's (2022) study of diverse Canadian Muslim women, including women who were refugees, newcomers, Black, single mothers, queer, and with diverse abilities, demonstrates how the women's sociodemographic and socioeconomic outcomes are determined by structural inequities encountered when navigating the labour market, social inclusion, religious and cultural support. Thus a static and unidimensional construction of Muslim women's subjectivities "denies these women the agency and political maturity to act as subjects of change on their own terms" (Zine, 2004, p. 168). These various intersectionalities must be considered in any study of Muslim women. In contrast to these static constructions, Muslim women have been and continue to be active in their resistance and challenge of this marginalization – it is their voices and experiences that this project seeks to capture and highlight.

Muslim Feminist Communities & Epistemic Resistance

Muslims take pride in being in community, as an *ummah*, one that is transnational yet offers instantaneous connection between believers. The imagery of millions of believers meditatively circling around the Kaaba in Mecca during the pilgrimage of Hajj reflects this spirit of unity. Solidarity in Islam is tied to worship and to the faith itself, as God advises in Chapter Al-Baqarah, verse 44 of The Holy Qur'an (2011): "…and bow down with those who bow." Worship and prayer is encouraged in congregation as believers stand shoulder to shoulder and assemble to pray Salat. Thus, the notion of community is essential to the religion of Islam and analyses of how communities of Muslim women

congregate to create bonds of sisterhood tied through faith are particularly important for understanding how they navigate their individual gendered and religious/racial selves.

In this project, I was interested in interrogating how women "develop their political sensibilities in community with others" (Naples, 1998, p. 332). I wondered: How do Muslim women seek connections with other Muslim women? How did they find a sense of community in conditions of social and physical isolation during the pandemic, particularly with the closure of mosques and other community hubs? What is their future vision for Muslim communities? How do they understand the concept of "change?" Finally, how did the societal shift to the remote impact their network developments? Chasms of time, space and distance were erased in the digital to enable engagement and connectivity globally, but what were the resultant possibilities and challenges?

As I considered these questions in the context of this particular project, I turned to the existing body of scholarship which captures how Muslim women in North America and western Europe are engaged in important and impactful resistances as they challenge anti-Muslim racism and problematic discursive subject formations of The Muslimwoman. Some of the research focuses on citizenship and political participation (Bullock & Nesbitt-Larking, 2013; Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017), finding that Muslim youth transcend divergences between citizenship and religious subjectivity through "everyday practices of citizenship" involving individual negotiations in their informal spaces (Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017, p. 168). Others discuss important initiatives undertaken by women to oppose policies that restrict their movements and practices (Soliman, 2016). Sahar (2022) describes different strategies practiced by Muslim women activists in the United States as they navigate their complicated positionalities at the borderlands. These include: through

ijtihad, or re-interpreting Quran and Hadith in the modern context; through exegesis of the Quran; and, through pushing for inter-faith harmony. This research demonstrates the partnership of faith and social justice in the women's activism. Gilary Massa (2020) eloquently writes, "For me, activism and the pursuit of justice, freedom, and Black consciousness are as much a part of my religious practice as prayer, fasting, and modesty. I consider them to be all equally part of my religious obligations" (p. 259). In a manner that subverts religious-secular dichotomies, Muslim women embrace their religious beliefs and practices as important markers of self-determination and social action (Massoumi, 2015). Faith actually inspires and informs the resistance (McGinty, 2012), and in a post-secular "ethics of becoming," political subjectivity is reclaimed and reverted with support from religious piety (Braidotti, 2008, p. 19). It is the subjectivization that informs the resistance. Butler (1993) writes, "The paradox of subjectivation (assujetissement) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms" (p. 15, emphasis in original). For young women navigating life in non-Islamic societies, they are searching for dynamic strategies to manage intersecting commitments to their religion and their country (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005). These resistances reflect "critical, reflexive and nuanced accounts of the actual relationships between faith, reason, gender and power" (Graham, 2012, p. 244). For some, this resistance takes the form of adopting the practice of *hijab* or *niqab* as a subversive tool of reclaiming their bodies (Haddad, 2007; Jiwani, 2011). Others take their activism online; for example, Hirji (2021) analyzes how engagement by North American Muslim feminists in the digital space can offer powerful opportunities for resistance. The subversion is possible because resistance is inherent within sets of power relations. As Foucault (2003a) writes, "If there

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were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all" (p. 34).

What is limited in Canadian research is the notion of the collective, or the development of Muslim women's collective consciousness, which is a critical concept for feminist organizing. For example, Eidoo (2018) discusses how a group of Muslim women in Toronto created safe spaces to seek refuge from Islamophobia, which organically evolved into a collective application for funding to coordinate an educational campaign. In a more recent publication, Eidoo at al. (2022) analyze how Muslims sustain community in order to continue the work of dismantling intersecting systems of oppression; to do so, they invoke "a relational solidarity that allows us to mother ourselves and one another into wholeness" (p. 324). This bond of Muslim sisterhood is crucial to this analysis, intentionally created as a space of nurturing, safety, and uplifting. This unity, though, must not "attempt to collapse the multiplicity of Muslims, ways of being Muslim, and ways of being in community" (Eidoo et al., 2022, p. 316). Though there may be debates within community regarding goals, visions, priorities, and strategies, an aversion to replicating Orientalist universality and respect for multiplicity must prevail if this relational solidarity claims to be transformational. One such debate, for example, concerns ideological disagreements between secular and faith-based Muslim feminisms, particularly around debates concerning the practice of *hijab* as a religious tradition (Zine, 2004). Another point of contention concerns the palatable profile of "the acceptable Muslim," which in the case of the CBC television program Little Mosque on the Prairie, sustains racial boundaries (Kassam, 2020) rather than invoke transformational change. Finally, an important point of consideration is the invisibility of Black Muslims in conversations concerning Muslims in

Canada. For example, debates around the Québec Charter of Values in 2014 continued to invisibilize Black Muslims and, as Mugabo (2016), warns, "Without offering an analysis of the specificities of the Muslim Black experience, we risk enacting anti-Black modes of thinking" (p. 165). In each of these cases, debates around what constitutes effective action exist and yet, rather than stifling these debates, these conversations must be taken up conscientiously and respectfully in order to push the boundaries of organizing, political action, and intersectional solidarity-building.

In this project, I consider how to attend to intersectionalities and multiplicities while sharing values related to faith and justice to move towards a collective critical faith-based epistemic resistance (Zine, 2004). Zine (2004) explicates the vision as follows:

Attempting to construct a new genealogy for Muslim women's feminism and praxis based on a faith-centered epistemological framework requires centering faith-based knowledge construction as a lens through which a particular reading of the world can be constructed and framed. This involves the political and discursive goal of creating a space where faith-centered voices can enter critical academic and political debates and dialogues as valid sites of knowledge and contestation. The emphasis on criticality within this perspective relates to the way women can identify, counter, and resist racism, classism, and sexism from a spiritually centered space that is at the same time attentive to the way that extremist or fundamentalist religious dogmas can become complicit in these constructions and the structural relations and circumstances that sustain them. (p. 181)

In this way, collective knowledges are simultaneously challenged and advanced in a manner that prioritizes the Islamic faith and critical social justice. Like Zine, Collins (2021) theorizes an epistemological resistance that reflects a feminist political organizing which recognizes the many subjectivities embodied by intersectional subjects. Conscientiously attending to the wisdom and experiences of community to engage in resistance also requires challenging normative constructions of "change" and "agency." To this end, I conclude this chapter with an excerpt from Saba Mahmood's (2005) foundational work on Muslim women's agency in Egypt, where she articulates a nuanced and context-specific understanding of social change. Mahmood's analysis demonstrates a community-led epistemic resistance, one that critiques and resists the very concept of "change." Mahmood (2005) writes,

> If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes 'change' and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms. (pp. 14-15)

Taking cue from the wisdom of these feminist scholars, I too embarked on a project seeking intersectional solidarity, Muslim women's community building, and social action.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the existing bodies of scholarship in the fields of political sociology and social movements, transnational feminism theory, racial logics and the nation-state of Canada, systemic Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslims, and feminist Muslim organizing and intersectional community building. Together, this scholarship provides a solid conceptual grounding on which to embark on an investigation of Muslim women's subjectivities and resistances. In the following chapter, I provide the narrative profiles of the four women who participated in the group Circles of Wisdom, describing their intersectional experiences as they navigated their everyday lives.

CHAPTER THREE: COMMUNITY MEMBER PROFILES

This chapter contains community member profiles for the four women who participated in the community project, Circles of Wisdom. These profiles provide the reader with a better understanding of group membership and the individual experiences of the women that then led to a collective decision to create Circles of Wisdom as the group's social action. These profiles are written by me as a researcher using primarily interview data from Component Two of the project with some supplemental material from the secondary data from Component One of the project. Institutional ethics clearance was received to use this data in this dissertation.

The profiles describe the demographic characteristics of each participant as relates to their generation, racial and ethnic background, education, and marital status to provide a sense of how each woman uniquely experienced being a Muslim woman in Canada. This is significant as a strategy for highlighting the diversity of experience amongst the group, even as the women are all members of "the 9/11 generation" (Zine, 2022b). The profiles also elucidate each woman's response to the question of a global event that had a powerful impact on them as a Muslim woman and motivated them to engage in social action. In each response, the women make connections between global events and the localized impacts of those events on their everyday lives as Muslim women, particularly through the use of emotions such as anger, fear, and empathy. This description is important for uncovering how Muslim women respond locally to global structures and events and furthermore, how they utilize these emotions to take action, which suggests connections between their subjectivities and resistances and I explore this further in Chapter Four.

Zainab, Fatima, Aliya and Sumayya's experiences are written below as narrative profiles. The style of writing in this chapter is inspired by narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007) in which data is represented as thematic experiential accounts using lengthy excerpts with the women's own words. Particularly powerful phrases have been bolded. Having utilized this narrative style of writing in my master's thesis (Mian, 2012), I again turn to this style to provide the reader with comprehensive profiles of the women. All four women have been given pseudonyms and care has been taken to omit details from their experiences that would easily identify the women.

Zainab

Family Responsibilities

Zainab is a cis-woman of East African heritage who lives in Windsor. She is the first member of her family to attend graduate school, which is a matter of immense pride for her and her family. As an older sister, she feels a sense of responsibility towards her younger siblings, saying,

> **I need to be the one to like break all these generational barriers** and **it's so hard carrying all that on your shoulders while also think about yourself right**, like taking care of yourself. … I want them to be able to say like I have somebody in my family who decided to go through higher education and they persevered and they did it and … you know that'll open doors for us to do it you know because there's no reason why I shouldn't type of thing. **So I think of them all the time instead of myself. I put them before me**. They're like my inspiration.

For Zainab, being an older sister means being an excellent role model for her siblings and other women in her community, and this responsibility involves thinking conscientiously about all the decisions she makes. She says:

Everyday when I you know when I choose to, like I go to school or when I'm in a meeting or when I'm deciding about my future endeavours, when I'm choosing to do a PhD, **I'm not thinking about myself**. And I'm not thinking, I'm not just thinking about myself, I'm thinking about my siblings, I'm thinking about the example that I'm going to set for my siblings, I'm thinking about other women in my community, I'm thinking about the example that I needed when I was a young girl. **I'm thinking about all these things that I didn't have**. I'm thinking about the fact that I didn't have an older sibling who pursued higher education. I'm thinking about I don't have parents that pursued higher education so I need to be the one to like break all these generational barriers and it's so hard carrying all that on your shoulders while also thinking about your, yourself right like taking care of yourself and all that stuff.

Further, Zainab describes the pressure to protect her siblings from the challenges she has faced in academia so that her experiences do not deter her siblings from pursuing higher education. She says,

It makes me scared to make mistakes like you know I try to set a good example in everything but it's like sometimes I cover my flaws because I don't want my siblings to like look at that and be like, "Well I saw her do this and now I'm doing that" you know what I mean so it, it kind of makes me like cover up, like I said

cover up a lot of like my battles that I go through in this journey because, I dunno, I guess like in a way I just want them to see the good in it but **maybe they're too young to understand the difficulties that we face on a regular basis.** And I hope that's not too much of a shock for them when they are you know my age and education but hopefully by that time things would have been a little bit different, at least I hope.

Zainab expresses concerns about the type of world her siblings will grow up in, which is why she prioritizes her activism despite being so busy. She says,

I constantly find myself like thinking about the experiences of Black people in, all over the world of course, but in North America and then the experiences of Muslims in North America and then **just like wake up every day and hope that nothing ever happens to me or any of my siblings**. Cuz there's so many of us right and there's primarily boys in my family. You know the way that boys are profiled in North America. I'm always worried about them.

Knowing that they cannot escape their racialization and knowing the multiple racisms they will face as Black Muslims, Zainab is fearful for their future.

Advocacy is What I Do

When not working or in school, Zainab spends much of her time supporting neighbours and community members with rides to medical appointments, guidance in filling out government applications, or providing translation services. This service work is primarily facilitated by her mother; Zainab says, "My mom volunteers me for everything

[laughs]. People in the neighbourhood need help? 'My daughter can help!'" While completing graduate school, Zainab is also actively involved as a researcher and community organizer, both on and off campus. She says,

> **I think there's advocacy work in everything that I do** … because it feels like I'm doing it every single day … for people, strangers on the street, people in my neighbourhood, people in my communities, people in my placement, people in my classroom. … I constantly find myself speaking up in spaces that are not favourable to me with my intersectionalities as a Black Muslim woman, visibly Muslim with a *hijab* on.

In this way, Zainab connects her actions directly to her sense of self, articulating how speaking up against injustice and advocating for those who are marginalized is an important aspect of who she is as a Black Muslim woman in *hijab*. For example, Zainab narrates an incident in one of her classes where the professor showed a graphic video of police brutality against a Black individual without any prior context, trigger warning, or group discussion afterwards. Zainab was shocked by the careless presentation of this graphic anti-Black violence in class, remarking, "It seemed almost like it was entertainment for some people." When Zainab and two of her racialized classmates spoke up to express the problematic nature of this incident, she recalls how her classmates "were rolling their eyes and just taking deep breaths like we were wasting their time for bringing it up." For this reason, speaking up to educate her classmates about anti-racism makes Zainab fearful: "I feel like there's a fear that comes with that because it always kinda feels like a target on my back."

This attention also creates an additional inner pressure where Zainab starts to question herself, saying,

> I used to kind of feel like I would gaslight myself because I'd be like well maybe it's not, maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe I did do too much. Maybe I did say too much. [Ayesha: second guessing]. But then again, I was like no, I didn't, you know? But then there's always that thought in the back of your mind like **if all these people made it seem like you were doing too much, then you must have been doing too much.** So it constantly, it constantly makes me feel like I'm in a battle with myself because I don't know if what I did was right or wrong and **it makes me feel like these people don't like me anymore**. And they're my colleagues and they're people I have to see on a regular basis and work in groups with. … It's tiring. It's emotionally draining. It's tiring.

So although Zainab recognizes that speaking out is necessary if she wants to continue making change within her sphere of influence, she is conflicted as she also recognizes that these scenarios burden her with emotional labour by causing her to question herself and potentially alienate her colleagues and classmates.

Perceptions of an Educated Woman

Zainab reflects on how education became a defining feature of her identity, as it offered solace from the racism she faced growing up. She says,

> Recently I kinda came to the conclusion but I was like if I wasn't in higher education right I would kind of feel like, and this might sound so like extreme but

I was like I dunno how, what there is about me that I would technically be proud of right **because I feel like I get a lot of academic validation**. Growing up, there was like so much bullying that happened with regards to wearing a *hijab* or being Black that **academic validation was the only place that I felt safe**. Like through my academics. Like having a degree, always doing well in school regardless of the things, of the circumstances, and now it seems like if I didn't almost have a master's degree right now, I feel like a lot of my confidence comes from that. And I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. I really don't know. I don't think it's either one.

This same education which provides her with a sense of accomplishment and validation, though, is at times perceived by community members negatively. For example, one of her neighbours was surprised when Zainab offered to look over her résumé saying, "Usually people who are like highly educated, like they kind of are like arrogant and they don't have time for like lower class people or lower class women you know?" As a strategy, Zainab does not disclose right away that she is a graduate student, saying, "A disconnect happens with people, and I don't like that. That's one thing about being highly educated that sometimes sucks because you stop being relatable." Zainab further elaborates,

And it's not to say that I want to like dim myself or like make myself small to make other people comfortable but I do kinda find myself doing that. Do I think it's bad? No. I don't think it's bad to want to make yourself relatable. Cuz **I still wanna remain connected to my roots and the people that are from my community**. It's just something that I'm learning to figure out.

In this passage, Zainab demonstrates how she becomes conscientious of and navigates her overlapping but contradictory aspects of her identity: her humility and connection to community and her advanced education and privilege, revealing her specific strategies for maintaining cohesion between them.

Muslimness

Zainab speaks a lot about her *deen* or her faith as the defining feature in her life. Although she describes her Muslimness as "very flawed," she notes that "it does make me who I am and it shapes my identity, and it's always shaped my identity and my values in life." Even so, she is very much impacted by anti-Muslimness around her, saying,

> Things like that honestly start to impact my *iman* a lot, my faith, like it really does impact it because I try my best every day to have a strong relationship with Allah but I feel like **how could I do that when there's all these like things going on around me**? It kind of makes me feel like helpless.

Here, Zainab describes the conflict between her inner faith-based understandings of her Muslimness and the external politicized constructions of Islam, which create barriers in the practice of her faith.

When asked about one global event that impacted her as a Muslim, Zainab shares how she was profoundly affected by the murder of the Afzaal family in London, Ontario in June 2021. Zainab says, "I didn't leave my house for a month after that happened." She speaks of her grief and fear and the heaviness with which she felt her Muslimness, so much that she considered removing her *hijab* to no longer be visibly identifiable as Muslim. She

says, "There have been like times after that, like other instances like people looking at you weird cuz you have *hijab* on. I'm like, I dunno if they're looking at me cuz I have *hijab* on or if it's cuz I'm Black or if it's cuz I'm both. And stuff like that honestly, Ayesha, like made me many times question whether I even want to wear *hijab* anymore." For Zainab, it was devastating that her "beautiful" *hijab* which comprised such an important part of her faith and identity had become a precursor for inciting violence and hate. She started wrapping her *hijab* differently in the days immediately following the murders so that it more resembled a turban and was less conspicuous. Zainab says, "If I'm being honest, I'd never take it off," but "it's the thoughts that are bothering me. I'm just like why am I having these thoughts? I know that I'd never take it off, but why am I all of a sudden asking myself, 'Do I actually want to keep it on?' **And I remember those thoughts actually starting when I heard about what happened to that family**." Zainab's reflections demonstrate how powerfully impacted she was by these external events and how she navigated challenges and shifting understandings of herself as a Muslim as a consequence.

Taking Care of Self

When asked about how she defines wellness, Zainab responds that it signifies being empathetic towards oneself and towards others. She finds that all too often, she gets overwhelmed by others' instructions particularly when navigating societal and familial pressures as women, pressures such as "Muslim women should look like this, you should dress like this, you should do this. As a mother, you should stop doing this, you should look like this, you should lose some weight…" Zainab counters these pressures through prayer and by surrounding herself with friends who encourage her to become a better

Muslim and a better person. Her therapy is going to the mosque or praying to Allah. Zainab says,

> I love my religion more than anything in the world and that's what my wellness is. Your wellness could be putting on a face mask [Ayesha: laughs] and doing a bubble bath [both laugh]. Bubble bath with some like cheese on the platter, [Ayesha: like bath bombs] ya like bath bombs. That's not my type of self-care. It's nice, but it's not. I feel like **self-care is what feeds your soul**.

Fatima

Advocacy is What I Do

Fatima is a cis-woman of West Asian heritage. Since high school, Fatima has been involved in community advocacy initiatives both in and outside of the mosque, especially as relate to supporting newcomer integration. Her initial interests related to environmental preservation and through initiatives such as starting a community garden, Fatima realized that she "**really loved the feeling of creating this sense of belonging for people**." This led to her transition into more social justice-related projects also focused on community capacity-building.

Recently married and graduated, looking for employment, and having moved to a new city, Fatima feels as though she hasn't been "on the ground" much in terms of her advocacy. When Fatima and I meet for the interview (about eight months after the end of Component One), she feels more connected to the community as she has become active in legal advocacy work and mentorship initiatives.

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Pandemic-Induced Isolation

The COVID-19 pandemic made Fatima feel socially isolated in a way she was not prepared to face as she was busily engaged in advocacy work prior to the pandemic and that all of a sudden "just went to zero since COVID started." Fatima felt particularly isolated during the month of Ramadan when mosques were closed. She says,

> **The pandemic really forced or like it deprived of an opportunity for building connections** in [her new city] right, or of feeling community … Even when it was Ramadan, I came back to Windsor in Ramadan just so that we could feel some sense of community right. I know that, you know, mosques were closed everywhere but at least there's some family, there's somebody you know to break your fast with.

Fatima was unable to build similar kinds of community connections to those she had left in Windsor. Although she was grateful for this opportunity to slow down, she also felt that it hindered her personal growth. She says,

> While it's been you know kind of good to have that time to just you know focus and pause and you know reflect on oneself internally, I feel like it's also been just **a feeling of a lack of growth in a way** … I'm not sure if it's because of just the pause that COVID has brought down onto a lot of our lives or if it's also just you know the phase of life that I'm in right now.

When discussing the importance of community in her life, Fatima remarks how the next phase after pandemic-induced isolation was a re-prioritizing of community, saying, "I

wonder if like you know everybody being just so far apart like **necessitates that kind of rebuilding** for a bit."

Defining Wellness

When asked what Fatima had learned from her many years of advocacy work, she responds saying that she quickly realized that one cannot change the world in one day. Change takes time. In her experience, she learned how to temper her passion and excitements with practicality. Fatima says,

> When I was younger, I used to always feel a sense of urgency around this type of work and then as I, the more you become invested in it, you realize that a lot of the problems I'm trying to tackle have existed for like generations and decades. **It's not going to be solved in one day,** like it's not about undermining the value, it's just about **recognizing that successful things take time** and it's not just about how fast you can get things done. It's about how impactful they will be if you plan it right in the long term kind of thing.

This learning around slowing down, taking time, and tempering expectations around change also ties to Fatima's definition of wellness, which she defines as "**having realistic expectations for yourself**." Mitigating expectations with realities is a strategy for being kinder to oneself according to Fatima. Another component of wellness is determining at the outset of the project, "What does it look like to be done?" She elaborates,

> Not that you can ever really be done a project but like you know like what are the desired outcomes that you have in mind when you want to start an initiative or

something and **your value isn't going to be dependent on that**. Sometimes we define ourselves with how we perform whether it's grades at school or you know results of certain initiatives that we do and I think that **that can be sometimes harmful** just because there are things that are out of our control and I think that you know just **having that type of pressure on yourself, imposing like this level of perfectionism** is something that follows you outside of academia and into these social you know kinds of initiatives.

Considering the issues facing Muslim communities are historical and deeply embedded, Fatima has learned that it is important to not be deterred or pessimistic about all the work that still needs to be done but instead to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in what is being done. She says,

I do think that wellness is a really important thing so that people don't burn out. It's not just about, it's not just you know about how we're always reacting to negative things. That is one aspect of wellness. But **another aspect of it is just how we're self-imposing these high standards on ourselves**.

This self-reflection based on Fatima's experience has led her to develop strategies for continuing to engage in advocacy work but avoid the burnout that follows.

Muslimness

When asked about a global event that impacted her as a Muslim woman, Fatima describes how she was profoundly affected by the arrival of Syrian refugees to Canada in 2015 following the Syrian civil war. She reflects,

One of the events that really you know sparked and motivated a lot of my activism like I said, a lot of it had to do with newcomer integration and I think that was primarily reflected because of the Syrian conflict when Canada was bringing in like a lot of Syrian refugees. So I would say even though it's not like a religious event per se like a lot of the if not most of the refugees that came were Muslim and so it became important for, in my perspective, **it was important for Muslims to be involved in the reception and the integration of these individuals** who are you know just coming to a foreign land and have no idea what to expect.

Fatima volunteered to support the welcome and integration efforts, from collecting clothing donations to organizing social events to foster a sense of community. When asked about how anti-Muslim sentiment in the media impacted her during that time, Fatima shares how the negativity became a source of motivation for her work. She says,

In general, I feel like **anti-Muslim rhetoric or negative attitudes and perceptions towards Muslims is sometimes a driving force for positive contributions** just because it, it almost is like, it reminds you that like there's more to be done to like fix the perception of Muslims in society in a way.

In this way, Fatima channels anti-Muslimness into advocacy and support for Muslim communities.

Representation

Fatima realizes the importance of having older siblings who are also good role models, saying,

Half of everything in my life is just made easier because you kind of know that

there's somebody who, **you can just envision yourself doing things because you**

have seen people do it who are like, **you know, they're part of you** ... I guess I

always recognized the importance of having that kind of role model in a way, so

ya, I do think that that is important to kind of structuring somebody's or **visualizing**

where they're going.

Being able to visualize other Muslims and seeing their representation as they navigate

complicated life circumstances is important for Fatima. This even applies to religious

practice, as Fatima reflects,

Even the mere fact of like wearing *hijab*, sometimes I'm like ya I don't know if I

had older siblings who maybe weren't wearing them, I probably wouldn't be, like

I dunno you know where I'd be you know.

This reflection is key and demonstrates the impact of others practices on one's own practice

of Muslimness.

Aliya

Feeling Distant

Aliya is a cis-woman who moved to the United States several years ago. She is

currently on maternity leave from her place of employment as she is a mother to two little

ones. Prior to her move, Aliya was very active in organizing youth and women's

programming at the mosque. She also supported community outreach initiatives to build

stronger connections between the Muslim community and the broader Windsor community. When asked to describe herself, Aliya responds,

> As a Muslim woman? So I guess [pause] that's kind of like very, it's been changing over the years based on where I am in life. But I feel like right now, I'm a Muslim woman who's also a mom and that's been my primary focus in life for the last couple of years and but also **I'm trying not to let go of the other parts of me** which is I see myself as an activist as well and as a person who's very involved in my community, in the Muslim community and the wider community.

Considering the many recent changes in her life, including motherhood and moving away from her community in Canada, Aliya feels a sense of loss that has impacted her sense of self. She says,

> There's been a shift in my identity in that sense too because **I've always identified very strongly as a Muslim Canadian woman** and now it's like not being home, it's kind of, **it's scary** and I feel like I have lost, **I don't know where I belong any more** in some ways. Not being engaged in the political process or the community, the way I used to be in at home in Canada in Windsor, it's a little bit **isolating**.

Muslim Motherhood

Aliya speaks very honestly about the challenges of motherhood. She describes how her mental health was affected after the birth of her children, saying,

> And even just you know mentally I feel like since having kids, I've struggled a lot with like mental health too. I just feel like I went through postpartum

depression with my son and then with my daughter. I was okay but now I feel like maybe I see some kind of like, ya maybe I feel like some anxiety a little bit. And **so it's like just trying to manage all of that while also trying to take care of young children who are at home most of the time**.

Aliya describes how difficult it is to balance raising her children with a proud Muslim identity while also ensuring their sense of belonging in society, in other words, how to intentionally raise children in an environment that is known to be deeply anti-Muslim. For this reason, she goes back and forth between wanting to tell them everything about what they will face and letting them experience and figure it out for themselves. She compares this to her own upbringing, arguing that the racism her parents experienced in a pre-9/11 world was very different from that experienced by her and her children in a post-9/11 world. Aliya says,

I kind of flip flop between two different approaches in my mind. I haven't you know really discussed this with anyone, it's just like a constant thought in the back of my mind. Like sometimes I think okay, maybe is it maybe a better idea to not bring it up at all and just let them go out in the world and figure it out for themselves the way that kind of we did. You know **I don't remember my parents ever teaching me or warning me about any of this stuff probably because you know as first generation immigrants I'm sure they themselves didn't know**. And if they had known, they probably didn't know how to have these talks, number one, and number two you know like we grew up, a lot of us grew up in the pre-9/11 time when of course **Islamophobia was still a thing but it was not at the degree or**

the level that it is now. And it was a very different type of racism that you faced. It was more like you know they just didn't know, people just didn't know who you were. [Ayesha: A post-9/11world is very different.] **Post-9/11 is completely different because not only do they know who you are but it's a very different type of hatred that Muslims face**. So on one hand I keep thinking you know is it better to just not even bring it up and let them go out there and experience it for themselves and you know would possibly bringing it up, would that mess with their self-confidence? Like **are we setting them up for having these kinds of doubts and questioning every single interaction that they have with people**? You know like, is that really the right way to do it? Because I dunno like it is perhaps naïve to think that, you know the world is generally good. It is naïve to think that I dunno but **like to teach our kids that people are going to be mean towards you because of the way that you look or because of your name or because of you know the way that you dress, are we really just setting them up for a lifetime of you know issues with self-esteem, with questioning their identity, questioning whether they want to be part of a group that faces this kind of thing** [Ayesha: that's true].

This excerpt outlines how Aliya navigates the difficult decisions she must make as a parent in terms of how to protect and prepare her children to face Islamophobia. In her oscillation, the heaviness of parental responsibility is apparent. These are the anxieties of a racialized parent raising racialized children. Knowing the kinds of discrimination they will likely face, how much should be disclosed beforehand?

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Aliya has shifted how she engages in advocacy work based on her changing life circumstances. Currently, she engages in less community organizing and more informal forms of activism in terms of connecting with neighbours, sparking friendships, and challenging any misconceptions they may have about Islam. She says,

> Especially now, we live in a neighbourhood where it's majority like white. And we're friends with a lot of people who are not familiar with Muslims. So it's just, I'm **trying to find a balance** I guess in that where I'm representing my religion and trying to tell them what it's about because, obviously, a lot of them are curious **but also just being myself.**

Although she continues her work in her circle of influence, Aliya's sense of how she responds to global anti-Muslimness has shifted over the years. As she realized how much her activism and social engagement was affecting her mental health, Aliya developed strategies to help her manage. She says,

> Like I understand this is happening in the world **but I'm gonna not think about this except for when I'm thinking about it**. And like you know being someone who's engaged in things, I feel like you have to do that sometimes for your own mental health. You can't read the news all the time. You need to set aside a certain time and that's what I started doing since 2016 or 2017, it was just too much. It was just affecting me too much. So I decided I'm not gonna read the news throughout the day. I'm gonna pick one time. I'm gonna read what's going on and just after that, I'm not gonna think about it. **It sounds very neat and**

compartmentalized because it kind of like it is, but I need to do it for myself.

Although Aliya recognizes she has the privilege to dissociate, she also realizes that she needs to be selfish in this manner in order to take care of herself and her family.

Islam & Feminism

When asked about a defining global event for her as a Muslim woman, Aliya reflects back to the "honour killings" of Aqsa Parvez and the Shafia sisters in 2007 and 2009 in Canada. Aliya recalls the anti-Muslim narratives constructed in the media at that time. She says,

> But when this happened, it was just like **I was so angry** because everything they were saying was look, this is what Muslims do. This is what Muslim men do. And when a Muslim woman like insults her family somehow, they kill her. And it was all like about Muslims and not like, they weren't addressing any of the other issues. **They never brought up the word domestic violence**. And even at that age, I was probably like I would say like in my early 20s or even younger than that, it made no sense to me right. …**This is an issue of violence against women**.

Aliya continues to push for those around her to understand women's rights and the compatibility of feminism and Islam, which she sees as fundamental to being a Muslim woman. She says,

> Like what does it mean to be a feminist and to be a Muslim. To be a Muslim woman. And for most Muslims, I would argue that their reaction is just like, 'Oh this is anti-

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Islamic.' Oh I remember why we started this. This is like at the top of my mind because last week or two weeks ago, [my husband] went to a *khutba* at Jumaa and the guy the person went on a rant against feminists saying that this is the death of society is feminism. Preaching to a group in a main masjid. And he was like you know [Ayesha: the death of patriarchy is feminism!] Ya so then he came home and he told me and I was like, 'Whoa what?!' And he was like, 'I need to write an email and I'm gonna go talk to this guy'. And I was so proud of him. … And it was just like I felt you know we did this together. **We worked so hard together because when we first got married, there is no way.** He would've been like ya, he would've been sitting in the first row like cheering the guy on [both laugh] but now he was like I'm gonna go, and I think he went and spoke to him, 'You need to stop doing this and this is wrong. You don't know what you're talking about'. So I was just ya first of all, I was really proud of him. **And I'm just so glad that even if we can't make an impact to hundreds of people, it's just like even your husbands, your sons, the men around you, even the women around you**. **But like this issue about feminism and how it's like taken such a negative thing you know even by Muslim women, I feel like that's something I'm always trying to chip away at by asking women around me questions**. Like I just ask them questions. What does feminism mean to you and what does it mean to you to be a woman in Islam? Like what rights do women have? And then just trying to naturally lead them down the path where they can answer that themselves and see that you know there's nothing, you can be a Muslim and believe in other things.

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Much of Aliya's conversations with other Muslims centre around American politics as relate to feminism. For example, she says,

> Even the abortion issue, it's like I've had this discussion so many times over the last few weeks because in [her state] there was a Prop 3 which was just passed about abortion rights. And so many Muslims were choosing to vote no. Because they didn't either understand the issue or they just feel like this is aligned with feminism and very progressive ideas and who knows what they're gonna start teaching our kids and like … And [abortion] is permissible if the mom's life is at stake [Ayesha: exactly] at any stage. And you can even like you know there's arguments out there that even Islamically before the soul is breathed into the fetus, into the, you can have an abortion for any number of reasons. So it's like, it's so lenient. [Ayesha: Those are all within our faith already]. Exactly, **we're so lenient and we're making our faith so restrictive like when it's not like that**. We're restricting it for ourselves when it comes to women and I would argue that it's not it's not in the interest of women of course, there are other interests out there that they're trying to make it restrictive and women are just playing playing along, not playing along but you know what I mean. They're going along with it.

Through these conversations around Islam, feminism, and American politics, Aliya is able to push other Muslims around her to broaden their understanding of women's rights.

Sumayya

Sumayya is a cis-woman of South Asian heritage who is also a millenial. Sumayya works in healthcare administration and is active in public education and advocacy around

Muslim issues. Sumayya was only able to participate in one group conversation and did not respond to requests about scheduling a follow-up interview. For that reason, the narrative profile on Sumayya in this chapter is limited.

Working in healthcare administration during the pandemic, Sumayya felt exhausted having to manage devastating pandemic-related information. She says,

> And we always get like the bad news first, that's what I was saying. Like we feel like, or at least I feel like the Negative Nancy where I'm always like, you know like when Omicron was coming in December and people were getting excited about things re-opening and what not and I was like, 'Oh, it's not good.' Another wave's coming. But it's like, we just, it's hard like **I'm not a negative person but it just feel like it's forced this like negative light on everything**.

For Sumayya, handling this immense stress and feeling of burnout was exacerbated by anti-Muslimness and "the rise in hate crimes." When asked how she manages it all, Sumayya responds,

> You know today is the anniversary of the Christchurch shooting right and it's just you know it's like, **we're just kind of going about our days** and then you remember that and it's like wow. Like it was 3 years ago but it feels both like yesterday and like a million years ago. So it's just I dunno, I'm, that's all to say I dunno. I dunno if there's a good answer there. I hope that this is one of the ways you know community and **that's been hard with the pandemic and not**

having like this sense of community and like connecting with other sisters,

that's definitely hard.

Sumayya is hopeful that this opportunity to connect with other Muslim women through this project will provide a space of shared community to be able to unpack everything that is happening in their lives. The remainder of Sumayya's contributions to the group discussion have been incorporated into the analysis in Chapter Four.

This chapter has provided detailed narratives on the four women who were part of the group, Circles of Wisdom. These narratives capture their individual experiences as they navigate systemic Islamophobia in addition to their education, careers, families, relocations, and the pandemic. Their detailed excerpts depict their individual concerns, apprehensions, and reflections. Together, they constitute a presentation of their complicated selves. In the next chapter, I assemble and thematically analyze the data to theorize how Muslim women's political subjectivities and resistances involve simultaneous embrace and refusal of power relations.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEORIZING SIMULTANEOUS REFUSAL AND EMBRACE AS

RESISTANCE

In this chapter, I describe how the participants reflect on their various intersecting subject positions—as Muslim, as racialized women, and as activists—and in doing so, I theorize how they construct their individual subjectivities and resistances through their simultaneous embrace and refusal of power relations in their everyday lives. Their reflections demonstrate their nuanced refusals and countering, which ultimately challenge essentialist and reductionist categorizations of "the Muslim woman" and draw attention to the power relations that converge in their complicated subjectivization. I argue that through these navigations in their individual lives, the participants participate in a collective refusal to be bound by subjectivization in any of these categories; correspondingly, through their simultaneous embrace and refusal of various aspects of their subjectivity, they demonstrate their attempts to counter through re-subjectivization so that their embodiedness as Muslim subjects is reclaimed into a more authentic characterization. This is a complicated and messy process, one that I attempt to tease out of the data in this chapter. This analysis primarily relies on the thematic analysis of secondary data from the community project (digital recordings, transcripts, and my notes and memos from before, during, and after the four group conversations). Parts of the analysis have been supplemented with primary data from the follow-up interviews with three women who participated in Circles of Wisdom.

Studying Resistance, Studying Power

For this analysis, I rely on a foundational text from Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990). In the article "The Romance of Resistance:

Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," Abu-Lughod (1990) questions why researchers are fascinated with tracing the concept of resistance in their studies and instead encourages them to ask an alternate question, "What are the implications of studies of resistance for our theories of power" (p. 41)? Referencing Foucault's analysis of power and resistance, Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that resistance is not simply opposition to male domination or escape from dominant relations of power but rather reflects a transformation of power relations. An analysis that either simply identifies resistors or jumps to explaining resistance is guilty of romanticizing resistance because it simplifies resistance "as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42). Abu-Lughod (1990), then, urges an epistemic shift to alternatively "use resistance as a *diagnostic* of power" (p. 42, emphasis in original). In this way, resistance becomes "a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42). Abu-Lughod's (1990) analysis of Bedouin women's resistances in a sexually segregated society in Egypt critically reflects on the risks of a researcher misattributing, over-exaggerating, or devaluing the women's everyday forms of resistances. One solution is to use the forms of resistance to trace the forms of power being addressed. Abu-Lughod (1990) concludes,

> The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something
>
> admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the
>
> failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we
>
> respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of

the resistors but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power. (p. 53)

It is this guidance to trace the workings of power relations through the contradictory means of resistance—which are at times embrace and at times refusal—that I seek to take up in this analysis.

Collective Burnout in the Time of Corona

This research took place during a particularly unique moment in time, one characterized by immense sociopolitical conflict, neoliberal politics, economic uncertainty, and pandemic-related fears and impacts. For the participants, systemic Islamophobia and its consequential impact on the 9/11 generation led to a collective feeling of always having to be "on," to be present, to be vocal, and to consistently uphold their responsibilities to their communities and to themselves. The pandemic led to additional stresses, anxieties, and stresses related to health and well-being, finances, and safety. Cumulatively, this was experienced by the participants as "exhaustion" and "burnout." Amidst these pressures, the participants expressed a lack of opportunity to pause and reflect on the goings-on in the world and in their own lives. As Aliya says, "Our lives have been like a hamster wheel." Below, I analyze how each of the participants expressed these pressures and determined strategies for navigating their everyday lives. In doing so, they sought to transform the impact of these power structures on their subjectivities. Each of the participants recounts a differential experience based on their unique intersectionalities.

A particularly powerful excerpt from Zainab captures how, over the course of our group conversations, she realizes that she has not had much time or space to process everything that she has been through in the past few years. Zainab reflects,

The fact that it's just been like go go go go go it's very telling that none of us has actually asked ourselves this question, you know what I mean? That's like probably the reason why we're here right now is because **we've actually never gotten a chance to ask ourself this question or to even like cut ourselves like a break or even give ourselves some credit for anything because we're constantly on like go mode**. There's never a stop you know and that's very like unhealthy like even from like a mental health standpoint, it's very unhealthy. And like truthfully I've never stopped and like never asked myself how do I manage everything? And it kind of goes back to like I guess like what my mom would tell me all the time. She would say like, 'Say Alhamdolillah, you could have it much worse.' Like, and we, I think, as Muslims are always trying coin this thing, it's like **always say Alhamdolillah, say Alhamdolillah** like somebody would kill to be in your position, and it's true. A lot of people do want to be in the position that we're in but that also is not fair to us because like, yes, although it's true other people like do have it worse than us but that doesn't take away from, **we can't gaslight ourselves you know into feeling like we're not like worthy of like taking a break because things could be worse**. Like Alhamdolillah, you know it seems like we have our families for our support system, we have friends, you know Alhamdolillah we have our educations and stuff. But it's like at some point

it's kind of like when you talk about that to an elder in your family, it's like why are you complaining? Like what do you have to complain about? And that will gaslight you into feeling like you know you're right. And **now we're go go go until one day we just get burnt out and we break down and then we look around us and we realize that nobody really understands what we're really going through**. So this question is so like packed that I actually have never even, I've never even taken a moment to think about it. And it's like when I do, like now that I'm able to have a minute to think about it, **it makes me so emotional**. Cuz I'm like oh that's really sad. Because the amount of things that I've had to power through and not given time to like, not given myself time to kind of process cuz I'm always onto the next thing in my life you know, there's so many things that are you like packed up and like **we all have so much like I guess like trauma that needs to be let out** and I think that the first step in doing that is kind of acknowledging the fact that we haven't even been asking ourselves you know this very difficult question. Cuz it does like involve so much introspect and it involves, can involve journaling, it can involve like so many different things but it seems like our lives have been like a hamster wheel [chuckles] especially for like the last two years, it feels like a hamster wheel is just going on and on and on and on and there's like no like solace almost.

In this lengthy excerpt, while participating in the group conversation, Zainab unpacks various aspects of her life from the past few years. Firstly, she has not had an opportunity to stop, consider, or take a break, either to rest or to process what has been going on around

her, locally and globally, and consider its impact on her. She echoes "the hamster wheel" sentiment expressed by Aliya, a metaphor that describes how one is constantly running, being busy, and feeling like even after accomplishing or completing something, one has no time to stop but has to move onto the next thing. Secondly, she shares how her faith and her mother continually guide her to be grateful for her blessings and think positively about her privileges. Yet, this philosophy does not allow her permission or space to unload and process the substantive grievances and traumas in her life. As she's so focused on action and always moving from one thing to the next, Zainab has had to push down or silence difficult experiences, which likely contributes to her feelings of exhaustion and burnout. Finally, Zainab has not had the space to process, reflect, and unload on all of this until the experience of being part of this group, which is reflective of her desire to nurture the space and commit to its growth and development.

Zainab's expressions of exhaustion and constant action are reflective of subject-formation in a neoliberal society that is marked by valuation of performance, immediacy, and efficiency. As a Black Muslim woman, Zainab further experienced a burden of response after the murders of George Floyd and Regis Porchinski-Paquette, which thrust her and other Black individuals into a demanding spotlight of heightened gaze and expectation. Doubly feeling the weight of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism at the height of the pandemic, which led to disproportionate impacts on women and racialized communities, the physical, mental, and emotional burden and burnout experienced by Zainab is evident. So while her Black identity offered potential for community collaborations and advocacy around anti-Black racism, Zainab also experienced additional

layers of stress from her multiple intersectionalities. Zainab's reflection highlights the importance of creating space through community in order to critically reflect on one's conditions and actions in a contextualized and collective manner.

As a health care administrator during the pandemic, Sumayya experiences burnout differently as she had the immense responsibility of using privileged knowledge about the COVID-19 virus to make important decisions about community safety. She describes her overwhelming exhaustion in response to the question, "What's happening in your life," as follows:

> I feel like **the pandemic has almost broken a part of us** where we, I don't know how to answer 'What's happening? What's going on?' cuz I'm like well there's no straight answer to that anymore. I think like broad picture, like my day job is in healthcare, I'm in healthcare administration so it's interesting cuz it's not frontline care but being in healthcare during the pandemic has been you know quite the experience. And it's not something that I really expected to be in. So **I think there's just an element of both being burnt out and hyperaware from my job which sometimes feels like not everyone understands right**. Like I'm really lucky that a good friend of mine we work together and you know we were friends before we started working together and one of the things we'd talk about a lot is like **we're living in a different world at work** and then we go home or like hanging out with friends or you know other like social circles and like people are just living different worlds. Cuz they're not getting the same information that we're getting right, like we're, it's different what we're seeing at work versus what's in the community.

And so it's just, sometimes that's a little jarring and then ya like I think ya like I think you guys might've spoken about it you know **the rise in hate crimes and what not so it just feels like you're hyperaware for so many different reasons**. So I think it's just I feel bad but **I don't even know like in what way to prepare for Ramadan cuz it just feels like just so exhausting**. I know that I need it that you know spiritual revival, it's much needed and I really wish especially this year that we were somewhat normal and in person but I don't know what that's gonna look like or if that's going to be possible again. So it's just as an A-type planner, it's just really hard [laughs] to like predict or project out what the next few weeks are going to look like.

In this reflection, Sumayya makes connections between the hyperawareness of knowledge at work and the hyperawareness stemming from the rise in hate crimes. This hyperawareness is directly connected to Sumayya's Muslimness, enabling an inescapable visibility and vigilance rooted in concerns for safety. According to Sumayya, this leads to a sense of uncertainty, even in terms of how to prepare for the holy month of Ramadan. Aliya makes reference to a similar unpredictability when she discusses the hecticness of her life, compounded by being a mother to two little ones:

It's just like taking it one day at a time, trying not to look too far into the future, and trying not to predict what's going to happen next. And I think that was the hardest thing for me in the last few years like first with having kids and then you know going through the pandemic, **they're both things that are completely out of your control.** So that's one thing that I've learned to do to cope with things is

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just trying to let go of predicting the future or trying to control the future or knowing what the outcome will be of basically anything. I know that sounds a bit negative but I know that for me that really works. **So just taking it one day at a time and also trying to focus on the good**. So like whatever good thing happens in a day, I just try to focus on that and try not to look at all the bad things that are happening.

Unpredictability, another marker of neoliberal life, calls for Muslims to expect the unexpected. Aliya's strategy of "taking it one day at a time" is a mode of subjectification necessary for those who occupy precarious positions. For this reason, Aliya felt like she had to be cognizant of the pandemic's consequential impacts on health and survival but also navigate work-life responsibilities, relationships, and finances. As a strategy, she tried to make a conscientious decision to be positive despite her imminent fears and anxieties.

Despite their lives being quite different from one another, Zainab, Sumayya, and Aliya describe collective feelings of burnout, exhaustion, and anxiety. Their subjectivities as women, as Muslims, as Black or racialized, as mothers, as health care administrators, as students, and so on were undeniably shaped by the effects of the pandemic in ways that they started to articulate during the group conversations. In the next section, I analyze how the participants navigate their visible religious subjectivities in public spaces and argue that their unwillingness to waver in their religiosity, particularly in their practice of *hijab*, despite the challenges they face, results in a transcendence of traditional religious-secular binary constructions – a simultaneous refusal and embrace as resistance.

Refusal to Veil Religious Subjectivities in Secular Spaces

The participants spoke in detail about the importance of their faith as an anchor in their everyday lives. They reported being inseparable from their faith and described it as an internal compass that guided their actions and decision-making. Their faith was embraced as the core of their being, something none of the participants were willing to give up despite the challenges they faced as Muslims. However, their religiosity was performed in a predominately secular-assumed society, which questioned the articulation of their overt religious expression, particularly through the practice of *hijab*, in public. In Chapter Two, I describe the secular climate of Canada where the dominance of Christianity is invisibilized under a guise of presumed secularity. For Muslim women in *hijab*, in particular, the vilification of this practice occurs despite legislative freedoms to freely practice religion in Canada. Thus, the participants articulated challenges in navigating their religious subjectivities in public spaces and although their strong and unwavering anchoring in their faith offered a means of support, the women also recounted many instances when they felt conflicted about how to navigate these challenging circumstances. These perceptions of anti-religiosity were powerful in determining what the women chose to disclose about their religious selves but were not powerful enough for them to waver in their practices, particularly in their practice of *hijab*, which signifies a powerful non-verbal religious statement. In this way, although they were cautious in the nature of their conversations, they were still able to embrace their religiosity and perform their religious subjectivities in public through non-verbal symbols.

In this section, I argue that the participants' unwillingness to give up their religiosity despite challenges and fears refuses to cater to strict demarcations between secularity and religiosity and challenges strict western religious-secular binaries. In doing so, the participants perform their subjectivities as a more transcendental reconfiguration of religious subjecthood. This subjectivity transcends impositional demarcations that sought to keep various aspects of their subjectivities distinct. In their refusal to cater to these external demands and maintain commitment to their communities and their faith, the participants demonstrate their efforts to carve out more hybrid, organic, and interstitial forms of subjecthood, all the while documenting their challenges in doing so. In this way, the participants demonstrate the futility of these demarcations.

Even as they were proud to be Muslim and practiced *hijab* which immediately identified them as Muslim, the participants faced challenges reconciling the importance of their faith with public spaces where religion has "become kind of like a dirty word" (Aliya). For example, Fatima discusses the challenges of navigating the complexities of her workplace while protecting the sanctity of her religious values. She says, "It's a different type of workspace to navigate you know and try to be true to yourself." She describes how she initially assumed that working as a government employee would offer a more inclusive work environment but quickly realized that "very cliché types of barriers" still exist for those who are religious but not Christian. For example, although her employer changed the labelling of "Christmas gifts" to "holiday gifts," the gift still consisted of a wine bottle without consideration for those employees who do not consume alcohol (for reasons religious or otherwise), which demonstrates how these institutions continue to operate

through western Christian hegemonic practices. Aliya describes how an instance where she realized that even bringing up the topic of religion in the workplace was equated with preaching, which made it challenging for her as a religious subject to share this piece of her subjectivity with her co-workers. She says,

> **People don't want to talk about religion.** And it's kind of like when you talk about religion, it's almost as though you are imposing on someone's personal space. You know what I mean? **Like religion has become kind of synonymous with preaching**. Like to talk about your religion it almost feels like you're preaching to someone. [Ayesha: you're trying to convert someone]. Ya like you're trying to convert them.

Aliya further recounts a conversation with a former co-worker who was very "anti-religion" and would routinely announce what could and could not be discussed in the workplace. Aliya says,

> I remember this one person that I worked with, she would say, 'Don't say, don't say God bless you. When someone sneezes, I don't want to hear that.' [Ayesha: really]. 'Because I don't believe in God. There's no such thing as God.' … So you could say it but it was like, that doesn't mean anything to me, don't say it to me. … So it's like you know it's kind of, to be anti-religion is kind of okay.

This example demonstrates how the co-worker assumed the duty of declaring which sentiments could and could not be expressed and in doing so, valorized their own atheism above their co-worker's expression of blessings and good health upon hearing a sneeze.

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This privileging of one belief system to the ostracism of others in the workplace, a clear display of power relations, created additional challenges in the workplace but was not strong enough to cause Aliya to waver in her faith or expression of her own religiosity.

Fatima shares an example of how she did not feel comfortable discussing her religion at work in terms of how she crafted her response to an employer when declining a job offer. Her carefulness involved not wanting to reinforce gendered and racialized tropes about Muslim women. She says:

> So it's funny, I got this like job offer really up north in northern Ontario which is like in the middle of nowhere. I can't even remember the city and it was like the closest mosque was like a 4-hour drive. And I was like just saying like I wonder if there's any mosques so I Facebook messaged like some random mosque I like found on Facebook and I was like is there like any closer community center, or anything like that. Not even community, I was just looking for like a place that, like if I went up there, my husband would've had a place to go and pray Jumma, like that's all I need right. And they were like no there's nothing, you'd have to drive all the way here but if you want we can like try and stock up some halal food for you guys [laughs]. It was so sweet. But I remembered when I was like, I decided it wasn't really the right fit to go all the way up there so when I was basically declining the offer, I was telling them you know, **it actually crossed my mind about whether or not I should like fully explain the details** of you know oh ya, there's not going to be Friday prayer and whether or not I should reference it in terms of like something that is a gendered responsibility or not. Like that actually crossed my

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mind. I was like you know what, it's important that they know why it is I'm not able to go there. **I mean it's a government job, you'd expect like accommodation to be there for everything** but obviously there's not much they can do to actually establish a mosque in different parts of the province. But it's funny because it's not just about being on the defense as Aliya was saying but it's also like **you don't want to reinforce any negative stereotypes** so when it is that you have that type of situation that where you know maybe like you're unable to relocate because ya now like you're married or whatever it is, like do you want that to like, **is that really what you want to be showcasing um to non-Muslims I guess**.

Aliya agrees with Fatima's decision, saying,

Ya, exactly whereas for another person like someone who is a white woman, who's not Muslim it wouldn't be as big of an issue. Although for all women it is obviously an issue but **for Muslim women, it's like there's another layer right of this stereotype** and the type of you know image that people have of Muslim women being oppressed and so I totally see what you're saying [Fatima] and that's exactly what I mean. **It's like sometimes you can't just even be yourself**, you can't say something offhand that we would say and that's why I think groups like this and gatherings like this are so important because we can say these kinds of things and we all kind of know what each of us mean without feeling that need to explain ourselves.

In this conversation, Fatima and Aliya describe how the turning down of a job offer became complicated through the conscious decision not to share the real reason for the declining,

so as not to fuel further stereotypes about Muslim women. This pressure and added gendered responsibility of not only representing oneself but an entire global community was immense and in the end, Fatima was not fully honest with her employer about why she declined the offer. As well-educated professional women, the participants felt an added responsibility to be careful about how they represented their communities. As practicing Muslims navigating seemingly secular contexts, they sometimes determined that their religiosity needed to remain veiled so as not to contribute to existing anti-Muslim sentiments. Further, the sense of solidarity that stems from sharing these experiences in this space makes this a precious and rare site; the creation of this space is analyzed in detail in Chapter Five.

As a student, Zainab articulates the difficulties in raising the topic of religion in university settings because she is unaware of how these topics will be received or responded to by others. She says,

I wouldn't wanna put my beliefs in a room where I don't know if they're going to be understood or comprehended. And I don't want to feel like I always have to like explain myself to the individuals in that group as well. It's difficult.

For the participants, then, the fact that their faith is at the core of their subjecthood is difficult to reconcile with public climates that may be hostile or, at best, apathetic or ignorant of their religion. The privilege of not having to constantly explain themselves or justify their presence is not available to Muslim women. Zainab discloses how even when surrounded by other racialized people, she cannot expect to feel safe and is always responsible for her own safety:

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So that kind of goes back to the question you were saying earlier like how do we navigate being Muslim like in group settings. **Sometimes I feel like my *hijab* speaks like for me. That I'm Muslim and now they know that I'm Muslim type of thing**. But also at the same time, I don't like talking about it that much cuz I'm like **I don't want a target on my back**. You know like I don't want, like even though the other people in the room could also be racialized, **I don't know what internalized racism they have towards people that are Muslim**. Just because they're Black, doesn't mean that now all of a sudden they accept me for being Muslim as well on top of being Black. So there's so many things to take into consideration when you're navigating spaces like **I'm always kind of having to make sure that I'm keeping myself safe**. And if that involves me not talking into too much detail about my faith, then I'll do that.

For Zainab, her *hijab* identifying her as Muslim is often enough of a symbol of her religiosity in public spaces. Any additional discussions about religion could potentially put her in an unsafe situation, which reflects the constant need to be careful about disclosures and practicing safety in relation to becoming and performing her Muslimness.

Despite the participants' fears and apprehensions around having conversations about religion in public settings such as at work or at school, they are still protective of the core of their faith and value the importance of their faith to their religious subjectivities. They are able to find ways to perform their religious subjectivities in a way that maintains their safety and presumed neutrality in professional settings. In doing so, they transcend strict impositional secular-religious binaries and demarcations to keep various pieces of

their subjectivities disparate or veiled. Through this refusal, they are able to navigate their religious subjecthood in a manner that is more authentic to what they value. They also become adept at working within externally imposed binaries to maintain their strong Muslim identities in terms of compartmentalizing away and protecting their Muslimness to not always publicize their concerns as relate to their faith. In the next section, I analyze how the participants navigate incidences of anti-Muslim racism on an everyday basis and theorize how their resultant responses and strategies reflect their way of preserving their religious subjectivities.

Navigating Anti-Muslim Racism

The participants recognize that their subjectivities as "Muslim women" are overwhelmingly determined by global political constructions of "The Muslimwoman." This is difficult for them to reconcile as their personal relationship with Islam is rooted in spirituality, theology, and a sense of community whereas systemic Islamophobia politicizes their religion and associates their communities with violence, fear, and oppression. Thus their understandings of their faith, as one of peace, of grounding, and of justice, is far from the politicization of the faith as one to be hated, feared, and managed. Wherever the women go, they are politicized based on this lens. Even before they open their mouth, a perception of them as an individual is formed. The women's immediate identification as Muslim through the practice of *hijab* meant that the women were carrying Islam and all its religious, racialized, and politicized interpretations with them wherever they went. As Aliya says, "you can't just even be yourself" because you are always reflecting Islam everywhere you go. These discursive constructions are managed through multivarious power relations, and

in each space, interaction, and relationship, the women determine how to navigate that particular set of circumstances. Zainab articulates the weight of this navigation as such:

> So it's kind of like having this like huge backpack. And **you're just adding bricks to it, and you're going every single day**. You're not like emptying out any bricks. You're on autopilot and you're just putting more and more and more into it and then all of a sudden, it's been 6 months, then it's been a year. Now it's been a year and a half. Two years, three years have gone by and you're just adding more and more and more and **you think that you're okay but you're actually not**.

Here, Zainab explains how navigating Islamophobia on top of managing her day-to-day adds a growing weight to her sense of well-being. Additionally, not having any reprieve, source of solace, or opportunity for unburdening are reflective of dominant societal expectations to "soldier on" without break and despite respite. Zainab further reflects,

> There's so many experiences that we go through on a regular basis where it's like some of them, you can't even like bring them up cuz it'll make you angry, it'll trigger you again. And then there's others that just, just make you sad. It's like why did that even happen?

Here, Zainab suggests that the divergences between her religious subjectivity and the politicization of her religious subjectivity result in a constant and exhausting need to navigate; additionally, the emotional labour involved in these navigations lead to the sense of collective burnout described earlier.

The participants spoke at length about the pressures, challenges, and anxieties required to attend to the burden of global anti-Muslim racism and violence during a pandemic in which sociopolitical conversations about race, gender, and religion were amplified. Global instances or rhetoric about anti-Muslim hate and violence as tied to white supremacy informed their everyday experiences as individual Muslims. For example, Aliya articulates how she feels pre-judged in small town climates in the United States. She generally encounters more friendly people in larger cities but when she travels to smaller cities, she experiences her Muslim subjectivity very differently. Aliya says,

> When you go to those small towns in Florida, for example, we actually noticed that this time we were there, it's like people will just walk past you without like, they clearly know you're there but they will not look at you. **They will not make eye contact. They will not look in your direction**. [Ayesha: Wow]. And it was like such a stark contrast to like some of the bigger, so we were in Florida for two months this past winter ... So people you know generally in touristy places are used to a lot of diversity and you know people of different backgrounds and what not, so people were very friendly. But when you go ten minutes outside of the touristy area, like it's such a stark contrast. Like **people were so racist! They didn't say anything to us but you can feel it. You can feel it. You can just feel that they do not like you, they don't want to look at you, they don't want you there**.

This is the type of racism that made Aliya feel very conscious of her Muslimness. In these power relations, she was made to feel very obviously Othered. Although Aliya did not disclose one particular incident or comment, she recalls *that feeling*. This markedly

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negative and hostile environment described by Aliya is not due to her individual actions but rather due to others' characterization of her based on her appearance. There is a heightened sense of vigilance and alertness experienced by racialized individuals in public spaces, particularly when entering unfamiliar spaces. This hypervigilance becomes a survival strategy, a means of protecting oneself through careful attention to one's surroundings.

Zainab recalls similar feelings of hypervigilance while performing the *salat*, or Muslim prayer, in a public place at the university. She recounts,

> There have been times when I'm on campus and the multifaith room is closed and like I have to go pray *Asr* for example, cuz now at the University they close it at like 4:30. Before it used to be open like all the way up to *Isha* you know. And I had to like, I was like I have to, I need to pray and so I have to like find some corner in like [the student centre] to go pray and **the whole time my heart it's like beating out of my chest**. I'm like oh my god, why am I scared? But at the same time, it's like **I understand why I'm scared**. Like I understand why I'm feeling the way I'm feeling right now. Cuz **it's like not wanting to have a target on your back**.

Here, Zainab describes how practicing her religion in public as a Muslim elicits a visceral response of apprehension and fear on the part of the Muslim subject; this fear could additionally be categorized as a gendered fear due to Zainab's *hijab*. This fear is also indicative of a societal expectation that Zainab's performance of her faith be practiced privately, and it is only through the privatization of her religious subjectivity that Zainab is "granted permission" to move freely in public spaces. When a Muslim engages in this

type of public performance of religiosity, she experiences additional fear and caution. And when one's subjectivity is comprised of multiple intersections of marginalities, particularly when it comes to race, religion, and gender, this even more exacerbates one's feelings of Otherness. When asked about the main challenges facing Muslim women today, Zainab says,

> I would mention how **intersectionality plays a huge part in being a Muslim woman**. I think because being a Muslim woman is one thing, being visible, being visibly a Muslim woman is another thing right so wearing the *hijab*, people know that I'm Muslim. On top of that, you're Black. In academia. It's difficult. You don't see many, I was saying this yesterday, **you don't see many people that look like you** so it's kind of, for me I don't know how it makes other people feel but for me it kind of **gives me a reason to work harder in a way to kind of prove myself**. But I know that that's not always the right way to go **because I don't need to necessarily prove myself to anyone** but I constantly find myself feeling like I have to do that you know what I mean? Like to kind of show people that I'm not what you think I am. Whereas that's not like it's not really my job to show them that but **I just kind of always feel like I'm in this position where I have to like prove my excellence to these people** because they already think of me as like a Black person who wouldn't even excel past university in the first place right. So it's difficult right.

Zainab's internalized pressured to prove herself to others suggests that Muslim subjects feel expected to overcome oppressive anti-Muslim racism in order to become models of

success in the labour market, at school, and elsewhere. Another aspect of being racialized in the way described by Zainab is not knowing who to trust. When one does not feel safe or welcome in a space, then one feels all the more hypervigilant about one's surroundings. Zainab describes how she remains vigilant in the many spaces that she occupies, depending on where she is and who she is around. She goes on to share how she does not feel comfortable sharing her educational aspirations with white people:

> **Sometimes I shy away from like talking about my academic achievements to white people** because I feel like there's always this like degrading, not degrading comments, but it's kind of like when they say like, "Wow, good job!" it's kind of like, "You did that?" "You could do that?" type of thing. **So I kind of just keep it to myself**. I don't really talk about it unless I'm in like in a space with other women. For example, I like, like other Muslim women I'm able to talk about this like openly like my endeavors and how I want to do my PhD and stuff like that but it's like **sometimes I feel like I'm kind of jinxing myself if I say it out loud to people that don't understand type of thing** because I'm kind of like [laughs] you know like the whole notion of like evil eye I'm just like no, **I don't want to tell these people because they're already like doubting me to begin with**.

Here, Zainab demonstrates how she has formed a protective response to racism by not disclosing or opening up sacred parts of herself to people whom she thinks she cannot trust or in spaces where she might potentially feel unsupported based on her prior experience. Having experienced many instances of racism in her life, ranging in nature of severity,

Zainab describes how she has also developed a response to racism, which is a means of survival:

> I think like **my response like my trauma response is like forgetting it**, which is good and bad at the same time. I'm really good at detaching from things like I can just feel the pain, experience the emotion, not harbour it in. But then just for the sake of my mental health I'll have to try my best to just forget that it happened because if I don't forget that it happened, then I will just replay it in my head over and over and over and over again."

Her description of not harbouring emotion or pain is another protective strategy, and one that also reflects a neoliberalizing or stoicism required for survival. As she knows that she will inevitably face instances when she is othered, excluded, or made to feel fearful, she resists by developing strategies for transforming her own response should a similar incident occur again. This transformation of her response reflects critical awareness and attempts to enact self-change by Zainab. What she can transform is her own response and her own future action (or inaction).

Zainab describes in detail one incidence of anti-Black racism that is difficult for her to forget. During a conference for Black and African high school students at her campus, a group of students went with their teacher to a convenience store to get a snack one night. There, they encountered a store employee who became hysterical at the sight of so many Black youth in the store. Zainab says,

This lady is like, 'There are too many Black people in my store!' Like she starts screaming and then I was like, 'Oh hi, I'm the coordinator for this conference like you know there's no need for you to be frantic or upset'. Because when she was doing that, **it literally defeated the purpose of everything that we talked about that day**. **Like these kids are coming, came to the conference talking to us about their traumas, about racism and they just got basically cussed out by this white lady at the [convenience store]**. She starts calling the police. And I'm standing there talking to her and her face, and this is the closest in somebody's face I've ever been. She's like talking to me, she's like, 'No you need to get out right now.' And I was like "Ma'am they're just getting their stuff, they're gonna leave, like it's not a big deal. You need to calm down. You need to lower,' I was like, 'You sound very emotional right now.' I was like, 'you sound very emotional right now, you need to calm down.' She goes, 'No! I'm not gonna calm down!' And then she picks up her phone and she's like calling the police, she's calling 911.

Once the police officers arrived, Zainab calmly explained the situation to them. The police officers said the employee had alleged that people were stealing from her store. Zainab says, "**That experience was so disgusting for me because these kids came with their traumas and then left with traumas**." Furthermore, the manner in which the situation was handled by university officials made the situation even worse. Not only did the university not issue a public apology to all university students (only offering an in-person apology to the students at the conference), Zainab claims that right after the apology, university officials used this opportunity to recruit Black students for their athletic

programs, which is an example of how Black organizing and pushes for institutional change become coopted by administration and hailed as institutional victories. Zainab says,

This man came in with the poster and the poster was like facing towards him so we didn't know what was on the poster. He gets on the podium which is like, every time I think about this experience, I just, I can't even say cringe like I just, I just **I get so angry at this situation**. He comes up on the podium and he goes, "It's come to my attention that a lot of you students want to come to the [this university] and we do need more diversity at this campus. This campus is already so diverse but we love seeing more diversity. We love seeing new faces." And then he turns around the poster that he has and it's a poster of a Black international Nigerian student who is a football player at the [university]. So he goes to the students, 'And you guys see this student? This student is so and so.' And then he named his like full government name. Like you know how some African names, like some Nigerian names are like extremely long. He lists his entire name and then he goes, 'This could be you. If you guys work hard, this could be you and this could be you at the [university]. So just keep working hard.' And I was like, when he said that I felt like my body was going into like a freeze mode. I was like there's no way that this man just came in front of 300+ Black students and told them that this could be them if they work hard enough. **Meaning that Black bodies are just used for athletic purposes and we don't care about your academic endeavors, just come and play a sport … and be on the poster for recruiting diversity**. And when that happened, all I could, I looked around the room and all these students' faces were

like [jaw drop]. They were like shocked. They had to end up cutting him off. I was like thank you so much, you know get off the podium basically. Later on that day, I feel like the conference turned into a matter of, a bunch of like apologies but it was also like letting the students know like this is a reality here but this shouldn't have to be a reality at the same time. **It was very embarrassing**. But the students at the end of the day still enjoyed the conference but those two things happening were not ironic. You know at a conference aimed for Black students, the most racist things happened to them and they still trigger me to this day.

Zainab wishes that she could have prevented these two incidents from happening but realized:

I was like what could I have done to prevent it. But at the same time, I was like nothing. I couldn't have done anything to prevent that. **That was literally out of my control**. I did what I could to prepare for the conference but there are certain situations that you literally cannot prepare for.

Here, she feels a sense of responsibility and accountability to her community to have tried to prevent the incident from occurring. But she also realizes that the way in which power relations are structured at her university and in other institutions continue to either construct Black bodies as guilty of crime and to be feared or to be tokenized and profited from for administrative gain. Zainab's efforts to organize this conference to provide a space of community and scholarship for Black youth became co-opted by overt acts of anti-Black racism. Although Zainab wishes that she could have prevented these incidents from

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happening, she knows that she could not have considering the deeply embedded nature of anti-Black racism in Canada.

The analysis in this section, which especially highlighted the intersections of anti-Muslim and anti-Black racisms, demonstrated that as they move about in their everyday lives, the women are already pre-constructed as Other and therefore must be vigilant and reflective about their responses and strategies if they are to continue to navigate these circumstances. The women's resistances in this section are primarily constitutive of survival strategies in response to the racism they face at work, at school, and in public. In the next section, I describe how the participants reflect on their activist work and how that is marked by a refusal to be interpellated as *just* Muslim.

Refusal to Embrace being Faith Ambassadors & Reimagining Resistance

The participants spoke in depth about the pressures of being part of the 9/11 generation, growing up and living in an environment where the events of September 11, 2001 drastically overdetermined how Islam is constructed and how Muslims are perceived in the west. This coincided with a global convergence towards neoliberal capitalist arrangements and towards stemming the rise of the securitization against terrorism as described in Chapter Two. The politicization of Islam described in Chapter Two led to material consequences for Muslims living in western nations. The Muslim subject, cast outside of the globalized western subject, became subjectified through new modes of subjectification through neoliberal surveillance. The Muslim subject then is required to respond through various refusals to engage with these preexisting constructions of their subjectivities.

As members of the 9/11 generation, the participants felt responsible for assuming the task of challenging misconceptions about Islam, particularly Muslim women, in a post-9/11 world. They did this primarily through education, which has its roots in the Islamic tradition of *da'wa* in which Muslims are encouraged to teach others about their faith. This education ranged from organizing formal public events to casual impromptu conversations with friends or strangers. They engaged in this advocacy work in various spaces: in their classrooms, places of work, homes, and even with their own friends and family members when needed. This responsibility was reflective of a collective responsibility as faith ambassadors, a responsibility which is experienced differently for different Muslims; some eagerly embrace it, some are tasked with it as a consequence of their titles or experience, and others navigate mixed feelings. This education is also made possible and supported through the work of Muslim community organizations and mosques, which focus on circulating counter-discourses to that of the Muslim outcast in the west.

In this section, I detail how the participants reflected on their advocacy work and their pedagogical revelations as a result of being part of the group conversations. I argue that through their refusal to fully and without question embrace their responsibility as faith ambassadors, rather through their questioning, their back-and-forth, and their changed levels of involvement through different phases of life, the participants challenged the hegemonic characterization of what the politicization of Islam demanded of them and imposed on them as members of the 9/11 generation. Inevitably, this critical reflection and engagement with post-9/11 discourses and power structures led to the changed nature of their advocacy work. I also argue that this refusal and subsequent navigation reflects

challenging of western liberal notions of who an activist is and what is considered to be "good" activism, a point that I develop in Chapter Five. Through the participants' refusal to engage in a more public, external-facing form of social action as had been conceived in this project's proposal, the participants demonstrate a collective shift towards an activism that is deeper, more introverted, and more meaningful to their sense of who they are as Muslim women.

The participants expressed increasing burnout from engaging in sustained advocacy work throughout their adult lives, whether in resistance to anti-Muslim racism or anti-racism broadly. They document the stresses that stemmed from public engagement and organizing but especially emphasize the emotional labour tied to this work, particularly if one is reflexive about one's embodiment, words, and actions when doing this work. For example, Zainab says:

> And **I realized that it soon burnt me out** and it affected my academics in a very like negative way because like me, like when I get invested in something, like I get invested like wholeheartedly and a lot of these things, I didn't know in undergrad, I didn't know how to like separate the things that were happening to students at school due to anti-racism versus like how do I separate myself from that when I go home. **So a lot of times I took that, those burdens with me like to my house**.

Zainab faced difficulties in detaching herself from her work and being unable to "turn off" once leaving a particular event or activity. For those engaged in social justice work, separating emotions from actions is challenging as the emotions are inevitably tied to, and fuel, the work, making it an unrealistic expectation. Zainab elaborates, saying, "I feel like

I'm spreading myself thin by doing all these extra voluntary things like in my community, advocacy and stuff, which also would affect my mental health." Here, she recognizes the personal impact and toll of this sustained engagement on her well-being. That being said, when asked if there was ever a moment when she refused to engage, Zainab says,

> **I feel like I always find a way to engage even if it's slight, like even if it's super small**. Even if it's like sending an email or going to like give that person a hug or like talk to that person who was inflicted. Even though I physically can't do anything to change the circumstance, I want to think that I try to do something.

Zainab recognizes that the responsibility to engage involves self-sacrifice and yet she is committed to taking action at every opportunity. However, the nature of how she engages differs based on how she predicts her involvement will be most useful. This demonstrates reflexivity and self-awareness of how her presence and subjecthood is not only taken up but also at what impact to her Self. This is a consciousness of her situatedness in the post-9/11 context and her calculations on how to maintain her complex identity to carve out a different kind of Muslim subjectivity – a Muslim activist woman who is a faith ambassador who will inevitably face additional emotional labour and burnout but is conscientious about taking care of her Self while still doing the work that needs to be done.

When describing the importance of advocacy work, Aliya reflects on the learnings that emerge from her experiences; this is knowledge she has gained not only about the world around her but also about her own Self. Most importantly, Aliya has learned to place less importance on what others think and instead do what feels right for her. She says,

Just represent Islam in a way that I want it to be seen but also not let that, like I think we talked about this last time, that **not let that being the flagbearer of being Muslim overtake everything in your life**. So I've been trying to work on that in the last year or so too where like, ya I'm a Muslim woman and I, visibly people look at me and they say ya, okay ya she's Muslim, but **I'm trying to like be myself more and not trying to always represent my religion**, if that makes any sense.

Through this realization, Aliya refuses to fully assume that immense responsibility put on Muslim women to represent their religion positively, to not let her actions reflect poorly on their communities, and to constantly have to be a faith ambassador. As described in Chapter Two, the post-9/11 politicization of Muslims and Islam led to immense pressure on Muslims to "correct," to educate, and to counter any negative media coverage about Islam. Aliya is learning that this is not her primary responsibility. As she describes her advocacy work with her mosque, Aliya questions, "Is it worth the effort?" Particularly when she faced criticism from within the Muslim community itself in terms of how an event was organized, Aliya reflects,

I think the first time you get into this type of work, you go in with this mindset that my intentions are good, everyone else is going to be the same as me. Why would I, **why would anyone not agree with my perspective on these things?** And then you face kind of like this opposition that you don't know where it's coming from, you don't understand. And it's not like the other side are people that are you know disagreeing with you, it's not that they're bad people right so you just, it teaches you in a sense how to work with people who have, ya they might be similar to you

but they have very different mindsets. So I feel like ya it does teach you a very

unique set of skills.

In this way, Aliya directs that criticism away from her Self and instead considers how this

learning can be fruitful for other organizing efforts. Despite the internal resistance and self-

questioning, Aliya is not ready to completely give up on her advocacy work, reflecting a

simultaneous embrace and refusal of the responsibility to educate and a resistance that is

more authentic to Aliya's sense of Self.

During the group discussions, the participants engaged in a lengthy back-and-forth

conversation about the importance of engaging in advocacy work, how to determine what

type of work to engage in, and when one needs to make a difficult decision to step back

from the work. What these complicated discussions demonstrate is that they recognize that

there are tensions between their internal responsibilities to their communities and external

expectations imposed upon them as faith ambassadors through the sociopolitical climate in

which they have grown up. Through self and group reflections, they have determined

strategies for determining how to make decisions about where to spend their time and

efforts in challenging Islamophobia. This demonstrates how they are required to be

strategic in their navigations as a consequence of their circumstances. Below, I share

lengthy excerpts from two discussions to illustrate the collective nature of this reflection.

In these conversations, the participants engage in collective attempts to navigate "the faith

ambassador" subjecthood through concurrent embrace and refusal.

The first excerpt comes from the second group discussion in which only Aliya and

I were present. The other women had sent their regrets at the last minute and so I used this

opportunity to engage more deeply with Aliya to reflect on the group's choice to create a wellness group as our social action (as analyzed in detail in Chapter Five). Aliya begins by suggesting that Islamophobia cannot be effectively challenged by "shouting from the rooftops" but rather by focusing on interpersonal relationships and engaging in difficult conversations about racism in these personal relationships. She says,

> I feel like the best way to fight Islamophobia or any kind of racism is **on a personal level**. So I think that if every single Muslim out there you know was more for example was more like, if we all talked to our neighbours and were friendly with our neighbours. If we all talked to our colleagues and incorporated some of what you said, like talking about what we believe openly without that fear of you know, I think that is the way to do it personally, I think that's where you actually see the results. I think that organizing anti-Islamophobia events and rallies and whatever it is, that stuff is great of course and it has its place but **I don't think that's where the difference actually comes in from. That's just what I believe personally**. So I feel like every Muslim, if you care about this, if you care about changing the perception that people have about Muslims, you need to do it in your day-to-day life. Like talk to your neighbours. If you're at a grocery store and someone's like, just talk to them and let them see that you're just a normal person. Right because the fear comes from the unknown. The reason they fear us and why they don't like us a lot of times, it's not everyone of course. Everyone has their own agendas. But in a lot of cases, it's just they just don't know us.

Here, Aliya introduces a major shift in the project as her comments have come in response to the question of what the group can start to plan as an anti-racist action. Her invocation of the focus on personal relationships instead of public organizing as well as her reinforcing of expectations of Muslims to educate reflect her navigations around the "faith ambassador" identity and in certain ways, upholding it and in other ways, refusing it. To Aliya's comments, I respond,

> **Do you think that's like too much of a burden on us** though to like always be on, to always be like thinking like what do other people think of me [Aliya: it is] and like I need to change their perception of me. Like I feel like I'm coming to that place where I'm like, do I really care what other people think of me? [Aliya: Honestly, ya] I know who I am, like I know who my kids are, like I know who my friends are. Does it really matter?

Through these comments, I attempt to problematize the concept of "the faith ambassador" further, to interrogate how Aliya reconciles this subjectivity in her day-to-day life. To this, Aliya responds that one's willingness to embrace this responsibility varies depending on one's phase of life. She articulates this responsibility and its subsequent subjectivity as not finite or static, but rather a subjecthood that is in flux and in which energy, interest, and attachment ebbs and flows over the course of one's life. Aliya says,

> I've been at the place where you're at and then I've gone, it's kind of like a pendulum, it swings back the other way. So now I'm kind of back in the other direction, like I was totally in your place a few years ago and I was like I do not care, I'm gonna live my own life. You guys think what you want, just don't bother

me. But then now I'm back towards the other side. And I keep thinking you know like we don't all have the time or the energy to like really go out there and do things but in the small interactions that we're having anyways, like don't don't put the burden on yourself to say I need to change this person's mind. **But just be a good person**. Right so it's kind of like do what you're already doing but maybe take it a little bit further. Right I'm not saying you need to preach your religion to them but just take it a little bit further. Like maybe you have a neighbour who like you know you've never spoken to, maybe just you know and it doesn't even have to be from the lens of like I'm trying to be a good Muslim just you know, or I'm trying to change their mind about my religion. Just be a good neighbour, be a good person just be a good colleague be, if you're just you know doing what you're normally doing but maybe just go a little bit further, **which I think it is still a lot to ask and I don't think that we all need to do it so only if you have it in you to do it at that point in your life**. Cuz I think in our life, we go through like there's like ebb and flow of our life right. **Like there are times when you're gonna have that energy to do things and then you're gonna go into this kind of phase of retreating and just taking care of yourself**. So when you have the energy maybe that's you know that's life's way of telling you that this is your time to do it. And then you stop for a while.

Here, Aliya more deeply interrogates this responsibility by articulating how an individual on their own determines how much or what forms their engagement will take, and this will vary throughout the course of their life. Finally, Aliya and Ayesha discuss the gendered

nature of this "faith ambassador" subjecthood and the problematic imposition of this responsibility onto Muslim women who are visibly Muslim through *hijab*:

Aliya: I don't think we all have that responsibility because at the end of the day **just because we're visibly Muslim, it shouldn't be on us**. Right like as Muslim women specifically, we should not have, it should not be like an extra burden that because you choose to be a visible Muslim that all of the sudden it's on you. Like you're the flag bearer, you are, everything is on you to change people's minds. I think that that's too much to expect. I think a lot of times, **that's where burnout comes from** and it's like too much expectation, **too much expectation that we put on ourselves and that society puts on us, the Muslim community puts on us, it's too much for us to, it's too much, we can't handle it and that's why I think a lot of the times, we just completely stop right**.

Ayesha: Ya I feel like that.

Aliya: **You can't, you can't always be the posterchild for your religion. We should be allowed to make mistakes.**

Ayesha: And be individuals, right? Not just Muslim women but just be ourselves.

Aliya: Exactly, exactly. Like if for example, if you cut someone off in traffic and someone sees you wearing *hijab*, you shouldn't feel like oh what are they going to think of Muslims? Ya maybe what you did wasn't the best thing but **you as an individual should be allowed to make mistakes**

sometimes without having to carry the burden of your entire religion and your gender and you know all that stuff. It's not right, it's not fair. I think it's perfectly fine for us, especially as Muslim women to just say like, I don't wanna do it. **I'm just gonna take care of myself, my family and do what I have to do to you know, it's okay**.

Ayesha: Live my life, yup.

Aliya: And I think for a lot of Muslims that is the way they're living. I dunno.

Here, Aliya describes how this responsibility is expected by society and by Muslim communities and is further internalized and assumed by Muslim women themselves. This becomes the onus of the individual to then refuse to fully take on this responsibility and instead determine an alternative path that is less burdensome and more authentic to themselves.

Fatima raises similar challenges in the third group discussion when reflecting on her changing patterns of advocacy over the course of her life and how she has become more selective and wiser about when to participate and when to refuse to engage. Interestingly, she connects this responsibility to the Islamic faith as the desire to clear misconceptions about Islam is rooted in how the religion guides Muslims towards performing good deeds and contributing to the betterment of society. She says,

Like our attention towards you know different causes I think kind of changes as we kind of outgrow maybe certain, I wouldn't say like values, I think we all keep having those kinds of values of like debunk whatever it is of stereotypes of Islamic

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or Muslim women but that it's just maybe we just feel like it's not really like **it's not really our responsibility anymore** or it's just not we don't need to pick every battle and we start becoming a little more wiser. **We start making those calculated decisions about where we want to invest our energy.**

Here, Fatima demonstrates how she strategizes how to navigate her faith ambassador subjecthood, articulating a selective and conscientious refusal to fully and without question embrace this subject position. These individual calculations are also based on choices that are constrained, and they help produce the kind of ambassadorship or Muslim subject that is possible and necessary in the given moment. Similarly, Zainab describes decision-making about when to engage and when to refuse through a learned strategy of being "very intentional" while also "mak[ing] sure that I'm taking care of myself." In the fourth group conversation, Sumayya interestingly articulates a sense of relief during the pandemic when she was extraneously un-burdened from this responsibility. She says,

There's a silver lining of the pandemic where **having the opportunity to be off** whereas before you know you were always at an event, always somewhere and **it always felt like we were explaining ourselves or having to defend you know do an Islam 101 like every week to some random person**. Whereas **the pandemic kind of gave you solace from that** where you didn't really have to do that and I think that was nice. I just I wonder what's gonna happen afterwards when we kind of get back to that.

Being un-burdened as a result of the circumstances provided a necessary solace for Sumayya as she was no longer responsible for having to navigate between engagement and

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refusal. The decision being taken out of her hands was a relief, but it was temporary as Sumayya knew that once the pandemic restrictions ended, she would need resume making these decisions on her own.

In this section, the participants demonstrate how they navigate between engagement and refusal of the subject position of "the faith ambassador," a navigation which changes over the course of their lives but remains a persistent challenge as they feel pressured by their faith, society, communities, and even themselves to continue to engage. Overall, their navigations are reflective of nuanced engagement with "resistance," one which looks different for each individual at different points in their life and requires conscientious attention but does not result in an outright refusal or embrace of the responsibility.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I analyze how the participants navigate internalized oppressions within their families and communities, especially as relate to internalized racism and misogyny. Although these situations can be uncomfortable or cause tension between loved ones, the women's refusal to allow the oppression to persist demonstrates their commitment to seeing change within the spaces and people that are most dear to them.

Refusal to Be Complicit in Internalized Oppressions

The participants were honest and vocal about the challenges within their Muslim communities and households, particularly in terms of how they navigated internalized misogyny and racism within these community spaces. Ultimately, their reflections demonstrate their refusal to be complicit in internalized oppressions and yet their engagement in these spaces differed from their engagement outlined in the previous

sections. By speaking out, the participants placed themselves in vulnerable situations to have to call out close friends or family members for their comments or actions but their willingness to do so despite the risk demonstrates their commitment to changing their communities to be more aware and less internally discriminatory. In their refusal to do nothing, they demonstrate their responsibility towards bettering their own communities and homes.

Participants talked at length about the gendered impacts of colourism and texturism on the body consciousness of young women. Zainab shares powerful examples of intracommunity discrimination around colourism and texturism and how being part of those conversations with her own family and friends made her all the more conscious about her own body. She says,

I remember I was talking to one of my guy friends a few months ago and he is also from my culture as well and he was saying, I was asking him how would your, like he's my skin tone, and I was asking him, like, **'How would your family feel like if you like brought home a girl that was like your colour.' He was like, 'I can't do that**!' He's like, 'I can't even bring home a girl that's my colour. She has to be like about five shades lighter than me.' [Ayesha: wow]. And I was like, imagine, I was kind of asking him just for like my information but **that made me feel so bad like for myself cuz I was like oh now, I don't even feel like comfortable my own culture.** So like now what type of thing? And he was saying how like my family, they really want me to marry a girl with fair skin and long hair and I was like, 'But you don't even have fair skin and long hair!' [laughs] 'You don't even have fair

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skin or long hair right.' So it's like, it's crazy. … **And it's like the amount of effort and money and time and brainpower that you're putting into making sure that you conform to like the norm or like what's the beauty standard, you could be like putting that time into educating somebody in your family to not like do that**. If you spend all that time in our own families and dismantling the racism in our own families, then we wouldn't even be having this problem where we're looking outside for validation anymore. And **I could understand how it makes a lot of women feel like they are not accepted anywhere**. You know and especially with the different intersecting things that make you who you are, like you're Black, you're also a woman, like there are beauty standards. You also wear the *hijab* so not only are you Muslim by name but people also know that you're Muslim right.

Here, Zainab demonstrates the impact of the normalization of preference for proximity to whiteness on women. Her statement that, "It makes a lot of women feel like they are not accepted anywhere," demonstrates the tangible impacts of internalized racial and gender-based discrimination on youth, so much that young Black Muslim women have very few spaces where they can actually experience acceptance for their bodies. Zainab even reflects on how she herself has internalized some of that problematic colourism with regards to her perceptions of her own skin colour, and she has to catch her inner voice when it starts to engage in this type of discourse. Reflecting on her past conversations with potential partners, Zainab says,

It's always the guy has to be a couple shades darker than the woman, that's just the way that it is. It's just the way that people have always done it. So I constantly

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found myself asking like, 'Are you sure your parents would like me? Are you sure your parents would approve of me? Are you sure like they're not gonna look at me and be like, you could get a light skinned woman?' **And then sometimes I think about it, I'm like I can't believe I'm asking these questions!** Like I actually can't believe it. I can't! But at the same time, **I don't wanna put myself in an unfavourable situation** because I know that there are so many families that would prefer a fair skinned woman over a dark woman.

Here, Zainab illustrates how she aims to protect herself from the consequences of these internalized colonial standards with regards to skin colour and hair texture by chastising her inner voice when it starts to reflect these harmful sentiments. Zainab's internal conversations demonstrate how power relations tied to white supremacy construct the racialized other as subordinate and how these power relations take root within racialized communities and result in intracommunity subordination and devaluation based on colonial racial logics.

As established activists and feminists with many years of experience in advocacy in different spheres of influence, the participants reflected on the especially challenging struggles they faced when confronted with the need to challenge their family members about their internalized oppression. They often found it more difficult to speak up about these topics with their family members rather than with strangers, and disclosed that the work of challenging discrimination within Muslim communities was more taxing and laborious than their work outside Muslim communities. Reflecting on the question of

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whether it is worth it to continue to critique one's own community knowing the toll it can take on one's health and wellness, Aliya shares,

> The experience itself is very valuable too. Even though it's hard and coming out from the other side, you look back and you wonder if it's worth it, I think it does build certain, the experience is in itself whether it's negative or positive or both, it does have some value to it I think**. It teaches us how to maybe move forward in a way that you can make those changes and not make the same mistakes perhaps that you made the first time.**

This demonstrates how Aliya considers it important to continue to challenge problematic practices in her own community despite opposition because that is how she can learn and re-strategize. Again, this presents a navigational challenge as she feels strongly about tackling deeply seated structural inequities within her communities but also, externally, is very protective and does not want public knowledge of these internal issues to fuel further stereotypes about Muslims as anti-women or oppressive.

Sumayya reflects on all of the themes above in the following eloquent passage from the fourth group discussion. She says,

> I really liked what Aliya and Fatima also said earlier about like taking it one day at a time. I think that comes back to this conversation too of like **sometimes this burden of trying to fix everything or need to fix everything falls on us**. And it's not to be an excuse or whatever like you said in certain situations like this, **especially when it comes to racism, things need to be called out**. But I think

there's an interesting balance here of like having safe spaces where we can talk about these things because you know trying to talk about internalized sexism or misogyny or racism within our community in the broader, in like the public sphere gets misconstrued right and then you just get skewered or get put on trial in public. But **I think to a degree we shy away from it within our community as well right we just wanna hide the dirty laundry and wanna pretend like nothing's wrong.** We wanna talk about the ideal state of the ummah and like ideal state of being Muslims without recognizing that we're fallible and we're humans and we all like make mistakes and we don't do things perfectly. So I think there's that interesting dynamic there where I agree with you Zainab, like these things need to be called out in our communities. **And I see that like changing within our generation**. You know I see it. My grandma moved here in 2018 so she's in her mid-90s you know she's MashAllah a little bit of a sassy one but you know I see it in like things that she'll say offhand about you know someone's body size or like skin colour. And like we're just like, 'Oh my god grandma you can't say that!' Even my dad who he's, it's his mom like he'll say that sometimes to her and be like you know, 'Mom we don't say that anymore' and trying to explain you know God made everyone the way that they are. Like the look that she gives him is just like, be quiet. But you know like it's tough you know right you know what, she's in her 90s, she's probably not going to change, **but we can**. And we can make sure that we don't say these things or believe these things you know what I mean, make someone feel bad for the way that they look or the way that God made them.

In this passage, Sumayya unpacks not only the challenges of speaking up with family members but also the importance of it because if not called out, even to her 90-year-old grandmother, those same sentiments will continue to be passed on intergenerationally. Sumayya's comments about how to reach an ideal state for the community without acknowledging the problematic elements is key to her definition of resistance. In order to transform her community, Muslims must set aside the desire to shield the community's problems from the outside world and instead tackle them head on. Zainab agrees that it is important to challenge family members who espouse internalized oppression, regardless of how difficult the task might be. She says,

> I would say that starts in the home like addressing that aunty or uncle who makes fun of the darker people in the family or like the one who loves people that are fair skin and then treats their like dark skinned nieces or nephews or grandchildren in a weirder way. The one that has texturism problems and doesn't like that your hair is kinkier than your cousin's hair. Like all this stuff I feel like before we can tackle it in the community, **we need to start having those conversations in the household with the people that are in the house cuz we all know somebody in our family who thinks like that right** and that's like, **us not saying something, we're all contributing to the problem**. But then there comes in that cultural aspect of like respect your elders and like don't speak like this to your elders, and there's like a lot of things that have to be taken into consideration so you know like there was even a Hadith [saying of the Prophet Muhammad^{saw}] that says like if you can't change something, if you hate something, change it with your hands like try to

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change it, take matters into your own hands and change it. **So like for example if you can't change the way that these people in your family are talking to individuals, you can make sure that you don't instill that in your own household moving forward in the future or if you can talk to the younger people in your family and tell them this is kind of the reality, I'll try to have your back type of thing**. So I think, like I said, these things start in the house and like even though I am Black there are individuals in my family who are like colourist or texturist and it's crazy because you'd think that that wouldn't happen in my household. It's like we're all varying skin tones and like we all have varying hair types and it's like I just happen to fall onto the darker side but its like if I have a sibling, you wouldn't even think that we're actually siblings but we are. Just like and I've seen the things that are said and like the negative comments that are made, it's really sad. **Like it's actually very very sad that not only do I not have that solace outside but I don't even have it in my own house like so it makes you kind of feel like there's nobody like you can talk to about these experiences**. So ya like I said, they kind of start in the household.

Again, Zainab addresses the isolation that stems from being exposed to discrimination in all the spaces which she inhabits and remarks on the sadness she feels about not being protected from this racism even within her own home with extended family members. Despite this lack of respite, Zainab remains committed to standing up to family members who continue to espouse these types of beliefs. This commitment demonstrates her strong sense of responsibility towards transforming the spaces and people that are dear to her, so

that they are more reflective of her values of justice and equity. In her refusal to be complicit, Zainab embraces a form of resistance that, though profoundly disheartening, is necessary in order to create necessary change.

In the following passage, Aliya and Fatima reflect on intra-community racism in Muslim communities and how they respond to it:

Aliya: We refer back to the Hadith that you were mentioning Zainab and what Fatima sent in the text about like you know we need to change ourselves before we can look outwards. **And there is so much racism within our communities. Not only within our families but within our community towards other sub-communities. Right you know people of Muslims of a certain skin colour are discriminating against those of a different skin colour. Even those of the same skin colour there's other levels of discrimination**. So there's like so many levels of racism you know and just so much going on but like you know not just skin colour but Zainab was saying about being fair and like body shaming like what Sumayya was saying. And it just, Sumayya, your grandma's awesome MashAllah and she's amazing but it's just true what you're saying, it's a generational issue and I do see some improvement in our generation but what I actually wanted to say, the one point that I wanted to mention was that it's so sad to see that it's actually in a lot of cases, it's continuing in our generation. Like **people of our generation are passing it on the internalized racism that they have onto their kids**. And I've actually seen it firsthand, people

who are our age who have kids like some of my friends or some people that I know within our families and in our friend circles and social circles who have kids who are like you know a little bit older now and now they're having these kinds of discussions and asking these questions. And I'm actually like, **I was very like you know disappointed you know to hear some of them passing on the same kind of nonsense about skin colour and like even within kids** ... So I feel like it's just ya, it is improving in the next generation but if we don't make a very like very mindful, we're not mindful of it and we don't make that concerted effort it's not gonna happen. It's not just, the generations are not going to improve unless we improve ourselves first. So we as like parents especially Ayesha like what you were saying we need to realize what it is that's going on and work on ourselves and then be very mindful of the way that we have these conversations with our children so that it does improve. Because if we're not mindful about, if we're not very very careful about it, I don't think that things are gonna improve as much as we hope they will in the next generation. Just from my observation of what I've heard other kids saying. Ya, that's all I wanted to say.

Fatima: That's honestly really crazy. **Sometimes we think of racism you know of being more prevalent like in the older generations and we kind of excuse older people for it** and just we say ya they didn't know or don't know any better and like you know, I've heard my grandma like say some

racist things before and I used to always like point it out to her and it would be like the laughing point sometimes, she just wouldn't get how serious I was about issues when she'd be talking she thought I was joking or something. But it's really sad Aliya that you're saying you hear kids talking about it, that's just another level.

This conversation reflects an authentic desire to better understand the current state of their communities so as to better gauge how younger generations of Muslims are being socialized to think about race and gender. The age-based dynamics are interesting in this passage as they reflect on the concept of letting elders get a pass due to their age but at the same time reflect on the dangers of other Muslims in the participants' age bracket replicating much of these similar norms. Aliya and Fatima here are, like Zainab and Sumayya above, committed to challenging this internalized oppression and not being complicit in its intergenerational transfer, which is again reflective of a re-imagination and putting into practice the kind of community they envision for themselves and their children.

Overall, the participants demonstrate how in these individual instances of communication with close kin, they respond to misogynist and racist comments, which inevitably changes the dynamics of those settings or relationships but is a risk they are willing to assume for the sake of their responsibility towards their communities. Through this refusal to be complicit, the participants are imagining and constructing the kind of community that they want through the critiques they are raising. Being able to reflect on what is at stake if they do not take action is reflective of connecting their individual sense of self to that of their community, which is further reflective of a commitment to neither

stay silent and complicit nor leave or abandon but rather to value the community so much that they are committed to putting in the labour and energy in order to challenge the internalized oppressions.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the participants engage in simultaneous embrace and refusal in their everyday lives. Collectively analyzed, this reflects the complexities for Muslim women in navigating their subjectivities and resistances in various everyday spaces. This complicated analysis follows Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) guidance regarding analyses of resistance and how to not gloss over or simplify but to consider the nuances and complexities around resistance. The participants demonstrate how they come to their complex Muslim subjectivities through a sense of efficacy carved out through challenging who and what western neoliberal forces want them to be. But as women, they also face circumstances that are beset with expectations that are both gendered and racialized. The very production of who they are as Muslims sets out the possibilities for the kind of Muslim subject they can be. And that re-subjectivation involves a transformation of power relations, either externally or as internalized by the participants themselves.

In the following chapter, I demonstrate how the participants collectively determined a social action for the group and theorize how the group transformed into a collective critical faith based epistemic resistance, the type of collective resistance required to continue to unpack and address the everyday navigations outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: ADVANCING A COLLECTIVE CRITICAL FAITH-BASED
EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE

In this chapter, I theorize how the various refusals and navigations analyzed in

Chapter Four were collectivized in the group space and how together, this powerful

formation comprises a collective critical faith-based epistemic resistance. I argue that the

conditions that led to the creation and meeting of this group thus put into practice the

framework conceptualized by Jasmin Zine (2004) for a critical faith-based epistemic

resistance of Muslim women united by shared faith and critical antiracist feminist axiology.

I theorize how this critical and collective space of epistemological advancement is

representative of a resistance that simultaneously embraces and refuses the exercise of

power relations and is rooted in shared space, shared relationships of wellness, and shared

values for community. As the group is unable to fully change existing forms of power in

which their subjectivities are co-opted, they then yearn for alternative spaces of community

with shared respect and goals. In this space, the group attempts to reclaim the power to

define and construct themselves on their own terms. This analysis relies on the thematic

analysis of secondary data from the community project (digital recordings, transcripts, and

my notes and memos from before, during, and after the four group conversations) as well

as primary data from the follow-up interviews with three women who participated in

Circles of Wisdom.

For this analysis, I rely on key texts from Saba Mahmood (2005) and Jasmin Zine

(2004). These transnational feminist scholars have advanced important scholarship

exploring the nuances of resistance, power relations, and social movements in the lives of

Muslim women, and their arguments are foundational for also exploring the findings from

this project. After explicating their arguments, I then theorize three key aspects of this collective that suggest a re-imagination of a collective subjectivity based on simultaneous embrace and refusal: (1) a new set of social relations rooted in wellness; (2) a transcendental digital space; and, (3) a responsibility and commitment to bettering communities.

Theorizing a Critical Faith-Based Epistemic Resistance

Jasmin Zine (2004) calls for a critical faith-centered epistemology characterized by the construction of "an alternative space where Muslim women can articulate a new understanding of their subjectivities through discourses they themselves have authorized" (p. 168). As authors of their own narratives, social relations are sought out and collective spaces are materialized where individuals can collectively consider how they are socio-politically constructed and what needs to be done to counter these constructions before returning to a neoliberal, heteropatriarchal, Islamophobic world. This is "a new discursive space" where Muslim women "can ground their theoretical and praxis-oriented projects" (Zine, 2004, p. 169) and can attend to questions of intersection between antiracist feminism and Islam. Spaces that offer possibility for these intersections are limited and not often legitimated in antiracist feminist discourses; therefore, Zine (2004) advances possibilities for connections between Islamic principles of justice and equity and striving for antiracist feminist change in non-Islamic spaces arguing that these axiological values are compatible and necessary for creating a critical feminist faith-based epistemology. To elaborate, Zine (2004) writes,

A critical faith-centered Islamic feminist epistemology can utilize Qur'anic precepts of peace, social and environmental justice, unity, and accountability as the guiding principles that govern theory and praxis. These faith-based principles, I would argue, in many ways correlate well to the goals of social justice that feminists of all persuasions see as central to their own theorizing and praxis. There are some significant differences, however, in the way in which notions such as accountability would be constructed from a faith centered framework. In this conception, accountability extends beyond an existential understanding and relates to a responsibility to a Creator or higher power, which shapes the ethics of one's actions. This approach is more clearly related to indigenous epistemologies that have a stronger spiritual basis for understanding social and physical realities. (p. 186)

These spaces do not seek to produce "grand narratives" but rather speak dialogically with existing theories to create "a space that is attentive to the role spirituality and religious commitment play in Muslim women's conceptions of selfhood and feminist engagement" (Zine, 2004, p. 181). In this chapter, I demonstrate how the women created this collective resistance through the participation in and valuation of the shared space of Circles of Wisdom.

In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood (2005) traces how feminist subjects challenge reductionist conceptions of religious fanaticism and ascription to a tradition that subordinates them as well as how secularization problematically connotes freedom, liberation, and autonomy as ideal aspirations for women. In doing so, Mahmood (2005) uncovers notions of selfhood, agency, and

ultimately the politics that govern women's movements in Egypt. Fundamentally, Mahmood's (2005) analysis challenges

> the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable—such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on. (p. 5)

Desires for agency, freedom and autonomy as defined by western liberal scholars are challenged by the everyday agency of Muslim women whose actions are not defined as an assertion of free will but rather as a comprehensive consideration of the systematic construction of these subjects through historical traditions and how they navigate that subjectivation in their everyday movements. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Sara Ahmed, Marnia Lazreg and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahmood (2005) argues that, "any social and political transformation is always a function of local, contingent, and emplaced struggles whose blueprint cannot be worked out or predicted in advance" (p. 36). Mahmood's (2005) work is essential for advising researchers on how to consider the particular sociohistorical and political contexts within which subjects navigate their everyday transformations and subsequently develop analyses of their resistance based on those contingent circumstances. Based on Mahmood's guidance, I analyze the collective epistemic resistance of Circles of Wisdom, the name of the group as decided by the participants, to advance a typology of Muslim epistemology that challenges western liberal conceptions of freedom and agency.

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Collective Decision to Create Wellness-Centred Group as a Social Action

My initial impetus for this project was to invite a group of Muslim women activists to gather together to plan, implement, and evaluate a social action to address anti-Muslim racism. However, this impetus rested on the assumption that the group would prioritize and plan a public, external-facing action; my assumption was false as the group determined through their decisions that they instead wanted to focus inward on rebuilding community and a sense of wellness. When considering what the group's social action should be, Sumayya says,

> **I wonder if it's just like this space of being able to talk and you know connect with other you know Muslim women which we haven't been able to do for so long**. If that's kind of the action for now. And I know like right now pandemic plus everyone living, we're geographically spaced out right now but eventually you know if that's in person, but for now if that stays on Zoom I dunno I feel like I would be open to that for now.

This subversive resistance to even my initial motivations for the project, to instead embrace and prioritize the need to address challenges within their own community, was surprising and is key to the development of this collective. Even more, this demonstrates both a need for this type of space predicated on relationship building between group members. What the women needed was a trusting space and community to unpack the complex navigations described in Chapter Four so that they could better understand how and why what was happening. This constitutes a resistance of middle-class, educated, *hijab*ed women in

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Canada who are not only embracing their religion but using their religious subjectivities to also redefine their political subjecthood in a way that is authentic for them.

Even though some of the participants did not know me or others in the group prior to attending the first meeting, they were drawn to an opportunity to meet other Muslim women with similar faith and social justice values and remained committed to participating in and even expanding the group. This level of commitment—of time, labour, and experience—suggests a broader commitment to creating communities of Muslim women engaged in social justice work who are also making an impact on bettering their communities. In their work on Muslim pedagogies of solidarity, Eidoo, El-Abdallah, Grant, and Massa Machado (2022) contend, "living Islam requires living life in community" (p. 315), and this synergy between religious practice and activist practice was alluring for the participants.

During the last discussion, the group discussed the possibility of also organizing a public event to address Islamophobia or an educational campaign to be disseminated within mosques as a means of tackling internalized racism and misogyny. To this point, I reminded the group that, "It totally depends on what you want to do, what you're interested in and what you decide on." To this, Fatima responded,

> I think it would be pretty cool just to keep inviting different Muslim women from different walks of life to just you know expand the different perspectives that maybe are shared. And you know just also make new connections with folks we didn't know.

This demonstrates how reflecting on Circles of Wisdom revealed it to be so impactful for the women that they became invested in seeing it grow to include Muslim women from other intersectionalities and perspectives, to add to the diversity of the group. Further, Fatima adds,

> I think that having that you know type of I guess support for people who do go through these types of experiences is really important. I know that a lot of the types of you know networks or even just like systems in place for people who go through these things aren't really designed just for them right?... having like, in terms of our reactions to these incidences, **doing some sort of advocacy to strengthen the bonds between community to like be able to spring back from these cases** rather than structurally interfere and try and eliminate systemic racism.

Here, Fatima highlights the tangible impact of a smaller project such as the one devised by the group as opposed to being frustrated or angered by a lack of systemic change. This also demonstrates the practical determination that as experienced advocates, the group should focus its efforts on something concrete and practical that would have a marked immediate effect on the lives of women, in terms of being able to share experiences of racism so that they can unload, find support, and leave feeling a sense of community and solidarity.

In the next three sections, I analyze how the critical faith-based epistemic developed a re-imagined collective Muslim women's subjectivity rooted in three key principles: (1) a new set of social relations rooted in wellness; (2) a transcendental digital space; and, (3) a commitment to bettering communities.

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A New Set of Social Relations Rooted in Wellness

Participants were open and gracious in their evaluations (which were both unsolicited and solicited) of the space and community, both in the group conversations and in the follow-up interviews. The women spoke in depth about the social isolation and burnout experienced during the pandemic and how much they desired a sense of social reconnection and rebuilding of relationships with other like-minded Muslim women. Being unable to socialize freely during the pandemic reinforced the value of social connections all the more after the pandemic. For example, two women who knew each other well for many years but had not spoken since before the pandemic reconnected in the first meeting, saying, "I miss you," and expressing excitement to join the group because they already knew one another. Fatima says, "Ya I was really excited to participate in this not just because of how amazing this is but you know also when I saw Aliya's name too [laughs], I was like I should join."

They reflected especially on the importance of a space where they felt safe to disclose without needing to explain or provide any background information – underlying the group was a premise of shared trust and understanding. For example, Aliya advocated for more spaces

> For women to have the support systems and just you know kind of gain that kind of energy back. You know **even to just recover** I guess and to be in a space where you can talk about your experiences **with women that have similar experiences to you**.

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Zainab says, "Honestly, thank you for having like this space because **I would have not have been able to talk about this like in another way or fashion with somebody else I feel**." Aliya reiterates these sentiments saying, "That's why I think groups like this and gatherings like this are so important because we can say these kinds of things and we all kind of know what each of us mean without feeling that need to explain ourselves." Further, Aliya reiterates a sense of community-based reinvigoration from participating in the group, an energy that she missed during the pandemic. By joining this project and committing to this circle, the participants again demonstrate their commitment and responsibility to be faith ambassadors not in the way required of them through societal expectations but in a way that seeks to rebuild their sense of community – on their own terms. Aliya explains,

> How do we manage it all? Usually it's really about, for myself I feel like it's just about **getting that energy from others** in a way you know just being, by working with others you feel like so energetic. At least I dunno I feel like it's really about being motivated through relationships with other people which has just been on pause for a couple of years now.

Aliya's comments reflect the importance of nurturing meaningful relationships with other like-minded Muslim women to her sense of Self. Correspondingly, Zainab describes how she has realized that all Muslim women do not share similar social justice values. She says,

> It was hard for me to navigate that I think support system of like other Muslim women who are actually active in the community. I think that's like one thing, **there's other Muslim women that you can talk to but then there's other**

Muslim women who are actually fighting for the cause type of thing. And

there's, they're two different experiences.

Here, Zainab describes how she rarely has an opportunity to bond with other Muslim

women who are also social justice activists. Aliya also disclosed instances of experiencing

judgement from other Muslim women in terms of how they prayed or decisions they made

as mothers which made Aliya feel uncomfortable, quiet, or seek out different friendships.

This was not the case with this particular group of women. The "likemindedness" amongst

the women in this group was appreciated by participants and it led to a sense of trust and

willingness to open up and share.

The new set of social relations developed between participants as a product of this

project rested on attention to the ways in which they navigated the politicization of their

Muslim subjectivities, not on the theological or scriptural aspects of their Muslimness.

Although the participants were all at different points in their lives, they were able to unite

through a shared struggle of being part of the 9/11 generation. As Aliya remarked, "I was

just thinking about that. … We're all going through different challenges and like they're

so unique but **we all have that shared sense of like nothing is easy**, you know?" They

resisted Islamophobic and western neoliberal conceptions of who Muslim women "should"

be by transcending limited binary constructions of secular and religious subjectivities and

creating a new epistemological conception of resistance. The space created and cherished

by the women countered western conceptions of resistance, characterized primarily as

overt displays of vocal protest or action, through feminist care. This resistance was rooted

in a Muslim ethic of care and a form of protectionism. By choosing to not focus outward

and instead focus inward by prioritizing their social connections and sense of community, the women subverted western liberal concepts of "agency." This is a Muslim feminist strategy, and corresponds in some ways to Egyptian women's agency expressed as docility and silence (Mahmood, 2005). This prioritization of Self and preservation of community in a society designed to not only isolate us from one another but to actually inspire hatred and violence across our differences—that's what made this group's resistance so powerful.

Further, the participants utilize the social relationships in this collective to become conscious of how they have been subjectivated as they also created a new collective subjectivity, one that is focused on care and wellness. This collective subjecthood defies secular-religious divides, defies what activism "should be," and ultimately challenges essentialisms and reductions to configure a new set of social relations that prioritizes wellness and relationship building. This group's experience connects to the research of scholars studying collective Muslim ways of knowing. For example, in an analysis of faith-based spaces of resistance, Eidoo (2018) describes how, in one instance, a group of women gathered after the murder of Aqsa Parvez. The participants described this space as "the first political act," and Eidoo (2018) describes how "the powerful sense of belonging they had experienced in community with one another gave birth to their identity as a collective" (p. 521). The group also determined certain parameters in terms of membership and went on to apply for funding to organize an education campaign and create a series of zines to address violence against Muslim women. Similar to Circles of Wisdom, the group in Eidoo's (2018) study drew on Islamic principles of justice to form a sense of solidarity as they confronted anti-Muslim patriarchal violence. In another study, Eidoo et al. (2022)

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analyze collective critical reflections on "the relational solidarity that is necessary to establish ummah" (p. 314). This relational solidarity offers epistemic possibilities for un-learning internalized patterns of domination and subordination and imagining a more just *ummah*, the type of ummah imagined by justice-minded and justice-seeking Muslims, such as the participants in Circles of Wisdom. The group provides the space to be able to do this in a way that does not exist for the women elsewhere. Zainab says,

> I think that **the strength that we all need is built from within and then it grasps out**. I think it's like a ripple effect. That's how I think of it. Because we need strengthening within ourselves because if we go out and we try to you know fight and do all these things alone, it's like **having that sense of community to fall back on** when our mental health is bad is also just as important. And I think for me it's like **I've burnt myself out trying to fight for all these things because I didn't know where to find that sense of community even when things were open**.

This *ummah*, though, can only be founded through social relationships that respect, motivate, and unite in this shared vision. Finally, Stonebanks (2008) argues that although

> Muslim ways of knowing are both deeply connected and guided by Islam, within the divergences of Muslim voices, they cannot be understood apart from historical analysis, contextual perspectives, and, notwithstanding its diversity, a continually changing and emergent collective consciousness, much of which has stemmed from the experience of colonialism and imperialism. (p. 295)

Thus, Muslim ways of knowing towards emergent collective consciousness must consider sociohistorical and political intersectionalities which, when represented, respected, and supported, can become powerful spaces of resistance and community.

This new set of social relations was also founded on a prioritization of care and wellness. As Audre Lorde (1988) advises, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 125). Through the construction and preservation of this collective space, the women demonstrated that a crucial element of engaging in political resistance was the need to focus on their wellness. By taking care of themselves and one another, they could then continue to tackle all the issues they needed to. By using words like "light," "free," "safe," and "therapeutic" to describe the group, they demonstrate how their commitment to Circles of Wisdom was an opportunity to unload from the heaviness of the burdens of the world. They were able to discuss sensitive issues that they were unable to discuss in other spaces, including conversations about feminism in Islam and internalized racism in their communities. This unpacking of the goings-on of their days in a safe space was part of the healing necessary to enable them to go back to their communities and do the work that needed to be done. This was a process of developing a reclaimed collective subjecthood through new and renewed social relations and determination to focus on well-being. To this end, Aliya defines wellness as the following:

> **If you're not taking care of yourself or if mentally you're not taking care of in the way that you need to be or emotionally or physically, you just don't have the energy or like the space to do the things that you want to do**. Right

and we might feel like we're taking care of ourselves but maybe we're not doing

it in the way that we actually need. And I feel like finding that is also very hard.

Because we think that you know wellness is self-care, as they say getting

massages or I dunno doing like that kind of, that doesn't work for everyone. And

for some women, **I feel like now talking to you, I feel like maybe this is it for**

some women. It's not going to get a massage or a facial or just getting your nails

done, **it's having these kind of conversations**. Maybe this does that for us. For

me, personally. What a facial or something might be for someone else.

Thus, the social relations were key to their wellness. The participants countered the external

politicization of their Muslimness and removal of the religious element of their

racialization by seeking out those spaces where religion could once again unite them. In

different ways the women spoke about how their faith guided their everyday lives and their

decision-making as well as their advocacy efforts, but they longed for a space to actually

unpack the challenges of these navigations and share their struggles in doing so. As Fatima

reflects, "A lot of times, your religious identity is what's motivating your social activism

in different spheres and circles." In this way, the stigmatization of their religion was

strategically deployed for building a new collective, one that countered anti-Muslimness

through community and wellness.

A Transcendental Digital Space

The impact and power of the group can be attributed not just to the participants but

also to the unique moment in which they found themselves meeting. The group was brought

together based on a shared love of faith and a shared commitment to bettering communities,

and yet the group found itself immersed in conversations rife with laughter and tears, around a range of topics, from children and siblings, to pressures from parents, to racist experiences at work or school, to religion and politics, to food recipes and book recommendations. This demonstrated the participants' need for a safe space to talk, to unload, to share without having to explain, to feel understood and welcome. This was a space that they had been needing, without even knowing that they needed it. Being in that space together sparked something in the women. Perhaps it was the timing of being asked to participate during the late stages of the pandemic but this led to a sense of reawakening. Together, they experienced a feminist power rooted in spiritual bonding. This was a sense of a "collective or common consciousness," defined by Durkheim (2004) as when "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average members of the same society forms a particular system with a life of its own" (p. 29). United by common beliefs, the consciousness of the individual materializes to the consciousness of the collective.

Meeting virtually significantly altered the dynamics of the space in which the group met. Circles of Wisdom did not meet at a mosque, in a university meeting room, a coffee shop, or even one of our homes (even though this was presented as a possibility if participants were comfortable). Our group was not physically tied to any of these spaces and accordingly, was able to dissociate from the power relations that structured these spaces which led to the navigations described in Chapter Four. Rather, our gatherings took place in the digital space – the Zoom© meeting room. This was a liminal space, a more "neutral" space, one where participants could connect from wherever they were at the moment (at home, at work, on holiday, or at the park with their children). For some, it

allowed for connecting to the space even when they felt physically ill and were required to quarantine (i.e. after testing positive for COVID-19). The lack of physical presence in a room with one another also meant that our interactions were mediated by the digital space. We were more reliant on reading one another's cues and listening to each other's words. In this way, these mediated interactions were well suited for a "pause" or break. So although the space was fractured in terms of disembodiment and time, it was also dependent on histories and shared connectedness, allowing for these artificially constructed moments to provide a rich site for solidarity and collectivity.

Overall, this was a transcendental space, one in which the group created a sense of sacredness. The space itself, which was a sacred space, was imbued with religious teaching (as an underlying framework), but was created in the profane, outside of the mosque and other places of worship. The Zoom© room transformed into a space of sanctity and protection, one where there was an understanding of why we were there and what could be possible. The group was committed to the space due to the parameters in which we continued to meet. In a follow-up interview eight months after the group discussions, Fatima reflects,

> I think that I met a couple of new activists and it was nice to see new voices and it was also a nice opportunity to reflect on, similar to how we were having today, to think on these challenging questions about who are you? Some of these things are, **if you don't take the time to think about them and force yourself to think about them sometimes you just get on with life without pausing to reflect** and so I do

think that those spaces provided for that opportunity to self-reflect and the space to be introspective, and I appreciated that.

Here, Fatima reflects on the combination of the nature of the individuals in the group as well as the reflective vibe of the space which inspired fundamental questions around subjectivity and Self, which Fatima appreciated. Interestingly, Aliya reflects on how the group was able to come together quite naturally, which she attributes to the similarities between participants. She says,

It was really nice. I remember I enjoyed it so much and **I felt so almost like light after having those conversations because I feel like we're holding so much in** and we don't have a lot of times that safe space, not that our spaces are not like physically you're safe and emotionally you're safe, but you don't have that kind of like avenue I guess where you can just let it all out with people who can understand exactly what you're talking about. And **for us, it's Muslim women you know who have been through the same kinds of things that we have been through who are in the same generation as us, grown up in the same kind of circumstances.** And even I feel like women who come are our age perhaps but have come from a different country or are immigrants, right like not to say, they of course have their own experiences, but they might not necessarily understand what we're saying.

Here, Aliya reflects on the shared bond of being part of the 9/11 generation and how that created a prefigurative relationship upon which participants were able to build a community. When asked about her thoughts on the group eight months after the last meeting, Zainab says,

I loved it. **Like I honestly felt like this group was like long overdue**. It finally

felt like I had a place that I could talk and not feel like, somebody's watching.

Somebody's listening, somebody's gonna take note of this. Besides you of course

like doing your PhD research. **But I wasn't scared of there being like a target or**

me like upsetting someone with something that I said. Or someone like thinking

something, 'Oh like these Muslims,' this and that. Cuz we were all Muslim. You

know we were all Muslim women who were there. Ya like **it felt very free**. Very

free space. And I really liked that. And I really appreciated it.

Zainab's comments draw attention to the constant caution she employs on a daily basis

when navigating unsafe environments and how welcome a space of safety was for her.

There was an inherent trust within the group, a sense of having been through similar

experiences and then being able to unpack those together. Further, Zainab says,

I think the pandemic isolated a lot of people. **And I feel like what the pandemic**

did was everybody had to sit with their pain. And that group kind of allowed,

well for me at least, and I'm sure the other women would probably agree, **it made**

it as though I was finally able to let go of some of those thoughts that I was

harbouring. Cuz sometimes you don't let go of things, like what I said about the

bricks, you're adding. You're just adding. And like after I shared, I got some bricks

taken out of my backpack. [Ayesha: Oh good! So happy to hear that!] So

Alhamdolillah. I felt a sense of ease, and that's just the kind of person that I am.

Like I feel ease like when I get things off my chest. And like my friends have

noticed it. So like if I'm upset about something and I say, hey like it takes me a

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while before I'm like, 'Hey I need to talk about this,' but when I finally get things off my chest, that night, I sleep like a baby! [Ayesha: ya and laughs] Like I have the best sleep of my life. And I wake up and I have like a drool mark because I just feel so good when I get things off my chest, it's therapeutic for me. **And that group was very therapeutic. And I think that you should bring it back**.

Zainab's comments further underscore the sense of isolation experienced during the pandemic and how this group provided a therapeutic need to unpack painful experiences in a safer space.

This space countered and challenged hegemonic western neoliberal pressures to individualize, which are forces designed to isolate or keep those who are marginalized away from coalition-building. More so, this community was built on a shared faith and this provided a significant pre-figurative building block for the power of the collective. This was based on a feminist solidarity rooted in a shared sense of feminist justice as well as a deeply automatic spiritual connection based on a Muslim way of knowing. Although the women were each at a very different phase of their life and their subjectivities comprised differing intersectionalities, they were still able to support one another through their experiences. This supports the notion that community is at the heart of the religion of Islam itself.

Responsibility to Community

Finally, the group was powerful because it reinforced a commitment to bettering communities, whether those were Muslim communities, racialized communities, families, or even communities at work or school. There was an underlying sense of responsibility to

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committing to doing their part in the antiracist, anticolonial, feminist transformation of their communities, despite the obstacles they may face. There was hope for a better society and a better life for themselves, their siblings, and their children. That sense of hope is also rooted in their faith, as there is always potential for betterment and bettering of society, and challenging of injustice, especially through prayer and appeal to Allah.

At the end of the individual interviews, I asked each of the women the question, What are you hopeful for as a Muslim woman? None of them replied nothing. Despite their experiences and their exhaustion, they still had hope that change could about and more importantly, they wanted to continue doing the work, even if the nature of how they engaged changed across their life-course. I argue that not giving up means being part of change. Much of this hopefulness stems from their worries for future generations, their younger siblings or children, for whom they feel responsible and want to ensure a better future. For this reason, there is always more to be done but doing nothing is not an option.

When asked what she is hopeful about, Zainab responds that she feels hope by putting her faith in Allah. When she does so, she can become a good example for her younger siblings and also encourage them to continue to seek out ways to make change. Zainab says,

> I wanna show them that it's possible you know like things are possible. Although there are so many limitations, **it's possible for you to make an impact** even if it's as great or small as you want it to be. Just try your best and don't give up. And always be true to yourself and your faith.

Zainab feels hopeful about changes in society; her primary hope is "to see people be held accountable for their actions" even though she acknowledges that "I feel like none of them

will be done in my lifetime." She recognizes that her hopes may be too optimistic and therefore says,

> All I can do is try to embody those things by myself. Like on my own. Try to continue being an understanding person, try to be more patient with myself with regards to my faith. **Try to just keep doing what I'm doing because at the end of the day, I actually can't physically change anything that anybody else is going to do**. All I can do is change the way that I react and what I do about it. And if I could change things and situations for people, I definitely would but I actually like, I physically can't. I would if I could I just can't.

Zainab recognizes the difference between aspirational hopes and realistic hopes, the most realistic of which is to honour her own responsibilities to her faith, her family, and herself by transforming her own actions and responses.

Similarly, Aliya feels hopeful about her children and also describes similar sentiments around accountability towards bettering herself. She roots this accountability in her own personal accountability as a Muslim, to be the best type of Muslim that she can be. Aliya says,

> I mean my hopes are all for [my children] now. Not that we're that old. But I feel like it's all about how we teach them. And **everything is in our hands now** right because we have these little children and they're so moldeable, they're so innocent. Everything we teach them, they're gonna take it out into the world and be the future right. So **my hope is that we can work on ourselves and be more gentle and more open-minded and inclusive and just loving and you know less judgmental**. **Just be Muslim right to the full meaning of what it means to be**

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Muslim. The way the Prophet^{saw} was. Not the way that we nowadays practice Islam but the way that it was meant to be. You know and it's just like it's such a loving religion and Muslims should be the best, like our character should be the best. We should be the nicest and the kindest and we should be all those things. So I'm just, my hope is that InshAllah for our children, we teach them all of these things that they can take it out and be that for us you know to live the way we want Muslims to be. And we have that opportunity like it's such a blessing to have children and to be able to teach them the way that we want to teach them right like everything is in our hands now. So I have so much hope for that.

Finally, and similarly, Fatima describes her hope for the future as also maintaining a strong religious subjectivity, saying, "I guess one of [my hopes] is just **the maturity of our community as it grows and develops**. I think that one of my hopes is that people's identities of being Muslim stays true to their faith in a way."

In this way, there is much hope in Zainab, Aliya, and Fatima's words for maintaining strong Muslim subjectivities rooted in their own personal responsibilities towards their communities, in which the group continues to inspire younger generations by paving the way, challenging injustices, and being good role models. This is a heavy responsibility, but one that the group bears with pride.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the group determined its collective action and the conditions that led to the powerfulness of the group. I have also theorized how this group represents a critical faith-based epistemic resistance, one that inspires the creation of similar groups in other spaces where Muslim women seek community and care. Collective burnout was countered by a relocation of energy into carving out alternative

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spaces of care and of community. In doing so, the group also challenged strict binary divides between secular and religious subjectivities and spaces, demonstrating through this transcendental space that it is possible to advance a different kind of community, one rooted in faith, criticality, and feminism. In this space, they also embodied values of care and justice that transcended divisions across lines of religion, race, or gender in many ways: by considering how *hijabi* women work in secular workplaces; or, thinking carefully about how to raise children in a way that is mindful and just; or, planning how to address anti-Black racism in and outside of Muslim communities. By challenging strict boundaries of these discussions, the community-making and subject-making within and because of this group is constitutive of a collective re-subjectivation. Most importantly, what this demonstrates is that although Muslim women are bound by Islamophobia, bound by heteropatriarches, both within and outside their communities, and bound by their embodiment as visibly Muslim racialized women, they are not helpless. They are not silent. They are not inactive. And yet, the characterization of the group's resistance or social action does not conform to western neoliberal constructs of resistance of overt protest and public proclamation. Instead, they resist through a complicated combination of embrace and refusal which reflects the creation of an epistemic resistance rooted in criticality and faith. In the next chapter, I analyze the methodological innovations required to create the space and conditions necessary for this epistemic resistance.

CHAPTER SIX: METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

In this chapter, I reflect critically on the methodological innovations required to undertake and organize this unique feminist community-engaged project that was praxis-oriented, transformative, and focused on values of solidarity and care. This methodological chapter is placed towards the end of the dissertation for two reasons: First, this allows the reader to engage with the data and analysis at the forefront and then understand how the methodological innovations were instrumental to arriving at that analysis; Second, this concludes the dissertation with a model for how a transformative community-engaged project can contribute to theoretical and methodological advancements in the fields of political sociology and social movements, transnational feminism, and critical Muslim studies.

This project comprised of two significant components: a community project and a research project. In the community project, I approached Muslim women activists that I knew of to seek out their interest in gathering to together plan a social action initiative to address anti-Muslim racism. Seeking their consent to record our conversations and taking written notes, we met four times to plan our group's action, Circles of Wisdom. After I had an opportunity to review our conversations and determine a research question, I applied to the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board for use of secondary data for analysis in order to analyze the digital recordings, transcripts, and my written notes and reflections for the purposes of my doctoral dissertation research. After approval, I also applied for approval to conduct follow-up individual interviews with each of the women to question their reflections on the group. In this dissertation, thus, all the data comprises research

analyzed by me as a researcher and as approved by the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board.

In this chapter, I begin by explicating methodological and ethical considerations of "the researcher in the research." Next, I describe the foundational tenets of the transformative worldview, community-engaged feminist sociological research, and qualitative research. Subsequently, I elaborate on the project design with detailed ethical consideration of the two components of the project: the community project and the research project. Finally, I theorize vulnerability as the foundation for building trust and respectful relationships which were key to the progression and impact of Circles of Wisdom as well as to the creation of a collective epistemic resistance.

The Researcher in the Research

The methodology of this project exists outside the boundaries of traditional conceptions of a pre-designed research study with an unambiguous analysis that is solely intended for research purposes. Rather, the intent for community-building and activism required an emergent project that took a messy path allowing for direction from participants and immersion of the researcher in the research itself. In doing so, this project advances transformational feminist theories and methodologies. In this section, I elaborate on the dynamics of the researcher in the research. As a Muslim woman researcher, my goal was to engage in methodological resistance that challenged western colonial patriarchal practices of "objectivity" and "limiting bias." For Indigenous and racialized communities, these concepts reflect a social chasm that does not ontologically equate to the importance of history and community as embodied within the individual. Thus, the researcher is in the

research, *always*. How much we choose to be, that depends on the project and the reflexivity undertaken by the researcher.

The impetus for this project is rooted in my personal experiences as a Muslim, woman, educator, activist, and feminist and these constitute my epistemic positioning as a community organizer and researcher in this study. These experiences led to my initial interest in approaching Muslim women to plan a social action initiative and later, as I began the process of analyzing the data as a researcher, I continued to engage in epistemic reflexivity, which is a critical self-awareness and articulation of how who I am shapes what I do and how I do it. This is not a once-off disclosure of positionality; rather, it is a continual, contradictory, and conflictual process of critical reflexivity—analogized as a spiral around which the researcher continually attends to their positionality at every stage of the project (Mao, Mian Akram, Chovanec, & Underwood, 2016). Even in my initial communication to the women (see Appendix A), I am clear about who I am and my motivations for reaching out to them. To engage in continual reflection, I maintained a daily journal while we met during the community group discussions. As I began to consider how to formulate a research question from the data, I wrote:

> Why am I doing this research the way that I am? It's much more complex. It's much scarier. It's much more time intensive. I could have interviewed twenty participants, analyzed the themes from the interview and called it a day. But no. That's not enough. It's not what's needed. What's needed is action. What's needed is community. What's needed is solidarity.

This excerpt demonstrates how my personal experiences and embodiment as a Muslim woman and community member yearned to create spaces of community and solidarity. Existing research demonstrated that Muslim women's communities were powerful entities, and I wanted to support the building of that type of network amongst the Muslim women activists that I knew. By being deliberative in my reflections on why I was inspired to engage in this type of community organizing that then led to my doctoral research, I transform my own learning about myself as a community member and researcher. Puwar (2021) describes the reflexive process of "carrying as an embodied set of influences" in which researchers become cognizant of how they bring not only intellectual traditions but also their own histories, traumas, obsessions and aesthetics to their research (p. 3). This involves exchanges that are intergenerational, transnational, and transverse a life course. Following this tradition, I am reflexive and attentive to how I imagined and designed this project and, in the process, carried my elders, community, and history in my embodiment and brought that to every aspect of this project. Reflecting on this embodiment is also transformative to my practice as a researcher – to be cognizant of how I move and am in the fields in which I research and how that ultimately shapes how I approach research in the future as well.

Throughout the course of this project, I had multiple roles as community member and organizer, researcher, and friend (with some of the women prior to the start of the project). I unpack the power imbalances and how I mitigated these multiple roles later in this chapter. Here, I unpack how I engaged in the community organizing phase as a community member and friend who was also considering how to design a doctoral research

project that made an impact. Overall, I was an active member of the group conversations. In conversation one, in particular, I took more of a lead in terms of sharing project impetus and initiating conversations around planning a social action. As we progressed through the series of conversations, I led less as the discussion flowed naturally but did not hesitate to prompt or ask questions when needed. As I already knew of some of the women's background and activist work prior to them joining the group, our discussions already had an underlying attention to critical awareness and shared sense of social justice. At times, I led the conversation in a particular direction, which was sometimes necessary because of a lull in the discussion or to introduce a topic that might not have been addressed but might be of interest to the women. I also contributed to the conversation in other ways, in terms of sharing my personal experiences or summarizing the conversation at times. These summaries, I realized, were important as I went back to read the transcripts as secondary data and attempted to determine a research question as a researcher.

As a feminist community-based project, I wanted to create a space of trust for the women to feel comfortable disclosing their experiences and reflections so that we could together determine what type of collective action we wanted to undertake. To do that, I also needed to be vulnerable and disclose my own experiences. Below is an excerpt taken from the last few minutes of the first group conversation which describes how my own activism had shifted, even around the impetus for reaching out to the women to plan a social action; in this disclosure, I also connect my shifting activism with the women's decision to create spaces of care for Muslim women:

> To be quite honest, when I started to, when I put together the proposal for this project, this was a few years ago and I was in a very different space at that time as

well right because I was like all we need to do something, I'm gonna get together like the most active Muslim women that I know and we're just gonna go out there and we're gonna fight and we're gonna do this and this and this and this! And now, the stage that I'm at also is so similar to what both of you are speaking about. It's like when you do, when you are a Muslim woman and you do this kind of work, there comes a point where you're like, I need to, the way that I can serve my communities and the way that I can practice my *deen* and my faith is by taking care of myself first and being intentional about what I do and who I do it with right. And am I gonna be like wasting all my effort and energy like screaming from the rooftops and being like, 'You're so racist! You need to do this!' Or am I just going inward and be like, this is what I need to do for myself and what really like feeds my soul right now is to try and surround myself with other Muslim women who are like so active and so amazing and so wonderful but have that space where we can just like talk and be friends and support each other and kind of like share in ways that other people might not understand. Right that other people in my life might not get it so that if we're able to come together, it's not adding more stress and adding more burden but it's actually trying to relieve some of that and trying to like be a source of comfort even if you could say.

This sharing of my vulnerabilities reflects a feminist practice of shared experience and empathy which further creates a sense of trust. This trust, founded during our community-formation as we bonded and determined our social action strategy, was key to the research phase of the project when I recruited the women to participate in follow-up interviews

based on an analysis of the group discussions as data. Their participation, vulnerability, and disclosure during the interviews was due to the trust established during our community organizing. This trust is also key as we plan to continue to meet as community members committed to creating spaces of Muslim women's wellness, solidarity, and resistance – the key takeaway from this project.

Transformative Community-Engaged Feminist Sociological Research

My philosophical worldview, which is my researcher assumption that informs the research design, is transformative (Creswell, 2014). This worldview gained popularity in the 1980s and '90s by researchers who argued that postpositivist assumptions did not account for the experiences of marginalized communities and did not address issues of power and social justice in their research designs. The transformative worldview, primarily ascribed to by critical theorists, feminists, persons who are racialized, queer, or have differing abilities, argues that the constructivist paradigm also fails to advocate for change in the research design. Simply capturing the experiences of marginalized populations is not enough. Rather, research and political action together "[contain] an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (Creswell, 2014, p. 9).

Ontologically, I recognize that there are multiple realities but those realities that sustain oppression and domination must be challenged. As a researcher, I would not undertake an analysis of this nature if I did not believe that realities have been historically hierarchized based on power relations that rely on political, cultural, gendered, and economic value, and these hierarchies are sustained in our contemporary world. However,

through the transformative worldview, I argue that we are able to resist this hierarchization and silencing of marginalized realities and ultimately imagine a new future ontological order based on the omission of these hierarchies. Epistemologically, knowledge is socio-historically contextualized and is co-constructed between the researcher and participants through trust, understanding, and building an ethic of care. In Chapters One and Chapter Five, I describe how epistemological resistance advances new knowledges based on a faith-based feminist resistance. Axiologically, the transformative worldview is founded on the values of social justice, human rights, empowerment, and equality (Mertens, 2018). This worldview aligns with my axiology as a transnational feminist researcher, political sociologist, and activist-scholar. In this way, I begin with an issue of inequity, alienation, or oppression and "proceed collaboratively" with participants (Creswell, 2014, p. 10). Circles of Wisdom and the subsequent analysis of it as comprised in this dissertation therefore "map[s] out possibilities for an alternative faith-centered epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it" (Zine, 2004, p. 181). This is reflective of transformation of social relations, constructions of collective resistance, scholarship of Muslim women's subjectivities, and methodological design.

As described in Chapter Two, community is at the core of the religion of Islam and Islamic religious teachings stress the importance of developing ties amongst and beyond Muslim communities. This attention to Muslim ways of knowing rooted in authentic community connections underlies this project, which prioritized bringing together a group of Muslim women based on shared principles of faith and justice. Academic literature on

community-engaged research details how projects vary in their level of community engagement based on the research objectives and goals (Key et al., 2019). Central to this project's community engagement was its attention to feminist principles, in which the objective is to challenge "power, difference, silence, and oppression, with the goal of moving toward a more just society for women and other oppressed groups" (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 129). Feminist research aims to challenge heteropatriarchal hegemony by starting from the "standpoint" of women. Standpoint theory, developed by scholars such as Nancy Hartsock and Dorothy Smith, has roots in feminist critical theory from the 1970s and 1980s, and critiques patriarchal knowledge production and practices of power (Harding, 2004). In critical feminist theory, the focus on developing oppositional knowledges and consciousness becomes not only a research method, but also a philosophy of science, epistemology, methodology, and political strategy (Collins, 2000). Indigenous, Black and racialized feminist scholars prioritize the voices and lived experiences of women as they navigate societies that are gendered, raced, and classed and through an intersection of their particular social locations, the women experience their life circumstances uniquely. When women gather together to reflect on their experiences, like they did in Circles of Wisdom, they have an opportunity to sit and collectively reflect in community, learning from one another based on their intersectionalities of position and experience, and together make collective epistemological advancements that are necessary for transforming colonial, racist, and heteropatriarchal societies. This bottom-up approach to building knowledge was crucial to this project.

To achieve this, this project uses qualitative methods, which support inquiry into the meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences or to their problems (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research often depends on intuitive and emergent design as a means of inductively building interpretations of meaning by moving from specifics to more general themes (Creswell, 2014). The focus of qualitative research is on the phenomenological, or the lived experience of human beings as they navigate their realities. Validity in qualitative research is one of its strengths (Creswell, 2014) and the accuracy of data findings are rooted in "big-tent" categories for qualitative quality (Tracy, 2013, p. 231), including trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility. Some of the strategies employed in this research design to ensure validity include: a *worthy topic* that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions; *rich rigour* through the substantial care and effort taken to collect enough data to support findings and spend sufficient time with participants to gain trust and disclosures; using *thick and rich description,* including lengthy excerpts from transcripts, in order to develop a deeper understanding of complex problems; and, *sincerity* by being transparent about decision-making through the community and research phases of the project. Overall, validity is understood "as an ethical relationship" in that "the *way* in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both *what* we know and our *relationships with our research participants*" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 182, emphasis in original). This requires constant reflection on how the ethical intersects with the epistemic and the interpersonal, in every phase of the project.

There were two components to this project. The first component, which took place in February and March 2022, was a community project that included inviting a group of

Muslim women activists to gather together and plan a social action initiative to address anti-Muslim racism. Four meetings took place on a bimonthly basis to plan and undertake this activity. The second component was the research project and included secondary analysis of data from the community project as well as interviews with three participants in October and November 2022. In this second component, I analyze the process and group as a researcher. In the following two sections, I describe the details of both of these components.

Component One: The Community Project

Group conversations with four Muslim women activists and together planning a social action initiative comprised the community component of the project. This project required recruitment of a specific group of women: they were required to be Muslim women who had some experience in activism, advocacy, and/or social justice. I wanted to keep the group small to start, knowing that a smaller group would allow for deeper relationships, more space for participation in group conversations, and flexibility in scheduling group meetings.

Recruitment

I started by contacting six Muslim women activists with ties to Windsor-Essex. I already knew some women personally, as friends and acquaintances, and I knew *of* the work of the other women. I sent the women a recruitment message through either email (for those whose email addresses I already had), LinkedIn© (with those who I was connected to on that platform), or Twitter© (with those who I was connected to on that platform). In this message (see Appendix A), I explained the project and why I wanted to

invite them to be part of this social action initiative. The women whom I contacted already demonstrated a commitment to social justice work and care for their communities, and I anticipated that their interest would be piqued by this project and our shared interests. At this point, I heard back from all six women saying that they were interested. If I did not receive any response, I was prepared to request other Muslim women that I knew to share this recruitment email with their close contacts who fit the criteria, but I did not need to move to this step.

In total, I contacted six women. Although they all responded to express interest in the project, due to the busyness of their schedules, only four women were able to participate in the project. In the first email, they were sent a demographic profile; only one participant completed that profile. Of the four women, I had prior friendships with two of the women, had worked on a one-time event with one of the women, and met the fourth women for the first time as part of this project. Due to the nature of my preexisting friendships with the two women, our communication tended to be deeper due to our prior knowledge of one another. Some of the women knew each other before the project as well while others met one another for the first time.

All four women — Zainab, Fatima, Aliya, and Sumayya — were at different phases of their lives. There was some diversity in terms of age, country of origin, racialization, marital status, city of residence, parental status, and phase of education and career. They could all be classified as part of Zine's (2022) "9/11 generation." Although not all of the women were currently living in Windsor-Essex, they all had strong roots to the area. Although not all six women who were initially contacted practiced *hijab*, all four of these

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participants did. Due to these similarities in terms of demographics and background, I hypothesize this facilitated a sense of trust quite quickly. In my experience, there is already an inherent familiarity and connection when Muslim women meet one another as strangers, despite differing social intersections.

Ethical Considerations

As this was a community project without a research question, institutional ethics approval was not required. That being said, care was taken to proceed ethically during this component. At the start of each meeting, I sought everyone's consent to digitally record and take written notes about the conversation. I also asked for consent to record each time a new person joined the conversation. In this way, the women knew that they were being recorded and that their contributions would potentially be used as data (pending ethics approval) for my doctoral research. They were also informed that as the organizer of the project, I could not guarantee their confidentiality in using their information as part of my doctoral dissertation. I did, however, commit to moving forward with the utmost care and respect and we started our first meeting by discussing our mutual principles for our community in terms of how we could ensure one another's privacy (to keep private what others might be sharing in confidence), respect (sharing space and respecting differences of opinion), and how we would demonstrate care for one another (see Appendix E). I encouraged the women to reach out to me at any point with any issues or concerns. Finally, I was upfront with the women that the data from our gatherings (digital recordings, transcripts, and my notes) could be used as data for my doctoral dissertation research, and they expressed willingness to support my doctoral work in whatever capacity they could.

Group Conversations & Social Action Planning

This project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the women decided that, for their safety and comfortability, we would meet remotely on Zoom©. Using email and Doodle© polls, the group conversations were scheduled at a time that worked for all the women, which could get quite challenging as we had to schedule our meetings around children's nap times, work shifts, coursework, and travel schedules. The overall vibe of the group was warm and uplifting. In the digital recordings, the women can be seen demonstrating active engagement and interest in the conversations: looking at each other on the screen, nodding along to what others are saying, smiling and laughing, referencing one another in their responses or asking each other questions, and sometimes tearing up based on what others shared. There were both challenges and advantages to holding our meetings remotely. As an advantage, it allowed those women who were not currently living in Windsor-Essex (two of the participants) to still participate in the group. It also allowed for participation without factoring in travel time, parking, or childcare arrangements. Finally, as the organizer, this minimized the risk of the women potentially getting sick if our meetings were in-person. On the other hand, the group's dynamics changed due to the virtual format. There was a general sense of Zoom© fatigue at that moment, which may have also altered the nature of our interactions. There were many distractions in terms of children, family members, and pets during conversations. Some women turned their cameras on and off, which made it difficult to read their expressions all the time. Wanting to create a comfortable and respectful space, I was particularly attuned to the women's facial expressions and being online made this difficult. For example, if someone looked down or looked away, was that a sign of discomfort or did a pet just come into their room?

When they looked down, was it a sign of not wanting to participate or were they just responding to a quick text or Googling something? The online setting also made it difficult to know when someone was done talking and when the next person could start so there were points in the recordings where I noticed that someone had unmuted themselves to talk but maybe someone else did not notice and started speaking, causing the other person to mute again and unconsciously silencing or delaying their contributions. These were all dynamics that the group experienced given we met in the digital space.

I prepared for each meeting by writing a general list of questions (see Appendix E), but after initiating the conversation, I did not adhere rigidly to this list but rather asked questions that emerged from the conversation. Thus, these conversations were semi-structured with broad discussion themes to provide space for the women to take the conversation in a direction determined by the group. Three participants attended the first discussion, one attended the second, three attended the third, and all four participants attended the fourth. During the very first conversation, the idea that our social action initiative should comprise a wellness group for Muslim women emerged, and this became our central action. This process is outlined in detail in Chapter Five. The first and second meetings were more content related, focused on discerning what issues were important to the women and what they wanted to collectively undertake in terms of a social action project. The first conversation, in particular, was more formal in tone as it involved individual introductions and background information from me about the project. The third conversation organically turned into a critical reflection of the dynamics of the group. The fourth conversation was the group wellness check-in. At this point, the women had become

cognizant of what the space meant to them and seeing how everyone engaged with one another was really powerful. At certain points, they thanked one another for raising a topic or reminding them of something they had forgotten to mention. At times, they checked in with me to say something along the lines of, "Ayesha, did you get what you needed?" They were mindful of wanting to support the project I had initiated and wanted it to be helpful for my doctoral research when it came time to analyze the data.

At the end of the fourth conversation, we decided as a group that we would meet one more time before the start of Ramadan and set a time and date to meet. When I sent a reminder email about the time, I did not get any response, so I wished everyone a Happy Ramadan, sent a one-page demographic sheet I hoped they would complete (see Appendix A), and said I would be in touch again after Ramadan to schedule another meeting time. When I reached out again after Ramadan, once again, I did not get any response. I assumed that everyone was busy and had committed what they could to the group at that point, and so I made a decision to give them some space and reach out again a few months later. When I emailed again about eight months later for the research component of the project (after having secured research ethics approval for secondary data analysis and recruitment for interviews), the women responded to apologize for not responding to my earlier emails. I reassured them that they had no reason to apologize and that I was grateful to have had an opportunity to work with them in this project.

This community project component has much potential to continue past the scope of this doctoral dissertation. The women and I discussed ways in which we could continue to share information, such as creating an online Google© document for sharing thoughts

or creating a WhatsApp© group in order to stay connected. At the time of printing this dissertation, although I have been connected to each of the women individually, we have yet to meet as a group but it is my hope that we can stay connected and continue to meet, work together, and potentially expand group membership in a manner and at a pace comfortable for the group.

Component Two: The Research Project

Component Two of this project is the research project, in which I conscientiously shift from community organizer to researcher to analyze Component One and the remainder of Component Two as research. The research component involved three stages. First, I reviewed the digital recordings, transcripts, and my written notes and memos from Component One to determine a research question. Second, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with participants to assess their evaluation of Circles of Wisdom. Third, I thematically analyzed the entirety of the data comprehensively to generate the analysis contained in this dissertation. In this section, I detail the specifics of each of these stages.

Secondary Use of Data for Analysis

The community project in Component One generated fascinating insights into the lives, experiences, aspirations, collective relations, and activism of Muslim women. I transcribed the digital recordings myself and as I reviewed the recordings, transcripts, and my typed and handwritten memos and notes taken before, during and after the conversations, the following research question emerged: *How do Muslim women activists in Windsor-Essex develop a collective political consciousness to resist the challenges they face as gendered religious subjects in Canada?*

Individual Interviews

As I reviewed the data from the community project, I realized that it was imperative that I seek out the women's evaluation of the group. I needed to re-contact the women to engage in individual inquiry as to their evaluations and reflections, especially considering that about six to eight months had passed since the fourth group conversation. I investigated my research question by conducting individual follow-up interviews with the same women from the community project. In a one-on-one setting, I could explore the themes from the community project more deeply as a researcher, probing specific topics related to the politicization of their subjectivities and self-evaluations of participating in the community project in a private space. After receiving institutional ethics approval, I contacted the same four women—Zainab, Aliya, Fatima, and Sumayya—through email (see Appendix B). I also contacted a fifth woman, one of the women who had expressed interest in participating in the group but was unable to attend any of the meetings – she did not respond to the request. Three of the women expressed interest and were sent the information letter and consent form (see Appendix C). Sumayya expressed interest in participating in the interviews but, in the end, we were unable to schedule an interview. The general willingness to participate in the interviews was due to trust formed during the community project and even as our roles shifted to a research relationship, our mutual respect and commitment to one another was maintained.

The interviews took place either in person or remotely on Zoom©, depending on the preference of the participant. They ranged from forty minutes to one hour and forty minutes in length. Interviews with the participants with whom I had a preexisting

friendship were longer in length, signifying our deeper knowledge of one another and willingness to share more. Interviews were digitally recorded through Zoom© after seeking participant consent to record (see Appendix D). I crafted an interview guide (see Appendix E) based on the themes emerging from the data from the community project and topics of inquiry that I anticipated would provide rich data with regards to responding to the research question.

Ethical Considerations during Interviews

In Component Two, as the principal investigator conducting research, there was an imbalance of power between myself and the participant given my multiple roles as friend, community member, and researcher. I mitigated this potential undue influence or relationship which could complicate consent through the following strategies. Potential interview participants were sent a recruitment email asking them to contact me if interested in being interviewed (see Appendix B). This provided participants with autonomy to provide free and informed consent and manage the relationship as both peer, co-collaborator, and now research participant. Only those participants who expressed an interest in being interviewed were then emailed the information letter and consent form (see Appendix C). Participants were then provided one week to make a decision and return a completed consent form to participate in the interviews. Additionally, at the start of the interview, I was transparent about my multiple roles and the preceding power dynamics that shaped our relationship. If at any point these multiple relationships made the participants feel uncomfortable or unsafe, they could withdraw their participation. Direct

and open communication with the participants helped to manage the various power dynamics between myself and the participants.

In the information letter and consent form (see Appendix C), participants were reminded that I would keep their participation in the study confidential and asked whether they preferred to be given pseudonyms in the presentation of the data; all three women replied affirmatively. Accordingly, all research dissemination from this project uses pseudonyms for participant names. Although longer excerpts from transcripts have been used in the presentation of data as evidence of authenticity and representativeness, excerpts have been de-identified to remove any references that could compromise confidentiality. These longer excerpts, with important phrases bolded, guide the reader in understanding the participants' narratives and becoming aware of the complexities and nuances of how participants reflected on their experiences as part of the collective space or in conversation with me as researcher.

Collective Analyses

The last phase of component two consisted of a comprehensive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of all the data. The data consists of digital recordings and transcripts from four group conversations, digital recordings and transcripts from three interviews, and my own written memos, reflections, and journal entries from the entire project journey.

In this project, analysis was not saved until the end of data collection. Rather, I took notes and memos before, during, and after each conversation (in both the community and research components of the project), making note of important points to raise in the next

conversation. In this way, layers of analysis were occurring even as the women and I were meeting and talking. As for the group conversations, I carefully transcribed each recording myself, then reviewed the transcript a second time to ensure that each word was accurately transcribed. While transcribing and reviewing, I made notes about potential themes and modes of analysis, which formed the basis for an initial thematic analysis. Additionally, I engaged in an iterative process of moving back and forth between watching the digital recordings, transcribing, and writing the analysis. This whole process felt very intuitive and immersive. I transcribed and thematically coded the four group conversations within a span of one week. This coding turned into preliminary themes. Then, as I went back to review the transcription, I selected quotes that provided evidence of those themes. Finally, I printed out the transcripts and went through them one more time to ensure that all the components in all four of the group conversations had been addressed in the analysis. All the while, I was organizing the themes and writing up the analysis. This immersive and inductive experience led to an instinctive and comprehensive analysis. A similar procedure was followed for the transcription and analysis of the individual interviews after they had been completed.

I liken this analysis process to the one outlined by Creswell (2014) in which the researcher approaches a set of raw data, prepares and organizes it for analysis (i.e. through transcription and printing hard copies), then reads through all the data while coding it (by hand, with highlighters and coloured markers) making note of preliminary themes and descriptions. These preliminary themes are then grouped into final categories with corresponding evidence. Finally, the meaning of themes are interpreted and theorized in light of the literature and the transformational aims of the research study. Though described

in Creswell (2014) linearly, my analysis was a much more messy and nonlinear journey in practice, occurring over a process of many months with time and space in between to go back and forth between the data, the literature, and consultations with my supervisor. As a researcher, I made the decision not to share written elements of the analysis for feedback with participants nor to do member checking of transcripts.

Vulnerability & Ethic of Care

In this project, the women were required to stop, pause, and reflect on their go-go-go lives. This is something they had not had much opportunity to do prior to this project due to the larger narrative of the pandemic, systemic Islamophobia, and managing the entirety of their responsibilities in their day-to-day lives. By participating in this project and conscientiously using the space as a means of community-building, the group challenged neoliberal white supremacist subjectification and the ongoing alienation of individuals from one another and instead championed a reclamation of a collective Muslim feminist subjectivity. But to engage in this process, the women needed to be honest and vulnerable; in their evaluations analyzed in Chapter Five, they felt comfortable doing so. Aliya says,

> I don't feel like with those women, although they're my friends, I would never say these kinds of things to them. Because you don't feel, people don't have the same issues as you, **you don't feel comfortable being vulnerable or opening yourself up** when you just feel like they're so perfect and I'm not. You know so it's nice to have this, and **I feel like the group of women that you had chosen was really, like I feel like we were all on the same page** which was nice.

This notion of vulnerability was crucial to developing these strong relations. When they spoke of their emotions, of fear for the lives of their children and siblings, of depression, of trauma from experiences of racism, of pressures from families, of feeling angry and exhausted, all of these revelations necessitated the prerequisite of vulnerability. Had they not shared what they did, the group could not have moved forward towards a sense of shared empathy. Vulnerability cannot be summoned through a formula that can be replicated in other groups; that being said, the innovative methodological design of this project created the conditions in which the women felt comfortable to do so.

Vulnerability in this space is taken up as a collective political act, one rooted in a resistance towards western hegemonic notions of stoicness. It was the women's willingness to share that allowed the group to move from conversation to a shared emotional space of solidarity. For that reason, vulnerability is crucial to the notion of political resistance, particularly as "an embodied enactment" (Butler, 2016, p. 22). In *Vulnerability in Resistance,* Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) argue that vulnerability has traditionally been disavowed from the concept of resistance, constructing the vulnerable subject as a weak victim in need of protection from paternalistic power. Countering, Butler et al. (2016) ask how our political analyses would change "if vulnerability were imagined as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance" (p. 1)? Rooting resistance in vulnerability also offers a strategy for feminists to argue for a relational subject that contests neoliberal individuality and capitalist self-interest; through the disclosure and articulation of vulnerability, so can political subjects resist their subjectification. Through a deliberate willingness to not only participate in this project but to be vulnerable in the process, to disclose very deep fears and experiences which the women had decided not to with others

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or in other spaces, the women were able to critically reflect on their embodiment as Muslim women and collectively develop a sense of support around those realizations. Reflecting on the group eight months after the last meeting, Zainab says, "**Your group was a safe space**. And that's why I think that it's important to have spaces like that …that's the reason why we started it in the first place, **cuz we're traumatized**." Disclosing traumas, building strong bonds, and challenging what is moved the group towards what could be.

Collective Epistemic Advancements

As a community organizer and researcher, the women demonstrated care, concern, and support for this project and recognition of the significance of advancing literature and knowledges about the unique experiences of Muslim women in Canada. They were eager to take action and, in doing so, support a fellow Muslim woman who was also a graduate student in advancing this work. It was truly humbling to experience their enthusiasm in terms of their willingness to participate, reflect, and share. Even as we met as community members during Component One, knowing that their contributions could be used to develop a research study, the women were conscious of ensuring that I had enough data to complete my doctoral requirements, so much so that they were willing to add another dimension to the group if additional data was required. For example, Aliya says,

> Ayesha, can I just say one thing? So like I think that it's, **I know that the discussion we had is not like necessarily within what you had originally wanted to do**. So I think that we can always do more than, of course it's very ambitious, but I feel like it's important to address the issues within our own community but also we shouldn't ignore the external work that needs to be done. So I don't think that one

is necessarily more important than the other but I do think that like whatever we decide to focus on it's, it's all important. I don't think we should say that like one is necessarily more important or more urgent than the other. And **we're here to support you in your research so you can of course lead us and we'll be good with whatever you want**.

This excerpt indicates a few different things. First of all, this demonstrates the women's support for me as a community organizer and researcher, which suggests their larger commitment to supporting visions for our shared communities. Secondly, it demonstrates a commitment or intention to engage in action on multiple fronts. Although the group decided that they wanted to focus on the creation of this wellness group as their action, Aliya also recognized that engaging in external organizing might be seen as more "legitimate" and important, in the traditional definition of social action, and was thus willing to plan another external component in addition to the project we had already discussed. This commitment to social action, community-based organizing, and advancing knowledge was a fundamental accomplishment of this project.

Here, I share another example of the women's commitment to epistemological advancement through this project. At the start of the third group conversation, only Aliya was present although the other women had committed to attending at that mutually agreed time. I expressed some hesitation to Aliya, suggesting that perhaps the women were too overwhelmed and that this was not the right time for this kind of engagement. Aliya agreed, saying,

Ya, I think that's a really good point. I think that **we have to give like a lot of space for ourselves** especially these days I think with, like you said with everything that's going on around the world and just the struggles of the last two years alone is like, you know, it's something that people are struggling with on so many levels, at so many levels that we can't even begin to express in many cases you know. Like people have lost so much and it's not just physical loss of life but it's also the loss of what what we considered normal. Right like you know how they say the new normal, it's a huge adjustment if you actually step back and think about it. Like adjusting to this new way of life that we were just kind of thrown into. So I think people have some kind of, **most people have some kind of trauma associated with that, that we're just learning to deal with slowly**. So ya I think we have to give ourselves a lot of space too to deal with all that and not push too hard to get back to the way that things were and to like how much we were doing before. … We should try our best but sometimes if things don't work out, there is a reason for it. [Ayesha: There's a reason for it, right?] And sometimes, ya and **sometimes we just need to step back and say okay, this is a really great idea, maybe we can look at it again in a few months**.

When Zainab and Fatima joined closer to the end of the third conversation, I brought up this point again, reiterating that perhaps I was asking too much of everyone at this time; they responded differently. Zainab says,

I see like exactly where you're coming from but at the same time, I actually don't think so. I think for a group like this, there actually **on the contrary, there couldn't**

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be a better time because we're all going through different things and a wellness gathering like the one that we have like there couldn't have been a better time for something like this to happen. And **yes SubhanAllah like actually when there couldn't be a better time considering the circumstances is actually when people happen to be the busiest**. So you know it's understandable that you would feel that way but I also feel like the timing just seems to be difficult for people's schedules but **the timing for this is very very critical because a lot of people need this space to connect**. And even if if we're sharing ideas on a Google Doc or like a Google Forms and then we're meeting once every two months or like once every while, I think it's good to just at least have a group of women that you know that are able to support one another.

Zainab's comments shifted the tone of that third conversation entirely, and re-energization around commitment to developing the group as a social action was palpable. Even Aliya reconsidered her earlier comments stating, "I agree, I agree with Zainab on that. I think it's such an important time to have that connection with other women especially. That's a good point." After hearing that Fatima also wanted the group meetings to continue, Aliya reflects on how her opinion changed. Below I share an excerpt of the conversation that demonstrates this re-connection, re-thinking, and re-energization based on the unique combination of the community of women and their commitment to advancing this project:

> Aliya: Hearing Fatima and Zainab too makes me feel more energized too because when I was talking to you [Ayesha], I think I was kind of agreeing with your [laughs], I was like kind of pushing you on the other side I guess. Like

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talking about how everything has gotten hard, and like the emotional

burden of everything. So it's so nice to have the other side, the younger

less burdened [laughs]

Fatima: [laughs] More optimistic…

Aliya: The optimistic ya. For me it's like I'm so tired all the time.

Fatima: I will also just reiterate that tired energy as well.

Aliya: No, I feel like with kids you get, you're so tired all the time that you need

you need to have someone to balance you out. So it's ya, thank you for

that.

Ayesha: I think throughout the pandemic, we've been hearing about that, that lack

of social connection but then like when you actually like see it at times like

this, like I'm actually feeling it right about what you're missing out on,

right when we don't have that. And how much, and Aliya you're right like

how negative that makes us right [laughs]

Aliya: And I think **sometimes you just need that push** like you know during

COVID nobody wanted to leave the house and even til now, like I don't

want to leave the house. But once you leave the house and you actually see

people and maybe talk to people, you feel so much better and then you

wonder, why did I not want to leave the house? And then you go back

home and you start going back down that same you know so I think

sometimes you just need to be pushed a little bit and it really helps not only

with your mental health.

This conversation is just one example of how the women bonded over the course of the

group discussions and how collective decisions and advancements were made through

careful acknowledgment and consideration of each other's ideas. It also demonstrates how

the collective energy was re-shaped due to the women being honest with one another and

being open to re-thinking previous comments – a commitment to advancing knowledges

about one's self, one another, one's communities, and one's society.

In this chapter, I have described the unique methodological innovations in this

project that led to transformative community-engaged feminist sociological results. The

critical reflections contained in this chapter demonstrate how a community-based project

transformed into a community-*driven* project, providing a model for other community-

based researchers interested in pursuing emergent projects. In the next and final chapter, I

summarize the findings from this research and reflect on future directions and imaginings.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMAGININGS & FUTURES

This dissertation opened with reference to a Muslim futurisms conference I attended in early 2022 which, through attention to intersectional Muslim ways of being, inspired attendees to imagine a different kind of future for Muslims in the west, a future free from the societal constraints that seek to divide and marginalize (Mipsterz, 2023). This call to imagination inspired me to not only consider what needs to change in our society, but to imagine an initiative that would actually create that change in ways that are meaningful and authentic to the Muslim women that I know. In this way, I realized that imagination can be actualized and change can be attainable. There is yet hope.

This dissertation analyzed the creation and impact of a community-based group, Circles of Wisdom, united by shared faith and shared aspirations for justice. Collectively, the group created a social justice-minded space for Muslim women in Windsor-Essex to reflect, unpack, and support one another during the late stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. By choosing to create Circles of Wisdom as their action, the women demonstrated the power of a collective critical faith based resistance rooted in wellness and community responsibility. Inevitably, Muslim women are shaped by external constructions that attempt to define, restrict, and control who they should be. And yet the women found that within those restrictions and limitations, there is potential to counter and create spaces of safety, protection, and solidarity as a means of survival. Together, they were able to transform the politicization of their subjectivities into powerful spaces of healing, inspiration, and collective growth.

The analysis in this dissertation responds to the research question, How do Muslim women activists in Windsor-Essex develop a collective political consciousness to resist the challenges they face as gendered religious subjects in Canada? In Chapter One, I explicated the personal roots of this project and, in doing so, disclosed how my experiences as a community member and researcher are at the very core of this work. This attention to critical reflexivity and the disclosure of my own navigations as a Muslim woman, mother, educator, and researcher are necessary, I argue, for comprehending how this project took form. In Chapter Two, I detailed the conceptual framework that underlies this project and establishes the sociopolitical context in which the women navigate their everyday lives. This context, comprised of systemic Islamophobia in the presumably secular nation-state of Canada, inspires a climate in which Muslims are Othered through a universalizing racialization of their subjectivities in a manner incongruent with the intersectionalities and diversities within Muslim communities. In Chapter Three, I presented community member profiles of the four women in Circles of Wisdom: Zainab, Aliya, Fatima, and Sumayya. These profiles demonstrate the intersectional and unique circumstances experienced and navigated by each of the women in their everyday lives; collectively, their powerful narratives challenge the universal construction of "The Muslimwoman." In Chapter Four, I demonstrated how the women navigated a series of complicated instances involving embrace and refusal while at work, school, home, and in mosques. These navigations demonstrate how the women, through simultaneous embrace and refusal of various aspects of their subjectivity, actualize their re-subjectivization so that their embodiedness as Muslim subjects is reclaimed into a more authentic characterization. In Chapter Five, I theorized how the gathering of Circles of Wisdom constituted a powerful collective critical

faith-based epistemic resistance, one that relied on the transformation of social relations rooted in wellness, as created in a transcendental digital space with a shared responsibility to community. Finally, in Chapter Six I critically reflected on the methodological journey of this project with careful attention to ethical considerations; in doing so, I argued that my role as the researcher in the research and the women's vulnerability were key to developing collective epistemic advancements in methodology.

Overall, I argued that resistance, developed relationally to subjectivities, can be reconceptualized to reflect the refusal and embrace of everyday power relations in the lives of the Muslim women in this project. Through their individual and collective navigations in the liminal space between external constructions of Self based on "The Muslimwoman" and their intersectional experiences and responsibilities, the women in this project are able to subvert and reimagine their own sense of Self in a new discursive collective space. By choosing to prioritize themselves – their wellness, their relationships, and their mental health – the women reconceptualize what it means to enact change. Epistemic transformation, this demonstrates, can occur in the most minute yet powerful of ways. These epistemological shifts have potential to transform ourselves as individuals, our communities, and our society.

I present this analysis as a feminist, anticolonial, antiracist offering. Recognizing that this dissertation reflects a brief snippet in time, it is my hope that it inspires ongoing analyses of the multifarious ways and means through which resistance is constructed and enacted by communities of racialized women.

As a researcher, I feel blessed to have embarked on this innovative, exhilarating, and complicated doctoral journey. As a community member and organizer, I see the potential and scope for a pilot project such as this to be taken up in different community and activist spaces as a means of re-thinking not only resistance, political activism, and coalition but also wellness – a crucial yet often neglected aspect of the enduring work of social change. I look forward to continuing to meet with the women past the completion of my doctoral journey, to converse, unburden, and expand our circles of wisdom – and in doing so, we continue the resistance. As there is yet much more work to be done.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Emails and Messages Sent to Community Members during Component One

These messages were either sent via email, LinkedIn© or Twitter©.

Recruitment Message:

Dear _____,

Assalamo Alaikum!

I hope that this email finds you in the best of health, InshAllah! I'm reaching out to you as both a Muslim woman and Sociology PhD Candidate who is concerned about the ongoing violence perpetrated against Muslims in our communities and who wants to take some sort of action.

For my dissertation, I am undertaking a project to study how Muslim women in Windsor engage in resistance to anti-Muslim racism. I am interested in starting and building a small community of Muslim women who can connect over our shared goals of social justice and work together to plan a local action initiative together. Propelled by the anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-Indigenous, anti-Muslim and all other anti-Other hate that we see on a daily basis, the idea is to not just talk about what should be done but to actually meet (virtually), plan, and do something about it *together*.

If this sounds like something that interests you, I would be so happy to talk further about it with you.

It would be great if our group could meet together (virtually for now), discuss and plan something to challenge this anti-Muslim racism in our communities. This may require multiple virtual meetings. I know that you are all busy women MashAllah and am mindful of scheduling meeting times that work for all of us.

I really look forward to hearing from you and working with you. I hope that we can flip the narrative from talking about how Muslim women are targets of racism to working with you to do something about it! If possible, we could start to meet as early as next week!

Please feel free to email, call, or message me anytime – I'd love to talk more about this with you!

In solidarity,

Ayesha Mian Akram

February 4, 2022

Subject: Muslim Women Resist: Scheduling First Meeting

Assalamo Alaikum!

Thank you so much for your patience as I sorted out some logistics on my end. I'm so happy that you're interested in being part of this project! I cannot wait for us to meet and get started!

I hope that we can meet as a group as early as next week and potentially even organize something for International Women's Day on March 8th as someone suggested. Please kindly fill out this Doodle poll [link removed] so that we can determine a day and time that works for everyone. So far there are 6 of us (including me) confirmed to participate, and I'm hopeful that we can find a day/time that works for everyone so I've included a variety of options in the poll. If you have any specific preferences, please do let me know.

If you would prefer to chat one-on-one prior to our first meeting as a group, I would totally welcome that and we can find a time to chat that works for you - please just let me know.

As this is a community project, my objective is to create a community of women to take action together, whatever we decide together what that looks like. At this particular time, I do not require ethics approval from the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board (I have conferred with the Chair of the REB about this). However, I do hope to analyze our work together for the purposes of my doctoral study and will apply for ethics approval once we have completed our first action together. For this reason, I will ask for your permission to record our conversations at the start of every meeting. These recordings will be very useful for my doctoral project to explore and evaluate the process of coming together and planning, implementing, and evaluating the group project.

Also, due to the collaborative nature of our project, I will not be able to guarantee anonymity or confidentiality as we will be working closely in the group together. That being said, I want you to know that I am committed to working with you with the utmost respect and ethics of care. We will start our first meeting together by collectively establishing mutually agreed upon principles to ensure privacy, respect, and care for one another. If you have any questions or concerns at any point, please do be sure to reach out to me. I hope that together we can create a community of Muslim women focused on solidarity and action, and that this community will continue to grow and work together past our first action together.

Overall, I anticipate that we will meet virtually 3-4 times over the next couple of months to discuss and plan this project, carry it out, and then meet once afterwards to evaluate it. But this depends entirely on the group and how our project evolves. What happens after

that is entirely up to the group, although I would hope that we would continue to meet and take action as needed.

In addition to the Doodle poll, it would be wonderful if you could take a moment to complete the attached one-pager with some demographic information and email it back to me. This will be very helpful in drafting some topics to get our discussion started when we meet.

Thank you once again for committing your time, expertise, and labour to this project! To say that I am eager to meet and get started is an understatement. I eagerly await your responses to the Doodle poll to schedule our first meeting!

Please feel free to email, call, or message me anytime.

Take good care,

Ayesha

Demographic Profile
Muslim Women Resist

Name:	
Age:	
Birthplace:	
"Race" &/or "Ethnicity":	
Education:	
Relevant work & community experience:	
Field of employment:	

March 3, 2022

Assalamo Alaikum wonderful women,

I hope you are doing well! Thank you for an amazing conversation on Tuesday and for expressing your commitment to this project and our discussions together - I really appreciate your time and friendship. Our conversations always leave me feeling uplifted and connected, and I look forward to our continued discussions.

On Tuesday, we discussed organizing a one-time wellness check-in with one another before Ramadan (middle of March, week of March 14th), preferably at a time when all 6 of us can meet. It will be a great opportunity for everyone to meet and just chat about what's on our minds before we retreat into our spiritual spaces for Ramadan. We discussed in-person versus virtual, but since some of us are not in Windsor-Essex, it may be best to remain virtual for now - perhaps we can have a post-Ramadan/Eid gathering in person, if we all feel comfortable!

I've created a Doodle poll [link removed] with evening times for the week of March 14th - we discussed trying to meet in the evening so that others who work during the days can join us as well. Please do fill out at your convenience.

Finally, if you feel comfortable, we discussed starting a WhatsApp group for us to communicate altogether. If you've not already shared your number, please send me your number and I can create the group.

Again, thank you thank you thank you - I feel so blessed to know you wonderful women and I'm so excited for our next chat!

Take good care,

Ayesha

March 23, 2022

Subject: Muslim Women's Wellness Check-In - Tuesday, March 29 at 6:00PM

Dear wonderful women,

Thank you so much for taking the time to be part of our wellness check-in last week. You were so honest and reflective and shared so much with the group, and I feel so grateful for the shared space that we create every time we come together.

As discussed, we will have a pre-Ramadan meetup next Tuesday, March 29th at 6:00pm [Zoom link removed].

At the end of our last meeting, we discussed how we want this group to move forward in terms of inviting other women, how often we want to meet, our name, and whether we want to think about meeting every in-person every so often. To help us decide on some of these pieces, I'll have some questions for us to answer individually at the start of our meeting.

Thank you once again, and see you next week InshAllah. I hope you all are keeping well.

Take good care,

Ayesha

April 5, 2022

Subject: Ramadan Mubarak & Brainstorming Document

Dear wonderful women,

Ramadan Mubarak to you and your families! May Allah shower his countless blessings during the holy month of Ramadan and may everyone's prayers be granted during this holy month, Ameen.

I hope that you are all keeping well. We had scheduled a meeting for last Tuesday but I know that it was a busy time for everyone so we ended up not meeting. That is totally alright and again, I am so grateful for the time you take to be part of this group.

What I've done is prepare a document with some demographic and brainstorming questions for consideration (these were questions I was going to pose at last week's meeting). These are questions about yourself, our group, and what you would like to do more of in the future. These written responses will be very useful in my doctoral work, so I would be so grateful if you could take some time to respond in as much detail as you feel comfortable.

Please feel free to send it back to me when complete - I will not share the individual documents with anyone else in the group.

As discussed, I hope that we can plan to meet again after Ramadan - what do you think?

Perhaps we can plan for a virtual Eid celebration?

Take good care everyone!

In gratitude and prayer,

Ayesha

Muslim Women Resist

Brainstorming Prompts

Demographic Profile

Name:	
Phone Number for WhatsApp Group:	
Age:	
Birthplace:	
"Race" &/or "Ethnicity":	
Education:	
Area of Employment:	
Anti-racism/EDI/community engagement work that you've done in the past/are currently a part of:	

Reflections on the group so far…

1. What has been your experience as part of this group so far?	
2. What are you getting out of this space and our meetings? What motivates you to keep participating?	
3. Is there anything about our meetings that troubles or concerns you?	
4. How is our group different from other groups that you're a part of/have been a part of?	
5. What is the importance of creating these kinds of community spaces?	

How do you want this group to move forward?

1. Do you want to invite other Muslim women into our group? 2. How should we advertise (i.e. tell our friends or advertise publicly?) What is the maximum number of women we want in this group?	
3. How often do we want to meet? 4. Bi-weekly or monthly? Online or in-person? A set day and time of the week so it's pre-marked in everyone's calendars?	
5. What is the primary goal/mission statement of this group?	
6. What is a potential name for this group?	
7. Any other ideas for the group?	

Appendix B – Recruitment Email for Interviews

October 11, 2022

Subject: Follow-Up on My Doctoral Research – Request for Individual Interview

Dear _____,

Assalamo Alaikum!

I hope that you are doing well and having a lovely Fall term! We haven't crossed paths for many months - I pray that your studies are going well and that you are thriving InshAllah!

I'm reaching out to connect with you regarding the next and final phase of my dissertation project, "Politics of Resistance & Circles of Wisdom: Canadian Muslim Women's Political Subjectivities Twenty Years after 9/11," which is based on our group conversations from earlier this year.

As you will recall, I am undertaking a project to study Muslim women's political subjectivities and the power of a feminist community. I've been transcribing and analyzing our conversations from the spring, and I am eager to schedule one individual interview with you with some follow-up questions. This is a one-time interview (~1.5 hours) and will take place either in person or remotely, whichever you prefer. Again, I am mindful of scheduling a meeting time that works for you and am flexible in that regard (weekday, weeknight, weekend). This interview will be extremely helpful for me to complete the analysis for my dissertation.

If you are willing to participate in this final phase of the project and schedule an interview, please email me back and I can share the consent form with you and answer any questions you may have. If I don't hear from you right away, I'll follow up in one week.

Once the interviews are complete with all the women, I hope that we can also continue to meet as a group and continue to share in our "Circles of Wisdom."

Thank you so much for your consideration and support of my doctoral work! I really look forward to hearing from you and meeting with you again!

Please feel free to email, call, or message me anytime.

In solidarity,

Ayesha

Appendix C – Information Letter & Consent Form for Interviews

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Politics of Resistance & Circles of Wisdom: Canadian Muslim Women's Political Subjectivities Twenty Years after 9/11

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ayesha Mian Akram from the Department of Sociology & Criminology at the University of Windsor. The results of this study will contribute to her doctoral dissertation, which has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Ayesha at mianakr@uwindsor.ca or her Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Jane Ku, at janeku@uwindsor.ca.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the political identities and activist efforts of Canadian Muslim women. Earlier this year, we had a series of group discussions where we together reflected on our past experiences as Muslim women and how to address anti-Muslim racism in Canada. I now have some follow-up questions with regards to those conversations for which I would like to schedule one (1) interview with you. This information will be very useful for my doctoral dissertation.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to schedule one (1) interview with Ayesha. This will be about 1.5 hours long. It will take place at a time and place that is convenient to you. This interview can either be in-person or virtually on Zoom depending on your preference.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

It can be very difficult to talk about racism. During the course of our conversation, there may be revelations or topics that cause psychological or emotional distress to you. I will strive to create a safe and accountable space and will always be available outside of the interview for individual debriefing and support.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

By participating in this study, you will support the advancement of knowledge about Muslim women's political subjectivities and activism in Canada, a field that is currently

limited. You may also benefit from the study's goal of social justice and integrate these reflections and actions into your own activist work.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants will receive a $20 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and participation. This compensation will be provided even if you decide to withdraw from participation. You will also be compensated if you schedule an interview and then decide to withdraw. If we decide to meet in person, I will offer to cover your transportation costs.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will keep your participation in this study completely confidential and will not use your real name at any time, unless you wish me to. At the end of this consent form, you can choose whether you want to be identified by a pseudonym in research documents or by your real name (first name only).

The data will be used in my dissertation and other publications. All the information and data provided will be kept in a password-protected electronic file and a locked cabinet file. Myself and my faculty supervisor, Dr. Jane Ku, will be the only ones with access to the information provided by you. It will be destroyed after ten years.

Discussions will be digitally-recorded, and only myself and Dr. Ku will have access to these recordings and their transcripts. They will be destroyed after a period of ten years.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. Even after you agree to participate, you have the right to physically withdraw during the data collection process (i.e. not attend a scheduled interview). You will need to provide written withdrawal from the study (i.e. send an email to the researcher).

If you decide to withdraw your participation in the middle of the interview, I will stop recording, delete the recording and not use that data in my dissertation.

You will receive compensation even if you schedule an interview and decide to withdraw.

I will not be able to withdraw your data (i.e. interview recordings, transcripts, researcher notes) from the study if we have already completed the interview.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS
A summary of the research findings will be available to participants through the REB's Summary for Participants platform at this link: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/
Results will be available on this date: [insert date]

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA
These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: The Office of Research Ethics, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study Politics of Resistance & Circles of Wisdom: Canadian Muslim Women's Political Subjectivities Twenty Years after 9/11 as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Please check ONE box to indicate your preference:

☐   Use a pseudonym in research publications. Do not use my real name in research publications.

☐   I give permission to use my real name (first name only) in research publications.

_____
Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR
These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

_____   _____

RESOURCES FOR PARTICIPANTS

Canadian Mental Health Association, "Racism and Mental Health", https://cmha-yr.on.ca/racism-and-mental-health/

Canadian Race Relations Foundation, https://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/en/

Centre for Integrative Anti-Racism Studies, "Anti-Muslim Racism Beyond Islamophobia Resource Guide", https://cmha-yr.on.ca/racism-and-mental-health/

Islamic Social Services Association & National Council of Canadian Muslims, "Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence & Islamophobia"

https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/97e4-Geopolitical-Violence-and-Islamophopia.pdf

Appendix D – Consent for Digital Recording

CONSENT FOR DIGITAL RECORDING

Research Participant Name:

Title of the Project: Politics of Resistance & Circles of Wisdom: Canadian Muslim Women's Political Subjectivities Twenty Years after 9/11

I consent to the digital recording of an interview with the researcher, Ayesha Mian Akram, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview by requesting that the recording be stopped.

I understand these are voluntary procedures, and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the recording be stopped. I also understand that the nature of our conversation will be kept confidential. Recordings will be stored in a password protected file on my computer.

The destruction of the digital recordings will be completed after transcription and verification.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the digital recording will be for professional use only.

This research has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.

_____   _____

         Research Participant   Date

_____   _____

     Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix E – Group Discussion Guides

Meeting 1 – February 10

Permission for Recording

Before we begin, I want to ask for your permission to record our conversations on Zoom. You have my word that I will keep the downloaded recordings on my computer, not share them with anyone, delete them off the Zoom cloud. But these recordings will be extremely useful for my doctoral project to explore and evaluate the process of coming together and planning, implementing, and evaluating the group project. Do you consent to being recorded?

Thank you

I am so so appreciative of you taking the time to be here and participate in this project. I reached out to you because I had a feeling you might be interested and I'm so happy that you said yes. I know how busy schedules are, pandemic is still going on, really appreciate your commitment to this project and taking action together, doing something together. I promise to be mindful of your time, try to stay on time, etc. etc. That being said, I am so grateful of your time and also for your contributions to my doctoral work.

Introductions

Let me tell you a little bit about where this project comes from:

-In Sociology, but my background is in Education. My master's project in Educational Policy Studies was a study looking at how racism impacts the identities of Canadian-born Muslim women who practice *hijab*. Worked with 7 women, interviews, focus groups, worked closely – really formative project working with them, shaped me as a feminist researcher and my passion for anti-oppression work

-for PhD, wanted to do something different. Focus on action. Not just talking about experiences, but actually doing something. A few years back, a friend [name] and I organized a series of workshops at the University called Building Solidarity through Collectives where we created these spaces for women to gather to learn about other religions and share their experiences. Since then, I've been fascinated with the idea of communities of women, getting together, sharing, learning and doing something – which is what I wanted to do in this project – bring a few women together who have shared social justice values, interest in taking action, start small, start talking and doing, and see what happens. Another important piece is the evaluation – after we do whatever it is that we decide, I would love for us to meet one more time to evaluate it – what worked, what didn't work, did it have any impact, how do we know, how did participating in this project affect us? I think that process of reflection is so important for future work.

-As I said in the email, I don't have REB ethics clearance, I don't need it because this is a community project. That being said, I do want to analyze our work together for my doctoral

dissertation and will apply for ethics approval once we have completed our first action together. This process of coming together and doing something together will really contribute to the academic literature on gendered anti-Muslim racism and feminist praxis and more importantly, provide a model for other communities perhaps.

Also, I cannot guarantee anonymity or confidentiality – we can all see one another and know that the other is participating. But, I do want you to know that respect and ethics are core to who I am and the work that I do, and I really want us to be able to do this project with the utmost respect and care for one another. Again, if you have any questions or concerns at any point, please call, message, email, we can meet for lunch, anything.

Principles for Our Community:
Before we start chatting, I think it's important for us to talk about some mutually agreed upon principles to ensure privacy (may be sharing things in confidence), respect (sharing space and respecting differences of opinion), and how we demonstrate care for one another. What do you think our principles should be? Let's just say them out.

Questions:
Hoping for us to have a conversation, if we were in person it would be very different – and we can talk about that as well and your comfortability level with that. But please don't feel like you need to raise your hand and I moderate the conversation – let's just all speak when you feel the need to and be mindful of others also having space to share.

I have some questions just to get us started and thinking, as well as getting to know each other.

Overall:
- ⊕ What are some of the challenges that you face as a Muslim woman in Windsor-Essex?
- ⊕ What are some of the issues facing Muslim communities today?
- ⊕ Let's talk about settler colonialism and anti-Black racism – intersecting oppressions.

Identity:
- ⊕ How has anti-Muslim racism impacted you?
- ⊕ Is it important for you to do something?
- ⊕ What have you tried to do about it? What was that experience like? What has worked and what hasn't worked? How do you know that change has come about?
- ⊕ How does your work inform who you are? How does who you are inform the work that you do?

Pandemic:
- ⊕ How has the pandemic affected your sense of self, and what you do and how you do when it comes to social and political engagement?

Community:

- ⊕ Why is it important for Muslim women to work together to challenge anti-Muslim racism? Who are your allies?
- ⊕ Our Community: What are our rules? What are our responsibilities, to the cause and to each other?

Social Change Initiative:

- ⊕ What should we do? What do you envision it to look like and how can we go about doing it?
- ⊕ Criteria for initiative (i.e. it must address anti-Muslim racism, be coalitional and collective (in that we work together to plan and implement it), be public, and address a collectively-defined social change objective.)
- ⊕ What issue(s) we are trying to address, what outcome(s) do we hope to achieve, and what do we plan to do in order to achieve this?
- ⊕ Ask: How will we know if we have accomplished anything? (starting to think about evaluation criteria)
- ⊕ Decide on plan and timeline for implementation

Next Steps:

- ⊕ Next Meeting – next week?
- ⊕ Any other women you know? No criteria, just Muslim woman
- ⊕ Think more about what we can do in the meantime
- ⊕ Is it okay if I email you a question and ask for you to respond?
- ⊕ Feel free to journal – can even write in an email to me, don't want this to become too cumbersome but I've found the practice of writing down my reflections to be really good for the soul – feel free to just write for a minute and send it in an email to me, anytime. Maintain confidentiality, not share with anyone else.
- ⊕ Okay to share email addresses with each other? Whatsapp group chat??

Thank you!

Meeting 2 – February 15

Permission for Recording

Do I have your permission to record on Zoom?

Recap from last week:

There is so much negativity and hate out there. We counter that by creating spaces that are uplifting for Muslim women. Spaces of community and care.

We spoke a lot about rebuilding ourselves. Taking care of ourselves. Reconnecting with other Muslim women after the pandemic.

We need to be intentional about the work that we do.

We know what's out there. The hate. The barriers. The challenge. Let's counter that with spaces of solidarity and uplifting.

Faith is what unites us. Faith is at our core. Need to talk about how we centre faith in the work that we do.

When we meet, it's not stressful or burden. It's bringing back peace. And reconnection. And community. And faith.

- Can you speak a little bit about the community organizing or anti-oppression work that you've done in the past? Why was it important for you to engage in that type of work? How did you feel when you did that work? Did it feel like you made a difference?
  - o Are you tired?

- Why is it important for Muslim women to be in community and especially to reconnect during/after the pandemic? What are our responsibilities towards one another?

- How does our faith guide not only our spirituality and our identity but our work? Why is it important to work towards normalizing talking about faith in "professional settings?

- Let's plan out some of the details: Meetings of Muslim women?
  - o How many women?
  - o How often meet?
  - o Structure?
  - o Poster?
  - o Name for our group?

- Next meeting, next week?

Meeting 3 – March 1

Permission for Recording

Do I have your permission to record on Zoom?

Recap from last week:

There is so much negativity and hate out there. We counter that by creating spaces that are uplifting for Muslim women. Spaces of community and care.

We spoke a lot about rebuilding ourselves. Taking care of ourselves. Reconnecting with other Muslim women after the pandemic.

We need to be intentional about the work that we do.

We know what's out there. The hate. The barriers. The challenge. Let's counter that with spaces of solidarity and uplifting.

Faith is what unites us. Faith is at our core. Need to talk about how we centre faith in the work that we do.

When we meet, it's not stressful or burden. It's bringing back peace. And reconnection. And community. And faith.

- Can you speak a little bit about the community organizing or anti-oppression work that you've done in the past? Why was it important for you to engage in that type of work? How did you feel when you did that work? Did it feel like you made a difference?
  - Are you tired?

- Why is it important for Muslim women to be in community and especially to reconnect during/after the pandemic? What are our responsibilities towards one another?

- How does our faith guide not only our spirituality and our identity but our work? Why is it important to work towards normalizing talking about faith in "professional settings?

- Let's plan out some of the details: Meetings of Muslim women?
  - How many women?
  - How often meet?
  - Structure?
  - Poster?
  - Name for our group?

- Next meeting, next week?

Meeting 4 – March 15

Permission for Recording

 Do I have your permission to record on Zoom?

Recap from last week:

There is so much negativity and hate out there. We counter that by creating spaces that are uplifting for Muslim women. Spaces of community and care.

We spoke a lot about rebuilding ourselves. Taking care of ourselves. Reconnecting with other Muslim women after the pandemic.

We need to be intentional about the work that we do.

We know what's out there. The hate. The barriers. The challenge. Let's counter that with spaces of solidarity and uplifting.

Faith is what unites us. Faith is at our core. Need to talk about how we centre faith in the work that we do.

When we meet, it's not stressful or burden. It's bringing back peace. And reconnection. And community. And faith.

- How are you? What's on your mind?

- Why is it important for Muslim women to be in community and especially to reconnect during/after the pandemic? What are our responsibilities towards one another?

- Can you speak a little bit about the community organizing or anti-oppression work that you've done in the past? Why was it important for you to engage in that type of work? How did you feel when you did that work? Did it feel like you made a difference?
    o Are you tired?

- How does our faith guide not only our spirituality and our identity but our work? Why is it important to work towards normalizing talking about faith in "professional settings?

- Let's plan out some of the details: Meetings of Muslim women?
    o How many women?
    o How often meet?
    o Structure?
    o Poster?
    o Name for our group?
- Next meeting, next week?

Appendix F – Individual Interview Guide

Politics of Refusal, Politics of Wellness

A. Can you tell me about yourself (as a Muslim woman)? (Probe for how they self-describe race, gender, religion, education, career, womanhood, etc.)

B. Can you tell me more about your prior work to address anti-Muslim racism? (Probe specific examples of advocacy; inter-community, intra-community; when; how long; with whom). What did you learn from engaging in that?

C. What is one event that really impacted you as a Muslim woman in Canada and inspired you to say, I need to do something about this? (Probe for what was the impetus; probe for impact of global events on local action)

D. What is one moment where you refused to engage in action, even though you knew you should or felt pressured to? (probe for politics of refusal)

E. What are your reflections on being part of the first phase of the project? Especially during the pandemic?

F. How did being in that space together with the women (in Circles of Wisdom) make you feel?

G. What is the importance of wellness to the work of organizing and resistance?

H. What are your hopes as a Muslim woman in Canada?

I. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Ayesha Mian Akram

PLACE OF BIRTH: Calgary, AB

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1987

EDUCATION: University of Alberta, B.Ed., Edmonton, AB,
                          2009

                          University of Alberta, M.Ed., Edmonton, AB,
                          2012