

Being Muslim in Canada¹

I think the reason why we've been successful that way is because right at the very beginning one of the household rules was, "leave your ego at the door." And I think that was really big and I think people have, for all intents and purposes at these meetings, they did leave their egos at the door... look, we know we have these differences, we know these differences exist, but let's not dwell on these differences maybe from now until the end, who knows, how do we work with these differences. How do we work with these differences? (Sarah, Member of the Coalition.

After September 11, 2001, Muslims in Canada struggled to find a common voice with which to express their reading and resistance to the alarming increase in acts of violence and discrimination that have increasingly become associated with Islamophobia. The Coalition (which is the subject of this book) sought to engage across its differences in order to increase the Muslim community's/ies' capacity to address and potentially redress the effects of Islamophobia. Sarah's comment reflects the group's shared awareness that the Muslim community is complex, comprised of numerous sectarian, linguistic and national sub-groups. What her comment also signals is that the Coalition was and continues to be willing to bracket or engage with these differences according to what is strategically necessary at the moment.

Even as Muslims are dealing with issues of identity and belonging within the broader Canadian society, they are also actively engaged in individual and collective reflection about how their identities are conceptualized and performed within Muslim communities. And to the extent that these conversations are often obscured by the (mistaken) perception that Muslims are relatively homogeneous and unreflexive, this book is an attempt to bring some of these internal-to-the-community dialogues to the surface and begin to get at the complex and contested nature of Muslim identities in Canada. The question that is at the heart of this book is this: What are the challenges of articulating multiple, shifting, and sometimes contested identities within a Muslim coalition/community? Of course, this question is not only intended to be in service to the Muslim community as it engages with its internal complexities. This book and the question at its core are meant to stir conversation in the broader community. Current discourses (for example,

representations of Muslims in the media) often engender fear of the Muslim Other. This Islamophobia, or fear of Muslims, has closed down spaces in which those who identify as Muslims and those who do not can encounter one another without mistrust and misinformation clouding their perceptions of one another.

Muslims in Canada

Census data on the number of Muslims in Canada have not been continuously collected over time. Some figures are available until 1941, and then there is a gap of 40 years when no official data were collected (Hamdani 1999: 198). By 2001, the Muslim population in Canada had grown to over 650,000 (Zaman as cited in Scholes 2002: 413). However, these numbers fail to communicate the diversity within the Muslim community, a problem which, according to Hamdani, contributes to misunderstandings between Canadians and Muslims and, I would add, among Muslims themselves. Indeed, Hamdani pointed out that Muslims appear to have had little interest in undertaking any kind of rigorous census within the community, and most writing and research on this issue have come from outside of the Muslim community.

The Coalition

It was, actually that whole process was, a great learning experience for me... it was just an incredible feat that we accomplished... getting all those different groups together and basically working through identifying what our fears were, identifying our goals and what it was we wanted to accomplish over the next so many years. And then actually putting together an organization [and] Terms of Reference that we can all agree to was a great accomplishment and I definitely learned a lot from that entire process. (Yusuf)

Formed in the wake of September 11, 2001, the Coalition's² vision statement is "to work with the Muslim community in Edmonton to help improve the lives of Muslims in the region and to enhance their contribution to society at large" and its mission is to "strive to speak and act on behalf of Edmonton Muslims with fellow Canadians in a manner that protects, promotes, and enhances the understanding of Islam and Muslims in matters of public policy, education, peace and safety."

Constructed as a coalition of Muslim organizations, the Coalition had nine member organizations at the time I conducted the interviews for this book. Each member organization sends two representatives to sit on a body that is referred to as the "council." The eighteen members of the council elect nine from amongst themselves to the executive committee, which is

responsible for choosing from amongst themselves a chair, vice-chair, and a secretary-treasurer and communications officer. Membership is available to

Any registered not-for-profit entity that professes belief in Allah³ [God] (SWT)⁴ and testifies that Muhammad (PBUH)⁵ is His final prophet, and fully subscribes to the mission, values and operating principles of the Council contained in this document, shall, upon application and unanimous acceptance by the Council, be eligible to the membership of the Council

The Coalition has five portfolios that oversee its activities: public policy, education, interfaith, special events, and strategic leadership. The Coalition has attempted to maintain a proactive stance rather than simply reacting to conditions in the community. For example, through the auspices of the education portfolio, Coalition members worked with the University of Alberta to establish a chair in Islamic Studies:

We are very proud of the fact that our committee has been successful in establishing the first Islamic Chair at a major university in Canada. This unprecedented achievement is currently being emulated in other North American cities. The Education Portfolio will identify funding sources and organize fundraising events to support the Islamic Chair.⁶

The foci of the public policy portfolio included preparing and disseminating policy representations, legislative monitoring, and participating in boards and committees open to members of the public. In particular the Coalition concentrates on civil liberties, foreign policy, citizenship and immigration, and inclusiveness. It is also working to ensure that discriminatory or stereotypical representations of Muslims in public school materials are addressed. The Coalition responds to requests for information about Islam and the Muslim community in Edmonton and Canada from a variety of individuals and organizations. It has produced two editions of an information booklet entitled *Towards Understanding Muslims in Canada*, which has been used by, among others, the local police service.

Equally important is the complex make up of the Coalition's leadership, and by extension, membership. Three Islamic sects, multiple nationalities and languages are embodied in the women and men who lead the group. Some of the leadership identify as secular, some as observant, and there are those who fall along the spectrum of observance. Many had never before worked with Muslims of other sects, indeed many had never associated with Muslims outside their own mosque or sect. Joined initially by their shared alarm over events at home and abroad in which Muslims (or those thought to

be Muslim due to their appearance) were the objects of racism, the Coalition members gradually became friends and close colleagues. While their differences (discussed in more detail elsewhere in the book) continually played a role in how they developed strategies to education against and resist the effects of Islamophobia, they did not constitute an existential threat to their organization.

The persistent challenge I faced was how to illuminate these complexities. In the end, it seemed to me that the best way to make space for the important struggles, tensions, multiplicities, and ambiguities was to try to both illuminate and be illuminated by their struggles (Lather 1991: 55). The key struggle was that of a racialized coalition that has formed across significant identity differences to resist discrimination against, and the marginalization of, Muslims within Canada.

In many ways these are intimate and particular stories. The sometimes very personal reflections of those I spoke with constitute a portrait of Muslim organizers and activists in one Western Canadian city. On the other hand, their stories also represent a broader vision of how this and other racialized groups might resist the pressures of imposed stereotypes and the very real effects on their lives. In other words, the possibility exists for these stories to constitute a case study of sorts. Like many case studies, this one is neither tightly bounded, nor is it a complete telling of a/the story(ies). Rather it adds to accounts, both individual and collective, regarding what it is like to be an Arab or a Muslim in contemporary western societies. It may be the beginning of a story, or perhaps we have come into the middle of the story. In any case, I believe that the story is one worth attending to, if there is to be any hope of interrupting the destructive effects of Islamophobia (in this specific case) or of other destructive (and constructed) oppressions which suggest perpetual states of “us” versus “them.” The reflections of those I interviewed indicate how Muslims living in Canada are struggling to make sense of their identities, to come to term with differences within their community(ies), while at the same time attempting to interrupt oppressive discourses which have constructed Muslims as alien, and even dangerous, to the West.

Identifying as a Muslim

I was a member of the Coalition from the time of its first visioning workshops until it was about one year old. I know many of its leaders through blood relations, friendship, the mosque that I attended as a child, and various community activities. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents were founding members of the first Canadian mosque built in Edmonton. My family has a long and respected history in the community. Thus it would appear that my status as an insider is unequivocal. However, that status is much more

complex and even contested than it might appear at first glance. Certain of my identities do not necessarily privilege me in the context of the Muslim community or within all Muslim organizations. Some would not consider me religious enough; others might believe that my feminist orientation renders me suspect. And although I have experienced the sting of being a racialized Other since childhood, many in my community regard me as fully integrated or even assimilated into Canadian society.

Insider status is not a straightforward thing in that it does not always guarantee unproblematic relations with other insiders; nor do members of the community necessarily interpret the insider-researchers as having a privileged view of the community (Beoku-Betts 1994; Merriam et al. 2001; Sherif 2001). On the point of relations with the community, any unproblematic notion of insider presumes a “monolithic entity” (Merriam et al. 2001: 411), in this case a single identity called Muslim. However, class, gender, education, sexual orientation, skin colour, and place of residence can all complicate the research relationship. Merriam et al. refer to this as positionality, which is “determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’” (Merriam et al. 2001: 411). Both Beoku-Betts and Sherif describe their experiences, their need to negotiate differences even though they were initially welcomed as insiders. Regarding the insider-researchers’ capacity to render a more complete and accurate picture of the community, rather than affording the researcher with insider-status privilege, “insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions” (Beoku-Betts 1994: 411).

So, I have had to struggle with what Bolak calls “being blinded by the familiar” (1996: 109). I have had years to consider the issues that I address in this book, and I have had to work against the tendency to make assumptions about what I would discover. I had to be willing to be surprised and contradicted by what I might discover. This was not an aspect of doing insider research to which, I confess, I had given much consideration, believing that it would be easy to transcend my biases. But, of course, biases are not something to be transcended; they *are* who I *am*. The best that I could do in this regard was to be sensitive to my defensive or resistant feelings, which apparently are not uncommon in these contexts (Bolak 1996; Sherif 2001).

Although the challenges that confront the “insider” researcher are many, there are also rewards. In spite of my outspokenness and my tendency to rankle, I was granted complete access to the organization and was able to secure the interviews that I needed with relative ease. I believe that people were honest, trusting me not to misrepresent them or our community. Furthermore, it is rewarding to be able to contribute this research for what I hope will be the benefit of a community that has meaning for me.

These aspects of conducting research — my identification with the

community and my former membership in this coalition — influenced every facet of the research, from developing the questions to writing the final thesis. That it complicated the process is indisputable. Whether it made a positive difference is still hard for me to determine.

Clash of Civilizations?

Unfortunately, despite the presence of Muslims in North America for over 100 years, religious and political leaders and public and private intellectuals have all contributed to the pool of sentiments that situate Islam as the root of western troubles (Michael 2003). Samuel Huntington warned that the so-called Muslim world is about to rise against the West and that this rising “is no less than a clash of civilizations — the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (1993: 32). In light of this type of analysis, some European nations have begun to rethink their “generosity” towards Muslim immigrants (fearing the impact on their own cultures) and are considering changing their immigration laws to protect their society from both the reproductive and the cultural threat of Muslims (Razack 2004, 2005).

Closer to home, Muslim anxieties about their place in Canada are embodied in two incidents, one quite spectacular and the other disturbing by the lack of press coverage that it received. The first is the case of Maher Arar. On the basis of what turned out to be false information from the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, Mr. Arar, a Canadian citizen, was deported to Syria when he attempted to return home to Canada from a trip to the United States. While in Syria, Mr. Arar was beaten and tortured. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in full cooperation with the CIA, facilitated the deportation, and the Canadian government spent many months dragging its heels on the case (Mayeda 2006). Only through the dogged determination of his wife and support of one of the federal opposition political parties was Mr. Arar eventually returned to Canada.

More recently, Dr. Ahmed Farooq, a Canadian physician returning from an academic conference in the United States, was forced to deplane before take-off because his fellow passengers did not feel safe flying with a Muslim aboard (CBC News 2006). Although Dr. Farooq did not pose any security threat, he was not allowed to resume his flight, nor was any sort of compensatory gesture made by the airline. The sole reason for his being forced off this flight was the perception of fellow passengers who were acting upon their constructed belief that all Muslims constitute a potential threat simply by virtue of their being (or appearing to be) Muslim. From these two instances, we see that Canadian citizenship and innocence are not sufficient to protect

Muslims from fear and suspicion.

Conflicts such as the Israel/Palestine conflict and the ongoing military occupation of Palestinian land, both U.S. invasions of Iraq, the 2002 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the 2005 train bombings in Britain and Spain, the events of September 11, 2001, and the recent siege of Gaza continue to have a negative effect on the lives of Muslims who live in the West. Why, one might ask, would these far-away events have an effect on Muslims living in, for example, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada? This is in part due to the assumption that all Muslims are implicated as the cause of these conflicts. One unfortunate outcome of this assumption is that Muslims in the West are constantly called upon to clarify their allegiances (which is reminiscent of the situation with Japanese Canadians during World War II). However, as John Michael notes, allegiance is a complex and complicated thing:

Most of us understand ourselves to have many different allegiances and those allegiances often conflict. One might well understand oneself to be an American patriot and a committed pacifist. When the United States responds with violence to violence directed against it which identity should predominate? (2003: 712)

The complex, contextual, and contested nature of identities and allegiances generates questions about who “we” are, how we construct our notions of the other, and how *we* act upon those constructions. These are all questions of conscience, intellect, and heart. Neither identity nor allegiance can be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of “us” and “them” (Michael 2003). In spite of this common sense approach to the complex nature of allegiance, the Muslim community is often viewed with suspicion and held to account when Muslims or Arabs engage in acts of resistance (or aggression) abroad regardless of any physical or political disconnection from their current social or political context.⁷

Added to this mix is the common portrayal of western armies as liberators, as freeing Muslims/Arabs from either misogynistic male domination (Afghanistan), the sadism of its dictators (Iraq), or the fanaticism of its religious leaders (Hezbollah in Lebanon). At the same time, Muslim/Arabs in warfare, according to the stereotype, are expressing their

essential identity as religious fanatics. Their specific experiences of a world in which Western military fortifications appear unbidden on Arab lands need not be considered. Meanwhile, our [the West’s] own actions, and the actions of those with whom “we” identify, are always more complicated and contingent. (Michael 2003: 711)

Collective Response

In fact, contrary to the stereotypic image of a monolithic and hostile Muslim/Arab world, responses to the socio-political conditions described above have generally not been concerted. An Internet search using the terms “Muslim,” coalitions, organizations, alliances, and Islam revealed that broad-based, sustained organizing tends to centre around congregations and the sharing of religious information with adherents. For example, the Islamic Society of North America (and its Canadian branch) is predominantly focused on the religious life of Muslims — in particular, Sunni Muslims. Although some events in the past have spurred the formation of short-term, single-issue groups, only recently have *Muslims* in the West begun to think about working across their internal differences to resist the invidious effects of racism or other forms of Islamophobia. Furthermore, Muslims have yet to work consistently with other social justice groups to resist racism, sexism, or homophobia.

Media Complicity in Stereotyping Muslims in the West

Many writers have clearly demonstrated the linkages between stereotyped and monolithic portrayals of Arabs/Muslims and the presence of racism and Islamophobia. Failing to acknowledge the contextual and contested nature of Muslim identities, these stereotypical images paradoxically contribute to the social forces through which Muslim identities in the West become constituted. That is, the portrayal of Muslims as savage, backward, and hostile to the West generates hostility, fear, and suspicion that, when socially produced as Islamophobia, constitute the social context within which Muslim identity is reformed and performed. Stereotypes are symptomatic of underlying belief in a single Muslim identity: they are what the community can point at as evidence of what is experienced as more subtle forms of racism and discrimination. Racism and Islamophobia provide important frameworks within which to understand the social and political processes that impact the lives of Muslims, but it is the concrete representation of these phenomena to which organizations often respond. Newspaper articles, newscasts, stereotypic characters in movies, and so forth provide one starting point for calling attention to and addressing incidents of racism and Islamophobia. Complicating all of this is an interesting dilemma over what to call those who are being stereotyped. The search terms “Muslim” and “stereotyping” yielded literature that dealt with both Arab and Muslim stereotyping, which indicates that the terms are used interchangeably, even in the scholarly literature. Such a practice is, as pointed out earlier, inaccurate. The demands of rigour, clarity, and validity seem to preclude such conflation and interchange. Thus I looked at the literature on both Arab and Muslim stereotyping for two reasons, the most important of which was to try to include as much as possible. Second, by

writing the conflation as Arab/Muslim, I wish to foreground the ongoing linguistic and conceptual error that blurs distinctions amongst a vast range of peoples, cultures, languages, and histories. This conflation, in part, makes possible the production of stereotypes that reduce Arabs/Muslims to a few spare and terrible images in the minds of many in the West (which I will discuss as essentialism and Orientalism in the next chapter).

Edward Said noted that “since World War II... the Arab and Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture” (1979: 284). Unfortunately, the figure to which Said refers has few if any positive qualities. Almost three decades after Said’s comments about the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims, Michael observed that “the Arab as type remains linked to irrational or religious violence, opulence, sensuality, and evil” (2003: 706). Following the trail of images portrayed in written and visual texts from 1896 to the present, we can extrapolate from them the dominant stereotype of the moment, and in some cases, the place of the Arab/Muslim in the minds and politics of the West. Early imagery conformed to some of the more prominent stereotypical images of the Muslim/Arab oriental. “Rudolph Valentino, [who]... dressed like an Arab sheikh” (Abouchedid and Nasser 2006: 205), is perhaps the quintessential Arab/Muslim male of the time — exotic, mysterious, and perhaps slightly dangerous. Early images of women consisted largely of the harem girl or belly dancer (Abouchedid and Nasser 2006; Michael 2003).

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Arab was often depicted as “the embodiment of incompetence and easy defeat” (Said 1979: 285). However, oil politics and other imperial ambitions in the Middle East triggered a more menacing image of Muslim men in particular. The “rapacious bandit” (Shaheen 1994: 123) from earlier times is recalled in “cartoons depicting an Arab Sheik standing behind a gasoline pump... clearly ‘Semitic’: their sharply hooked noses, the evil moustachioed leer on their faces” (Said 1979: 286). The most recent images of the Arab or Muslim are gendered and stark — the terrorist man and the subservient woman, both of whom conform to old archetypes of the dangerous yet mute Arab (Sway 2005; Elia 2006; Michael 2003; Razack 2004; Said 1979; Shaheen 1994, 2003). From editorial cartoons that depict Osama Bin Laden (Joshi 2006), to the Danish cartoons that portray Mohammed as a bomber, to comic-book villains (Shaheen 1994), nondocumentary images of Muslim/Arab continue to associate the phenotypical Semitic-Arab, with his “large turban, protrusive nose and beady eyes” (Joshi 2006: 218), with acts of violence (Joshi 2006; Michael 2003; Shaheen 1994). Unfortunately, these images have their origins in ancient stereotypes that date back to the crusades and that persist today.

In print and television media, language has also been used to stereotype Muslims/Arabs. The consistent and persistent use of derogatory adjectives such as *terrorist* and *militant*, juxtaposed with the words *Islamic/Muslim/Arab*,

has reinforced the image of Arab/Muslim as both dangerous and the enemy (Joshi 2006; Tessler 2003). In an analysis of George Bush's speeches immediately following September 11, 2001, Merskin showed how the Arab/Muslim was constructed as "the enemy." Like the term *oriental*, the word *enemy* is imbued, Merskin contended, with a wealth of meanings. If people are our enemies, we know, for example, that they "have destructive intentions towards our group" or that their values repudiate ours (2005: 160). Therefore, when George Bush invoked the Arab/Muslim world as a force of enmity, he was able to communicate a whole range of hostilities and differences as being both irreconcilable and deadly (Merskin 2005).

The power of these negative images is exacerbated by the absence of portrayals of Arab/Muslim identities as complex and contextual (Merskin 2005; Shaheen 1994, 2003). "A lack of representation (symbolic annihilation) can also reinforce stereotypes" (Merskin 2005: 165); and in an analysis of comic-book portrayals of Arabs/Muslims from the 1950s to 1994, Shaheen found no Arab/Muslim heroes. Even the "benevolent" characters were "passive... playing minor roles" (2003: 123). In a similar study of almost 1,000 American films, Shaheen found only two positively portrayed Arabs/Muslims.

Finally, the image of the veiled Muslim woman has become symbolic of at least two aspects of Muslim identity. First, it represents the "undifferentiated sex drive" (Said 1979: 312) of the Muslim man from which the Muslim woman must be protected (Elia 2006); and second, it represents the Muslim woman/non-Muslim woman binary. In this binary, the Muslim woman is unfree, undifferentiated, and without voice, a perpetual victim waiting to be rescued from her culture; whereas the western woman is individuated, self-expressive, potent, and self-actualized (Michael 2003; Razack 2004; Shaheen 1994, 2003). This latter image of the perpetually oppressed and voiceless woman has become a *cause célèbre* for some western feminists. Both Rantanen (2005) and Razack (2004) called for feminists to employ both an antiracist and a feminist analysis in taking up important women's issues such as domestic violence and the political oppression of women abroad.

Politics of Being Muslim:

The Emergence of Muslim Coalitions in the West

Traditionally, Muslim organizing has centered on individual places of worship and on meeting the localized religious and social needs of a particular congregation. Although there has been some limited cross-sectarian interaction through attendance at fundraisers or social events, coalitional organizing to address shared political issues or social issues has been limited; especially rare are coalitions that include Sunni and Shi'a Muslims working together. However, the contemporary political and socio-religious issues that Muslims