

Article: ‘Standing with Each Other’: Indigenous-Muslim Relation-Making on Turtle Island

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Abstract

Within the context of the northern part of Turtle Island, the space of relationships between Indigenous and Muslim communities is one intertwined within the history and geopolitical realities of settler-colonialism and immigration. This paper is an exploration of the theme of space, and relationship formation from the perspective of Muslim and Indigenous peoples in Canada who have engaged in building relations over the past two decades. This article is based on a wider qualitative semi-structured interview-based research project, supported by content analyses of existing literature and online resources produced by relevant organizations and initiatives. The research analysis has led me to thematically organize these spaces into four general types of spaces: 1) organization-led spaces of relationship building; 2) spaces of conviviality as pathways to relationship building; 3) relational spaces defined through acts of documentation; and 4) spiritually and emotionally bonded spaces that transcend a secular framework. This analysis led to identifying practices of relational meaning-making that form a preliminary understanding of what characterizes Indigenous-Muslim relations on Turtle Island.

Keywords: Canada, Canadian, Decolonization, First Nations, Gaza, Indigenous, Islam, Muslim, Palestine, Relations, Relationality, Solidarity, Space, Treaty, Treaties, Turtle Island

Introduction

The Assembly of First Nations reports that from coast to coast there are currently over 630 First Nations communities in Canada (AFN, 2024). Today, the northern part of Turtle Island is comprised of over 450 ethnic or cultural groups (Statistics Canada, 2022), as reported in the 2021 census, and the proportion of Canada’s population that reported being Muslim has risen from 2.0% in 2001 to 4.9% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). This paper is an exploration of the spaces of relationship making between many of these Indigenous and Muslim communities across the northern part of Turtle Island. Space is not a fixed paradigm, but one that “unfolds progressively in time and space” (Elmessiri, 2019, par.7). Within the context of the northern part of Turtle Island, the spaces of relationships between Indigenous and Muslim communities are intertwined with the history and geopolitical realities of settler-colonialism and immigration. In his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes,

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle of geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, and forms, about images and imaginings.

The struggle that Said speaks about is characterized distinctly where, as Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds (2010) write, “colonialism between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries, has produced a profound and extensive rearrangement of physical spaces and peoples.” The result is “an enduring and unresolved legacy in the so-called postcolonial present,” which, as has been identified in this article by participant members of Indigenous communities, requires Indigenous

peoples who are citizens of a (post)colonial world to define a “new meaning and social demography ... [to] be carved and asserted over existing and enduring Indigenous spaces” (Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds 2010, 1). In the process of understanding how physical and conceptual spaces come into being, it becomes imperative to uncover and disrupt Canadian power dynamics over certain spaces within the era of modern treaties (Hunt, Stevenson 2016). For Muslims living on the northern part of Turtle Island, their relations with Indigenous peoples have often been both purposeful and cognizant of these power dynamics. This article is an exploration of developing space and relationship formation from the perspective of Muslim and Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Research Method & Background

Conducting research on two specific communities requires sensitivity and understanding. Focusing on the specificities of conducting research with Indigenous communities including ethical guidelines for such research, as identified by Indigenous communities, has been a priority. Hayward, et.al (2021) have presented meta-research on the various frameworks and guidelines, in which they identify three key themes of “balancing individual and collective rights; upholding culturally-grounded ethical principles; and ensuring community-driven/self-determined research” (403). This project has aimed at upholding these themes. While focussing on the specific theme of space-making, this article is based on a wider, qualitative research project, supported by content analysis of existing literature and online resources produced by relevant organizations and initiatives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen individuals across Canada, the Northern parts of Turtle Island, many of whom are part of various nonprofit organizations or grassroots groups that have led or participated in projects and initiatives focused on Indigenous-Muslim relationship-building. To access participants, some factors were considered, e.g. whether interviewees are available and willing to be interviewed, and whether they have lived experiences and knowledge about the topic of interest (Whiting 2008). There was a specific aim to attain diverse perspectives, including those involved at the grassroots level, in institution-based initiatives, grant-providing initiatives, youth-based initiatives, and by accessing organizational and community leaders. Gender, age, generational, and religious diversity were also incorporated into the research design.

This study also benefitted from content analysis – a research method which validates the fact that society exists through “...talk, texts, and other modalities of communication...[and] that understanding social phenomena cannot be achieved without understanding how language operates in the social world” (Krippendorff 2018, xii). This method was chosen because it enables a researcher to attain descriptive knowledge to understand the phenomena of study (Assarroudi, et.al 2018), where data isn’t viewed simply as physical events, but rather as spaces of experiences and existence “...that are created and disseminated to be seen, read, interpreted, enacted, and reflected upon according to the meanings they have for their recipients” (Krippendorff, xii). The interpretation of such communication within the context of social uses invites the researcher to understand the “...meanings, contents, intentions, references, communications,” and what is created. (Krippendorff, xii), enabling the summarizing of important information through the narratives and perspectives of the individuals and groups being researched (Neuendorf 2017, 23). For this research, content analysis was conducted on organizational website and literature, articles

published on mainstream news media, personal blogs, and program literature. All content was related to the initiatives, projects, or organizations that interviewees participate in, adding depth to the information provided by interviewees.

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret the major ideas, themes, and anomalies that came from this research project (Terry, et.al, 2017). Thematic analysis provides a means of examining the ways that people make meaning out of their experiences and how they construct their social realities through meaning making as informed by their material experiences and contexts (Evans, et.al 2018, 2). Data interrogation also involved moving from describing the data and what people are saying to reflecting on underlying assumptions, ideas, and threading this alongside wider societal contexts (Evans, et.al 2018, 5). This analysis led to identifying practices of relationship meaning-making and building that form a preliminary understanding of what characterizes Indigenous-Muslim relations on Turtle Island.

Considering researcher positionality helps to identify the “relative differences and similarities between the characteristics of the researcher and the participants,” to gain insight into what implications this may have in the research process itself (Olukotun, 2021, p.1412). It is also common practice in critical Indigenous research methodologies employing relationality. Positionality has impacts on how research questions are framed and how research projects are designed, how participants are recruited and how data is collected (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014). Exploring the social construction of knowledge and even processes of knowing provides insight into the “social situatedness of both the researcher and the researched” (Mellor 2022, 26). As a researcher of this project, I recognize my own positionality as a Muslim woman on Turtle Island. While I may have certain understandings of Islam and connect more to the narratives of Muslim participants in the research, I must also be cognizant of the fact that I am a non-Indigenous woman who is seeking to understand Indigenous perspectives. Further to this, being aware of the diversity within both communities that exists and how this is manifested within interviewee perspectives is something that I have paid attention to throughout the research project. In my own research work, I brought my own identities as an immigrant from Bangladesh with heritage, cultural and historical influences as internalized and lived by my parents who lived through the impacts of British colonization on their lands and then the brutal war of independence in 1971. The remnants of those factors also include a cultural context of Bangladesh that was brought from the 1970s and 1980s which my parents lived here in Canada, while the Bangladesh (their land back home) they left, continued to change over time. Living the reality of a diaspora and growing up in Canada, understanding the histories of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, and bringing values of truth, justice and community as it pertains to my Islam all play a part in my understanding and living of relationship building between Muslim and Indigenous peoples.

Given my positionality, this article tends to focus on how Muslims are developing spaces of relationship with Indigenous relatives. Muslims on this land are comprised of a diverse blend of individuals that are early settler, immigrant, refugee, and newly arrived student and young professionals, as well as First Nation, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) Muslims and Black Muslims, the latter of which have trace their roots in the Americas well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Munir, 2021 & Quick, 2021 & Quick, 2020). The Muslims who have been part of this research project have expressed a responsibility for Muslim communities to respond and engage in the work of relationship-building with Indigenous communities, and this is further explored as

an Islamic duty. While the perspectives of Indigenous communities articulated below adds further depth and dimension to these perspectives, as a researcher, I acknowledge and recognize that my ability to articulate the nuances and deeper meanings of those perspectives is limited and would most benefit from future Indigenous-led research. That said, I have cited helpful theorists and sources that illuminate certain themes where possible below.

This work is grounded in a recognition that a secular academic framework is inherently limiting for research and writing concerning both Indigenous and Muslim communities. Both traditions embody their own worldviews and frameworks whose richness cannot be comprehensively understood by secular frameworks. As Unanga scholar Eve Tuck points out, the secular academic framework is “not universal; rather, it is a colonial collector of knowledge as another form of territory. There are stories and experiences that already have their own place, and placing them in the academy is removal, not respect” (Tuck 2018, 156). The belief that academic knowing can inherently contribute towards an improvement of the state of being inherently assumes superiority and a progressive telos. Since at least the 18th century, there has been a penetration of Western colonialism and internalization of Western cultural and epistemological paradigms whereby the West has attempted to consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally force its cultural paradigms onto the citizens of the world, in a way that advantages the Western world economically, and politically (Elmessiri, 2006, p.xi) The underlying presumption is that the West has become “...the ultimate point of reference” thereby transforming from a geographical space to becoming its own specificity and space of modern universal and human thought (Elmessiri, 2006, p.xvi). Such a western paradigm is characterized by utilitarianism and rational-materialism, which then informs terminology, methods, and procedures within most human knowledge, sciences, and attitudes (Elmessiri 2006).

Knowledge must stem from the histories of different peoples and beings to build comprehensive social theories. Knowledge frameworks must move away from a materialist center-point, acknowledge transcendental natures of some knowledges, and accept open-ended, flexible paradigms that are not focussed on complete control of reality or knowledge. Finally, knowledge frameworks should not be reductionist or dualistic in nature and they should not necessitate a duality where social and natural sciences are dichotomized (Elmessiri 2019). Linda Tuhiwai Smith who affiliates with the Māori iwi Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou from the east cape of the North Island in New Zealand, Eve Tuck who is Unanga and is an enrolled member of the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, Alaska, and K. Wayne Yang who writes about decolonization and ghetto colonialism (2018) write in their book *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: “Settler governments and presidents, universities, schools, extractive infrastructures, the carceral system can seem very total, very permanent;”* however, wanting and imagining a different kind of future requires a process of bringing the “conversations that happen at the edges of the scene...out of the footnotes and into the body of the work” (Tuhiwai, Tuck, Wang, 23). In their groundbreaking article *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, Tuck and Wang (2012), assert that decolonization has no other synonym, rather it is a distinct project which must make direct mention of Indigenous peoples and the struggle for a recognition for sovereignty along with honouring Indigenous knowledge frameworks and individuals and activists who have made significant contributions. The work of decolonization is incommensurable to the goals of social justice, or critical methodologies, or other approaches attempting to decenter settler perspectives (Tuck and Wang, 2012), thus necessitating a novel approach, a drastic change in the order of the world (Fanon 1963)

and an ethic of incommensurability that is most concerned with Indigenous sovereignty (Tuck and Wang, 2012). To this end and bearing these imperatives in mind, this work seeks to understand and learn through the perspectives and processes that encompass the engagement of Indigenous-Muslim relationships on Turtle Island.



Image credit: Memona Hossain

Findings

Much research points to the fact that resilience is crucial to building vibrant and healthy communities (Jackson, et.al 2017; Lerch, et.al 2017; Newman, et.al 2009; Norris et.al, 2007; Rodin, 2018; Zolli et.al, 2013; Urban Resilience Project 2015) and the resilience of communities “...foregrounds the role of communities in responding, recovering, adapting and transforming before, during, and after crises” (Poland et.al, 2021). Socio-ecological resilience is the capacity and ability of an entire ecosystem to survive and withstand external shocks without losing fundamental characteristics of its functions and identity (Wilson 2012; Walker 2004; Magis 2010). Community capacity to engage and build relationships that foster resilience at the grassroots level is driven by the perspectives that enable them to approach one another and develop meaningful spaces for relationships. In looking at Indigenous-Muslim relationships, each community holds certain perspectives that guide the efforts they exert towards these relationships.

Indigenous Perspectives

In looking at the perspectives of Indigenous leaders, community members and organizations, there are three main elements that underpin making relations with Muslim communities. These three elements are: 1) Ensuring the narrative of Indigenous people across Turtle Island are true, authentic, and directly from Indigenous sources; 2) Reciprocally wanting to ensure the narrative of other peoples on Turtle Island are true, authentic, and directly coming from those people

themselves; and 3) A desire to nurture success and community-building within Indigenous communities.

“I’ve been very passionate about changing the narrative on Indigenous people,” explained one Anishinaabe participant who added that according to the settler Canada narrative, the narrative of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island is “dark, oppressive, and colonizing,” as though Indigenous people are only defined by their experiences of being colonized and the dark memories of oppression. This individual noted that contemporary narratives must recognize that Indigenous people have a very rich way of looking at the world and interacting with all that is around them, while engaging directly with communities to enable ownership of this narrative. Currently, those applying for citizenship in Canada must write a test, and the preparation manual which has been developed by the Ministry Citizenship and Immigration Canada directs the narrative of the history of Canada. It opens with the Oath of Citizenship to the British monarchy and continues to argue that, “To understand what it means to be Canadian, it is important to know about our three founding peoples – Aboriginal, French and British” (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, 2021). Connecting this fact to the statistics of newly arrived Canadians, and to the first point raised by this respondent regarding ownership of Indigenous narrative, there remains a gap in how the true, authentic narrative of Indigenous peoples is conveyed to many Canadians. Statistically, one in five Canadians are born outside Canada, and depending on their age of arrival, their exposure to the legacies of colonialism and Canadian history and how immigrants and newcomers perceive Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island is an understudied area (Parkin et.al 2023).

Another Cree respondent shared that, “we don’t get to study you [Muslims] and you don’t get to study us – the government doesn’t want us to do that, we have to take the initiative so we can become friends. I want to *learn* to respect you,” he emphasised, as he tried to explain the deep respect and connection that comes from relationships, rather than learning about each other through indirect sources. As Anishinaabe author from Lac Seul First Nation, Patty Krawec writes in the introduction to *Becoming Kin*, about newcomers, Black and Indigenous peoples, “the history we learn in elementary school is rooted in explorers and settlers,” wherein “...the very people who created the problem are transformed into the ones who saved us.” In other words, Canada becomes positioned as a country of safety and refuge for newcomers and “our collective memory is filled with other stories. Other centers. Sometimes the center is created simply through the act of revolving around it.” However, she questions, what if the things that we have been told are *not* in fact who we are? And so, Krawec suggests, that we need to go back to stories of new beginnings of our collective stories together (Krawec, 2022, p. 15-16).

An executive director for an organization that serves Indigenous families and youth indicated that connecting with Muslim communities works well with the objective of nurturing Indigenous peoples to be successful by living in two worlds – that which is connected to the traditional teachings of Indigenous peoples, and that which helps them to be grounded in the current realities. Experiences of shared connections, taking initiative in building one’s own narrative, and even the experience of communicating that narrative effectively fosters confidence, growth, and pride amongst Indigenous participants.

Muslim Perspectives

From the perspective of Muslim leaders, community members, and organizations in this study, the approach to building spaces of relationship with Indigenous communities is propelled by a desire to fulfill their purpose and worship of Allah by addressing injustice and experiences of oppression; to develop shared friendship; and a desire to know and understand more about the people of the land on which they reside.

One interviewee, who currently serves as an executive director for an Islamic social services organization shared that “we (Muslims) are a community that is asked to reflect,” as he further explained that Muslims are called to be in service of humanity. In this reflection, the interviewee argued that Muslims must focus on the purpose of life and the responsibilities associated with that purpose.

There is also an expressed desire to build meaningful friendships. “There’s a shared bond, in terms of both sides as peoples who have experienced oppression,” said one Muslim interviewee. “And the friendship that develops from solidarity and deep connection is unique,” explained another woman who has been working on relationship-building between Indigenous and Muslim women in Ottawa. The kind of friendship that was described is one where connection and unspoken insights that are shared between communities who have certain lived experiences and spiritual beliefs brings depth.

Another Muslim individual from Manitoba who has been closely involved with Indigenous elders and a healing center in her community shared that Muslims are known “as people who are motivated to stand for justice, not just for ourselves, but for others.” She further expressed that Muslims need to be concerned and involved in addressing the injustices of oppression that exist with our communities. Relatedly, an imam echoed this sentiment, stating, “Our faith teaches us to stand firm in justice, to help those who are vulnerable...and we really need to feel the pain of Indigenous communities around us...to be there with empathy and support.”

A female Muslim academic from Ottawa succinctly put it,

When we know this land has been found on injustice – our contribution to justice is to denounce it and to be aware and to make sure we are no longer participating in it. We weren’t part of the injustice, but today we live here; from an Islamic perspective, we need to minimize the injustice and be part of those efforts.

This reflective perspective on honouring justice is also tied to a sense of responsibility, where one respondent shared, “We need to look at this principle of historical responsibility and apply it to ourselves and look at any incurred debts that we as Muslims have been incurring at least since 1871.” Thus, religious beliefs of authentic brotherhood, citizenship responsibilities of assuming the duties of the land, and being aware of the history of the lands and claiming a duty to right those wrongs by building on restorative justice practises were identified as drivers of relationship building.

As members of the Muslim community have been learning through relationship-building, Indigenous experiences of injustice have often been tied to their belief systems. “Indigenous spirituality has been made illegal at times, (which has) driven underground mechanisms for

preservation of heritage, knowledge and wisdom,” commented an interviewee who has been working with Indigenous leaders on developing agreements of brotherhood and sisterhood with Muslim leaders.

One Muslim social services organization leader identified the need to think beyond a binary framework, stating, “It was important to articulate – we oftentimes infer something such as Indigenous and Muslim as separate categories, rather than recognizing there are many Indigenous Muslims. So, the binary framework is unhelpful.” He also identifies how both communities have found common areas of narrative connection through a belief in the Creator, shared stories on impacts of dislocation from colonization, valued frameworks that connect spirituality and purification, and shared interest in terms of changing how children’s services work.

Finally, the drive to make relations is characterized by Muslims as expressing a recognition of the deep relationships that Indigenous communities hold with the land, and their unique perspectives on treaty-making.

Shared Perspectives

One shared perspective arose on the need for both communities to come together. Members of both communities refer to a desire to develop a space of shared narratives that can then be passed down for generations ahead, recognizing that this work is for their children, and *their* children, and *their* children. “We have to spend our entire life learning to coexist with people around us,” said one Muslim woman who has been working with Indigenous youth in various remote communities in Ontario and Quebec. Another Muslim woman who has been working on creating social media platforms to share stories and narratives of Indigenous-Muslim relations said her hope was that the work of relationship-building will enable a future where, “collectively youth in our community will have no hesitation in reaching out and getting to know their Indigenous neighbours.” Another Muslim man reflected on the future with a rhetorical question “If your children are going to be here for seven generations forward and my children will be here moving seven generations forward, don’t we need to communicate and share?” He further explained the integral need to engage, communicate, and share how to nurture those future relationships.

An Indigenous knowledge keeper spoke about the importance of being liberated from the notion of land ownership and destruction and shared a vision for getting the land back not just for Indigenous peoples, but as an act of restoring justice for all peoples on this land collectively, “I wonder if it’s possible to get land back not just for us, but for all people. Let’s work towards a common goal (together),” he said, further explaining that the act of coming together helps both communities and opens doors for future relations. Another Anishinaabe woman who serves on the National Advisory Council on Poverty shared that “we just need to be deliberate [about forging relations] and we will see it bear fruit, in ways I can’t even think of right now.”

A Muslim leader who was part of launching the Muslim Indigenous Connection project (discussed below) reflects:

the common recognition that both communities have their own share of discrimination, racism, and traumas that they deal with, for different reasons and applied in different ways...directly deal with the Canadian government’s role in

marginalizing both communities. It's something Muslim communities need to be aware of. We don't want to be part of a system that oppresses, subjugates, sitting on stolen lands, treaty lands.

While both Indigenous and Muslim community members have specific perspectives that are guided by their own worldviews, they also share collective lived experiences that are directing their efforts in forging meaningful relationships. Members of both communities envision themselves and the generations that will follow them as sharing space on the land through connective means, hopeful that the work that is done today will contribute to the wellbeing of that future shared space: a space forged despite a violent history and remnants of colonial imprints that are resisted collectively and through that resistance, the relations are deepened.

Analysis

Indigenous and Muslim communities across Turtle Island have been making efforts to build spaces of connection, and shared experiences for over two decades. While other connections existed prior to this, the premise of this research was based on the past twenty years of relationship-building. The research analysis has led me to thematically organize these spaces into four general types of spaces: organization-led spaces of relationship building; spaces of conviviality as pathways to relationship building; relational spaces defined through acts of documentation; and spiritually and emotionally bonded spaces that transcend a secular framework. These spaces are defined by their unique means of communication structures as well as community members' engagement.

Organization-led Spaces of Connective Relationship Building

In their research on co-designing to engage stakeholders and impact social system change to enhance the life experiences of structurally vulnerable communities, Micsinszki et.al, (2022) explore this process as a “dynamic, creative approach...that embraces partnership with community, and focuses on systems change and improving human experience” (as referred to in Moll, et.al, 2020:1). Where historical and systemic trauma exists, a partnered approach is helpful towards a healing pathway of relationship-building. Partnerships require key elements that can increase their potential for success, and Cargo and Mercer (2008) identify these to be: trust and mutual respect; capacity building, empowerment, and ownership; and accountability and sustainability. Rose LeMay who is from Taku River Tlingit First Nation in British Columbia, and is the CEO of Indigenous Reconciliation Group, writes how reconciliation requires structural changes where law, policy, and practice need to change (LeMay 2015). Senge, et.al, 2007 write about how it may be “faster and easier to leave such work [of building frameworks for change] to small groups of experts or to outsource it to consultants or academics” (Senge et.al 2007, 47). However, the cost of faster and easier work is the loss of “collective intelligence embedded in diverse organization...and can result in output for which there is neither deep understanding nor commitment” (Ibid). Thus, a balance must be sought.

My research shows that *both* Indigenous-led and Muslim-led organizations are initiating and leading programs and projects that nurture relationships between both communities. For this research, *organization-led* spaces of connective relationship-building refers to initiatives that have been formally adopted by community organizations. Such organizations include registered non-profit organizations that have staff and volunteers who are committed to advancing organizational objectives and goals that focus on serving certain demographics. This includes aligning

organizational goals and objectives, allocating funding and staff timing as well as developing formalized literature that supports these relations. Therefore, formalized and documented work may enable long-term projects and continuity that is adopted beyond the agenda of a few people taking initiative through personal motivation. It is possible that some of the initiatives identified in other parts of this article can be adopted by organizations as well; however, at this time, only the initiatives identified in this section have been adopted at an organizational level.

Many individuals who are leaders of organizations commented on how the work of developing initiatives and programs that connect to Indigenous-Muslim relationships is directly related to the objectives of their work. “When we started our work, we learned about each other’s communities and how they are perceived and got excited about the potential to change perceptions,” commented the Executive Director of an Indigenous organization in Edmonton. One Muslim executive director shared that “the collaborative work comes from the framework of a lot of organic work that has been happening for years...but still, it was important to articulate” and clearly develop programming focused on Indigenous-Muslim relationships. Another Muslim woman reflects on when they, as an organization purposefully started to invite an Indigenous elder within their community to partake in the opening prayer for their annual fundraising gala. However, the organization decided to further this work and invited an Indigenous woman, who is the executive director of the First Nations children and family care society in their region as the main speaker at one of their events, to speak about what she does and about Indigenous families and children. Another leader of Muslim organizations spoke to how they used existing platforms and campaign prototypes to introduce Indigenous-focused programming. For example, the Friday prayer sermon, the khutbah, which happens in every masjid has often been utilized as a platform to campaign specific and relevant messaging. The Orange Khutbah campaign was initiated shortly after the mass, unmarked gravesites of Indigenous children across many cities in Canada where residential schools used to be (Cordeiro, 2022). As of September 2021, more than 1300 unmarked graves were found across five former residential school sites (Cecco, et.al, 2021). The announcement of the findings of the graves encouraged imams to focus their sermons on statements of solidarity with Indigenous survivors (Justice for All, 2023). Another Muslim executive director of a social services organization shared how a specific grant was secured to hire an Indigenous staff member to focus on clearly identified initiatives that will help build Indigenous-Muslim relationships and understanding with one another.

The executive director of an Indigenous social services organization commented that “it feeds nicely within our goals and strategic objectives,” as she spoke about the work that her organization is doing in building Indigenous-Muslim connections and relationships. She mentioned how the organization acquired grants through which they designed ways to spend time together with Muslim organizations and community members. “We got grants and deliberately started spending time together. We learned we have similar worldviews on kinship, connection to the land, ceremonies have similar intents...,” she commented. She also spoke about how it was “us becoming the first story of newcomers to the land,” as she described the organization’s efforts in doing airport greetings to welcome Syrian newcomers at the airport, singing out loud, drumming, and presenting a gift. She shared how there have been cross-organizational invitations where participants from each community are attending celebrations of others, including Eid celebrations, powwows, drumming circles, and national Indigenous People’s Day celebrations.

She then reflected on some of the impacts of these intentional and thoughtful initiatives when she explains: “It has already borne fruit. One of our staff ran into a girl in her neighbourhood. On her scooter, in a hijab. She stopped and asked (the staff) ‘are you an Indigenous person? My family came to Canada, and I was really scared and nervous because I didn’t know what it was going to be like here, and my parents were scared – and when we arrived, some people came and sang to us and gifted us (at the airport) and that made us happy,’ and I felt it would be ok.”

Organizations also shared how they focused on connecting specific groups within their communities for projects of building common narratives. For example, the Canadian Prayer Rug project was conceived as a special initiative which brings together the distinct weaving traditions of Indigenous and Muslim women to create one rug that cumulatively holds space for the stories of women on Turtle Island (Clancy, 2016). This project was funded by the Edmonton Heritage Council, and proceeds continue to support community projects through replicas made in collaboration with a fair-trade social enterprise (Clancy, 2016). In this project, “youth from the community interviewed elders and early pioneer (Muslim women) to develop stories of what the Canadian Prayer Rug would look like, (thus) basing that story on our relationship with Indigenous people and working with a Metis designer in an act of borrowing Indigenous arts and honouring the land...” explains one Muslim leader who was behind the project, who was later named a co-historian laureate for the 2022-2024 term in Edmonton. While Edmonton had announced solo historian laureates for six terms (City of Edmonton, 2024), in 2022, the city announced their first co-historian laureates – an Indigenous community leader and a Muslim community leader, identifying it as a “continuation of a pre-existing partnership between the two community leaders,” (Murray, 2022).

Another area of growth in relations is amongst youth. The Muslim Indigenous Connection (MIC) project is an initiative primarily focused on Muslim youth, where one imam said, “Why don’t we do something for the next generation of Muslims who not only need to learn what Indigenous people have and continue to go through, but also about the legacy of genocide and how to be part of the Truth & Reconciliation work?” The MIC project is a multi-week program where youth commit to learning about the histories of Indigenous peoples, visiting some sites for learning, meeting with elders, as well as speaking to both Muslim and Indigenous community leaders to understand the significance of reconciliation and relationship building. They then engage in a practical project that nurtures the work of reconciliation (Justice for All, 2023). These types of organizational, institutional, and clearly identified projects are building systemic sustainability in the space of Indigenous-Muslim relationship building. Through efforts like connecting organizational objectives with these programs, allocating staffing, grants and specific funding, both Indigenous and Muslim organizations and their leaders are recognizing the need for this work, and mobilizing it actively. They do this by building practices, policies, and long-term visions towards a shared, collective future of Indigenous and Muslim peoples on Turtle Island.

Spaces of Conviviality as a Pathway to Building Relationships

In their article on community and conviviality (2019), Neal et.al, explain how community is a profound space of sociality that nurtures the practice of “being with,” where acts of coming together invite diverse peoples to do ‘things,’ serving as “generative spaces of social interaction and shared practice through and in contexts of urban difference” (Neal et.al, 69). The emotional element to community creates an “experience of belonging on many different scales” (Blokland

2017, 8 and 29). Conviviality is focused on the social relations that happen through shared spaces between different groups, where activities can shape an ‘easy sociability’ (Watson 2009), thus nurturing ‘intercultural togetherness’ and supporting shared local belonging, also experienced through neighborly acts and other comforts appropriated through spaces (Peters 2010; Peters and de Haan 2011; Rishbeth and Powell 2013; Neal et al. 2015; Ganji & Rishbeth, 2020). Conviviality is understood as the processes and means through which informal life is lived in contexts of difference (Neal et.al 2015).

In her doctoral research, Janice Cindy Gaudet who identifies herself as “a Métis woman from Saskatchewan living in Ottawa, with maternal ancestral roots in Red River,” (Gaudet, 2019, p.48) explains that research methodology directs and defines how the research is approached and identifies the Visiting Way methodology where relationality inspires a research methodology that “inspires social values, kinship, an understanding of women’s contributions, and self-recognition in relation to the land, history, history, community, and values...further unsettle[ing] historical hierarchies of knowledge and inaccuracies about Indigenous peoples’ ways of being, knowing, and doing.” (Gaudet, 2019, p.47). Gaudet’s identification of Visiting Way resonates with my own research, where themes of visiting and conviviality surfaced through various recollections shared by respondents.

Within the realm of Indigenous-Muslim relationships, such spaces of conviviality have included shared meals, celebration, prayers, and acts of cooking together. One Indigenous man simply said, “As an Indigenous person in Canada, I thought, how come we don’t get to know the people coming to this land?” as he recalled the elders of both Indigenous and Muslim communities coming together for dinners and spending hours in human-to-human conversations. “Let’s keep on talking and find ways of how to make a better world,” he said. Another Muslim woman who spent time living with Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario and Quebec shared that “small stories completely change how I see the world around me. The role of food or rain” and the stories that exist within Indigenous cultures deeply impacted her own worldviews, she shared. A Muslim woman shared her experiences of being invited to attend a powwow in Ottawa. She expressed how sharing joy with other women at the powwow inspired her to develop deeper friendships. She reflected and later wrote about the “clear manifestation of joy, happiness and gratitude to the Creator,” that she witnessed, and the depth of connections felt in holding hands with young women who danced “with such elegance, grace and smiles, in the powwow circle” (Mazigh, 2022). Another Muslim woman from Manitoba that was interviewed shared her experiences of spending time with Indigenous communities and being “adopted by members of other nations as part of their communities and families,” and how this, for her, “was like getting immigration status.” She explained how such deeper relationships that come through spending meaningful time together enable connections as well as hold responsibilities as kinship would. “It doesn’t make me First Nation. What it means to me, what I understand from the elders, is that I am now fully welcome here, to raise my family here, but also with that adoption come responsibilities. I am responsible for honouring the laws of this land, and serving the people of this land who are my fellow family members” she shared.

Another Muslim woman spoke about how youth from Indigenous and Muslim communities in Winnipeg have been connecting to better understand the water advisory issues by collectively visiting Shoal Lake in Manitoba. Muslim and Indigenous youth also attend ceremonies together to

understand these issues through sweat lodges and sun dances. “We don’t get too much into the politics. We get to the person-to-person, the community-to-community,” she said, emphasizing the need for authentic relationship-building as an initial step. She reflected on how understanding the lived experiences of others as well as the implication that such issues have on the lives of Indigenous youth in their community, helped youth to better understand the impact as well as how to engage with youth as friends in solidarity. “We don’t speak for each other, that’s the colonial way, but we can stand with each other,” she shared. Aileen Moreton-Robinson is a Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka people (Moreton Bay), and she writes about *relationality* and the role it plays in effective research practices. She writes that relationality “provides a network of ideas for perception within which thought, communication and action...is grounded in a holistic conception of the inter-connectedness and inter-substantiation between and among all living things and the earth...[and] with an awareness of our proper relationships with the world we inhabit” (Moreton-Robinson, 2016, p.71). Indigenous and Muslim youth visiting Shoal Lake together and participating in ceremony together seem to encompass acts of relationship-building with relationality at their heart.

Both Indigenous and Muslim women spoke about the connection of shared cooking and Indigenous women visiting and making prayer supplications together. “When you bring people together, when they can have a conversation, share a meal, volunteer together, you build relationships, and it is all about relationships,” shared one Muslim woman.

Another Muslim woman reflected on her own experiences, why it is important to build relationships that enable an understanding of different worldviews and stories to help further nurture and support the pathways towards relationships. She recalled her own experiences of identifying a perceived issue within an Indigenous community that she visited and immediately trying to fundraise to resolve the issue. When she visited the community leader to discuss this plan, she was surprised to know that the community leader did not feel this was appropriate permission-seeking, or that she was part of the decision-making process. The Muslim woman reflected on her own colonially-informed frame of mind. “In the colonial system, there’s focus on efficiency and getting to the point. I’ve learned that we need to start off slow, humble, and don’t even assume...” she said. The practice of conviviality is a crucial aspect to developing relationships that become deep and sustained.

Documented Spaces

The act of thinking about the type of relationships that Indigenous and Muslim people want to foster amongst each other and committing those into words as a mutual understanding through acts of documentation is another way the space of Indigenous-Muslim relations have been developed. In my research, this has happened in two distinct ways: drawing an agreement of brother-and sisterhood between Indigenous and Muslim communities, and Muslim communities creating land acknowledgements that are authentic to their worldviews.

Anishinaabe-Ashkenazi researcher and theatre-worker Jilly Carter who is cross-appointed to the Centre for Indigenous Studies and Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance studies at the University of Toronto writes,

As a nation built on the Doctrines of Discovery, Extinguishment and Terra Nullius, Canada is, understandably, a precocious and forgetful entity. Her very existence, as an internationally recognized sovereign state, relies upon that forgetting—upon her refusal to acknowledge that there are stories that precede her recent genesis, stories that inhabit and reverberate throughout “deep time” and upon a rigorous and methodical campaign to sanitize the present moment of Indigenous presence and eventually to erase all traces of Indigeneity from living memory. (Carter, 2018, 242)

Indigenous peoples have been reclaiming cognitive spaces and academic erasures, developing authentic land acknowledgements, and writing treaties of brother/sisterhood. Supporting such acts of re-scripting and documenting resultant spaces may be another place of relationship-building for non-Indigenous peoples. As Carter writes, “our first task is multi-faceted: it requires an active embrace of new knowledge and a recovery of what has been forgotten. As non-Indigenous peoples invest time and energy in re-educating themselves, in listening to and learning about the lands upon which they live and the Indigenous peoples who continue to steward these lands, they must also invest equal portions of time and energy in remembering themselves” (Carter, 2018, p.246). Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg writer, musician and academic, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) writes, “theory is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice within each family, community and generation of people...it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion, it is contextual and relational” (Simpson 2014, 7). Creating such realities on the ground is an act of rebellion against erasure.

Drawing from the teachings of Islam’s core principles, it can be seen “...that Muslims are taught to see themselves as part of the human family over which no human can be superior. No human has the right to subdue or harm the other. Peace thus is a concept nurtured into the hearts of the believers” (Bashir 2018, 225). From this perspective, treaties are designed to be “...one of the most significant sources of peace and peace keeping[;] they deserved unprecedented attention and were empowered by Islamic international law to the point of sacredness” (Bashir 2018, 225). Mohammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani is a 9th century Islamic scholar and jurist who has produced extensive works in the field of Muslim international law and treatise, and the application of Islamic ethics in “Islamic Law of Nations.” More recently, Khaled Ramadan Bashir (2018) presents and discusses al-Shaybani's works, showing his works on Islamic thinking and international law and ethics and how this relates to contemporary dialogues. Bashir writes how *mowada'ah*, translated as ‘peace agreement’ or ‘accord of harmony’ was a significant focal point in al-Shaybani’s works (Bashir 2018, 216). As found in his thesis on the formative years of the Islamic state in the Umayyad Period, Mohamed Hosny M. Gaber researches the principles of Islamic international law and writes, “the principle of good faith has, from earliest times, been regarded not only as a matter of common concern to the whole community of states, but also as a matter of legal duty between the parties to the treaty,” (Gaber 1962, 97). Early scholars of Islam including al-Farabi, al-Mawardi, Nizam al-Mulk, al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldun, and Ibn Qayyim have all studied and written about treaty-making and its jurisprudence within Islam (Rahman, 237). Verses from the Qur’an that relate to relationship and treaty-making have been referenced by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah:

Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice. Excellent is that which Allah instructs you. Indeed, Allah is ever Hearing and Seeing. O, you who have believed to obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result

Quran, 4: 58-59 as translated from The Noble Quran, 2016: Ibn Taymiyyah, 2000

Ibn Taymiyyah identifies two critical elements to relationship building: trust (*amanah*) and justice (*adalah*) (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2000), and these elements are studied in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who enacted several treaties and covenants during his life. Such examples help address the needs of society (Muhaimin, 2014). Scholars like Ibn al-Qayyim took from the examples of the Prophet and teachings from the Qur'an to later write that the basis of all Islamic legal systems (sharia) are:

...a system based on the welfare of the individual in the community both in his everyday life and in his anticipation of the life hereafter. It is all Justice, all compassion, all benefits, and all wisdom; thus any principles which become unjust, uncompassionate, corrupt and futile is not part of the shariah; however, by false interpretation.

In my research, I found that Muslim groups have been developing land acknowledgement statements that are connected to such Islamic worldviews to nurture reflection and authentic commitment to the work of relationship-building. Land acknowledgments may “provide an awareness of Indigenous presence and land rights, and to recognize privilege” (Favrholdt, 2022) for newcomer and settler inhabitants. However, there needs to be meaning behind those statements and actual commitment to implementing calls to action will inform true relationship-building, writes journalist Penny Smoke, of Cree and Saulteaux descent from Treaty 4 (Smoke, 2019). Land acknowledgments “remind(s) us we are accountable to these relationships and to remind us every day, for example in school systems, of the accountability that everybody has to listen to the concerns of the community and how we can align to our [Indigenous] community,” explains Karyn Recollet an urban Cree woman and assistant professor at the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto in a news article (Recollet, article by Ramna 2017).

One Muslim interviewee who has served in various senior leadership positions within Muslim social justice-based organizations shared that, “...land acknowledgement at the first stage is to verbally say [the acknowledgement], but the second part is to act.” Another Muslim man who was interviewed has been involved in developing meaningful land acknowledgments for the Muslim community. He explains that “...a secular state apparatus begins with a land acknowledgement, and they often omit the most important things, which is the Creator. But we as Muslims, we share a core belief,” and as a result, land acknowledgments should not “feel formulaic or mechanical,” but rather sacred. He continues that within the Islamic tradition, “we believe that nothing good begins without the intention.” In this line of thinking, a book of *dua* Islamic prayers was developed in connection to the land acknowledgement process (IFSSA, 2021).

In 2010, Elder Dave Courchene Jr. of the Anishinaabe Nation, Eagle Clan, in Sagkeeng, Manitoba Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness met with several leaders of the Muslim community to collectively develop and document a “Statement of Understanding” titled *Kii zhay otti zi win and Ukhuwa: An agreement of the Spirit of Friendship, Kindness, Brotherhood/Sisterhood, Sharing and Gentleness*. The agreement reads that it is to “act as a gateway to furthering a relationship of knowing each other and supporting each other in the sharing of each other’s unique contributions to Canadian society, for the common good of all,” (Nasir 2010, par.3). I spoke with two people who were part of this agreement development process, and they reflected on its significance. “I was part of that process (of drafting the agreement); it was a sharing of worldviews that happened,” explained one woman. She then recollected the response of an imam who spoke after Elder Dave Courchene: “...he said ‘thank you our brother. First of all, we want to apologize on behalf of our community [that] it has taken us so long to meet. We should have come to you sooner and paid respect to you. This is your homeland. Secondly, we have the same belief. The seven sacred laws. We have our own way of articulating, but the foundation is the same. Thirdly, I want to thank you for reminding us to follow the book of nature, we have that understanding that we have to follow the book of nature, and as Muslims we have neglected to do that.’...” She then reflected on the impact this had for her and connecting at the human level. Another man who was part developing the agreement reminisced on its essence and spoke about the “dream” that was borne of it to really embody the concept of treaty-building within the Muslim community here on Turtle Island, and how “each Muslim individually and collectively shares in a moral obligation asserted by the Islamic moral code to rectify injustice.” He shared what he had learned from his Indigenous friends about the essence of treaties as an ongoing mutual relationship, and that agreement is considered to be alive with a spirit of its own for both parties to come together to reflect and grow with it. He passionately explained how the work of the agreement started with many hopes and that the need to continue to bring this agreement to life and fruition is a duty.

In these findings, the notion of documenting spaces where relationships exist, there is a coming alive of histories, of belief systems, of lived experiences, and all of these seem to tie to a higher power, which both communities recognize as a Creator. These spaces don’t only exist on paper, nor are they sterile documentation. Rather, they embody and acknowledge the erasures and blank spaces between words that are felt by both communities, thus becoming sacred documented spaces that both communities showed an invested interest in upholding.

Spiritual & Emotional Connections Beyond Secular Narratives

In their work on spirituality and community development, Chile & Simpson (2004) identify that the promotion of fairness and social justice is crucial for connecting the individual to community development. As people search for meaning in their lives, spirituality becomes embedded within all cultures within every geographical community (Fabry 1980), thus informing their ethical framework. Regardless of the particularities of the kind of spirituality, community development relies on a “respectful and sustainable regard for communities and the environment” (Chile & Garrett, 2004, p. 318). The University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development team has developed a free multilingual online community toolbox which includes a 46-chapter resource outlining frameworks for supporting the work of community and systemic change. In the chapter on spirituality and community building, community psychologist Bill Berkowitz, defines spirituality as “...the qualities that inspire us to do what is right and good - for ourselves and others”

(Berkowitz in Community Toolbox, n.d., ch.28, par.3). Spiritual assets include compassion, appreciation, being charitable towards others, forgiveness, and solidarity in seeking justice, and as community members become more cognizant of the “needs, beliefs, and emotions of others...when they feel common bonds [with others] and are motivated to maintain them...” it nurtures collective community building.

For Indigenous and Muslim communities coming together, there is a theme of the spiritual and emotionally supportive space that forms through the relationships. In that space is the gently compassionate space of solidarity through acts of ‘showing up.’ These spaces have included members of both communities either connecting back to pre-existing relationships, or in those moments of difficulty, where pre-existing relationships do not exist, those communities make it a priority to find ways to connect. Those acts of solidarity take place after acts of hatred or violence have been endured, expressing empathy through difficult experiences, sharing narratives during moments of pain, sharing in moments of joy through celebration, and upholding and validating spiritual connections that transcend the boundaries of the secular framework. This can be in the form of attending public vigils, public demonstrations such as protests or demonstrations against injustices, finding ways to bring one’s own practices of grief, such as prayer or jingle dances, or participating as speakers on platforms of the other community, and creating spaces of education that brings both causes to the forefront. Connecting through core spiritual values and building relationships through emotional connection, and perhaps even a recognition of how oppression and injustice can evoke emotional connections, seem to bring the two communities together in a unique way.

Facing the impacts of Islamophobia seems to be one such space where experiences of injustice and oppression awaken a point of emotional connection. When speaking about the aftermath of 9/11 and the impact on Muslim communities, one Muslim woman who has been active in forming relationships with Indigenous communities across Turtle Island expressed that... “one of the first communities that reached out to the Muslim community was an Indigenous leader from the community” to check on how the Muslims were doing and how they could support them. Another imam spoke about the vigils that took place in the wake of the 2021 London, Ontario truck attack on a Muslim family which took the lives of four people and how significant it was when Indigenous faith leaders attended the vigil. Another Edmonton-based Muslim Palestinian community leader shared a photo of an Indigenous woman wearing a Palestinian sash around her neck at a vigil that took place in the wake of the finding of unmarked graves. As she wore the sash, she spoke about how the children suffering in Palestine are “our babies too.” The community leader spoke about how “shared experiences of colonization is a space of pain that connects.” As journalist and the Northwest Bureau Chief, Luna Reyna, who carries Little Shell Chippewa and Mexican heritage recently wrote in connection to the genocide in Gaza since October 2023,

At this moment in time, we can’t talk about Land Back without talking about Palestine. Indigenous people from all over Turtle Island and abroad are sharing, “Land Back also includes Free Palestine.” Indigenous customs, traditions and tribal identities are complex and unique but one thing many acknowledge is the correlation of a violent settler colonial state displacing Native Palestinians from their homelands to the history of the violent settler colonialism in the Americas that resulted in the genocide of so many and

the scattered reservations some Indigenous nations have been allotted today.
Reyna, 2023, par.9

The violence of settler colonialism that passes through the globe must be recognized and true relationship building and calling for truth and justice must not only see the connections between these injustices, but also rise up against injustices together wherever they are seen.

For both communities, those spiritual, emotional points of connection speak to a natural removal of the secularism barrier. Both Indigenous and Muslim women spoke of a connection that removes secular boundaries and judgement, which enables an unburdened relationship. “I didn’t feel a single ounce of judgement...[it] was a moment of joy and friendship but most of all, it is a way I connect with my Indigenous brothers and sisters and learn from their values and beliefs” (Mazigh 2022) shared one Muslim woman who also wrote about her experiences of being with Indigenous women. An Indigenous woman chuckled as she compared her interactions with Muslims as opposed to white people, stating, “when I engage with white people, they always say they are afraid of doing something wrong or mis-stepping. But there was none of that fear when it came to meeting with Muslim people. There was nothing but excitement and passion to do, learn, and grow more.” The burdens of a violent colonial past do not carry with Muslim communities, as they do with white communities, and therefore a precautious approach to relationship building is not present in the same way.

Every Muslim member in this study consistently commented on the realization of shared narratives that arise when the boundaries of secularism are transcended in a relationship, thus providing opportunities to learn from and connect with the essence of their own understandings of Islamic principles. This further opened emotional connections and reinforced the desire to connect with Indigenous communities. One Muslim interviewee who is an academic shares about her first experiences in meeting people from Indigenous communities in a university classroom in Kamloops. She shared that, “We live in a society where religion and spirituality is being eliminated because we live in a secular society...bringing religion back in the public sphere has been resisted. Going to the Indigenous communities and seeing how spirituality is present at any phase of their life is important...bringing the unseen world to the physical world is a notion I’m conscious of as a Muslim...” Part of the shared experiences between the groups are in bringing narratives of resistance to the societal imposing of a secular worldview which forces both communities to eliminate an essential part of their being when participating in the public sphere. Another Muslim woman who spent a total of nearly 4 years living in various Indigenous communities in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Peawanuck, Ontario, and Kangirsuk, Quebec, shared that verses in the Qur’an ask us to reflect on cosmos, on day and night and “...we’re supposed to read these as verses, signs to reflect on the Creator.” She noted that learning to relate to nature through her experiences of living in Indigenous communities enabled her to gain a deeper understanding of certain verses of the Qur’an. One Muslim man who has been involved with the Orange khutbah campaigns shared how “trust is at the core of the relationship” with Indigenous peoples and this has “direct implications on our spirituality. It is about how we treat the Earth, our connection to the Earth, and the land is all connected.” He further explained that this all connected to social justice issues in defining the non-tangible aspects of the spaces that define Indigenous-Muslim relations. What came across for both communities is how social injustice, experiences of oppression, and relationship building through meaningful ways invite a spiritual component – one that is absent in

the secular paradigm that both communities are living under. It is within those crevices that Indigenous-Muslim relations form spiritual depth within their acts of relationship-building.

Imagining a future for Indigenous-Muslim relationship building

In my concluding question for interviewees, I asked them about their thoughts on the future of Indigenous-Muslim relations on Turtle Island. Indigenous perspectives on this question reflected purposeful work, along with a sense of wonder. One Indigenous interviewee shared, “We’re a nation that welcomes newcomers all the time, and I never want us to not be that nation. But I would like us to do better when it comes to those relations and be more deliberate.” Another Indigenous woman said, “If we were more deliberate then you would see a change in how policies and legislations [were enacted.]” Another Indigenous man wondered “...if its possible to get the land back not just for us – but for all people...let’s come together so we can help open the doors to other relationships with other people” as he saw this work as building future pathways.

Muslim perspectives on future relationship building work were centered on learning Islam in greater depth to have a foundation from which to build deeper relationships with Indigenous people and develop purposeful work towards restoration and healing. Several reflected on the importance and need for “...showing up and being active – [and recognizing that] grassroots relationships are very important...” while another commented that “Muslims, through whatever circles they’re in, need to build one-on-one relationships with Indigenous peoples in their communities.” Finally, there were some words and terms that repeatedly came up from several interviewees, on the topic of thinking about the future of Indigenous-Muslim relationships. These include being brave and building relationships deliberately; looking internally; and thinking about individual as well as institutional commitments.

Collectively, respondents expressed a need to continue to build relationships and how decolonization of the land and mental construct are shared values that both Indigenous and Muslim communities can work together towards, as well as how this work needs to be more deliberate and proactively developed by both communities.

Conclusion

This research explores the concept of space and how this is defined and developed with regards to the relationships between Indigenous and Muslim communities on the northern part of Turtle Island, often referred to as Canada. The concept of space takes on different dimensions and in the context of this research, that space has manifested itself as organizationally-led spaces where initiatives are developed and executed and objectives and visions for those organizations have been brought into alignment. There have also been spaces where person-to-person and community-to-community relationality are given life, where the sense of conviviality and community spring forth through shared experiences such as sharing meals or participating in experiences such as sweat lodges. The concept of space has also been found as documented spaces that take important values from both communities when it comes to treaties, or agreements. Such documentation is neither sterile nor static, but rather, is living and centered on shared practises and commitments. I have also explored where the emotional and spiritual spaces of connection take place and are nurtured by excluding secular societal frameworks, giving an opportunity for concepts of spiritually-informed justice and resistance to be defined through both community’s adherence to their belief

systems. Finally, it is clear that both communities imagine a future for their relationship-building and both express a desire to continue to forge relationships for reasons that are often similar or particular to their own community's needs.

This research has shown that the space that defines the relationship between Indigenous and Muslim communities is informed by many aspects and this includes the lived histories of both communities and how this informs their perception of relationship-making; the belief systems of each community and how it drives their worldviews and systems of values that they bring into spaces of relationship-making; the physical spaces that both communities live within and how much each is within the physical vicinity of each other and how this has enabled them to meet one another; and finally the shaping of these relationships through shared experiences of relationality. These spaces continue to be carved out through meaningful work and efforts throughout Turtle Island, and participants express their desire to continue to participate in such spaces.

The area of study to learn about the relationships between Indigenous and Muslim communities is vast. There are many more Indigenous and Muslim communities that are connecting and developing relationships and this study serves only as a conversation starter about them in the hopes that this dynamic will be explored in greater depth. Additionally, a more in-depth study that focuses over how such relationships evolve over generations and how they are inherited by children and grandchildren will provide insight into the depth of how these endure through the relationships they forge. Finally, comparative studies of Indigenous-Muslim relationships on other lands may also provide insight on where there are similarities, where there are other unique spaces of connection as well as how these spaces can cross geo-political boundaries and resist the boundaries of separation and segregation between peoples that have been imposed through colonial projects and define a post-colonial existence.

As we look at the genocide of Palestinians continuing today (at the time of writing), we see these connections and themes continuing. In late 2023, I had a conversation with Nick Estes, a member of the lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Professor of American Indian Studies, as well as co-founder of the Red Nation Movement, and Indigenous Solidarity with Palestine Project and he commented,

We bandy about terms such as natural allies and I don't actually think that Palestinians and Indigenous People in North America are necessarily natural allies. It is something that has to be taught because we are indoctrinated in a system that sees our struggles as separate. I think organically we can see those connections, but we have to draw them out through a process of deprogramming of what has been indoctrinated within us because Indigenous people have undergone an extremely violent and genocidal indoctrination process. The evidence of Indigenous people allying in moments that weren't necessarily politically and socially beneficial to us with Palestinians demonstrates that we still continue this long line of resistance, that we still have these embers that can heat up and bursts into flames in moments of rupture that we are seeing now. I think that is something incredibly important for me to recover this history of Indigenous solidarity with Palestinians that go back to the Red Power Movement. (2023)

This space of solidarity amidst the heightening of the genocide in Gaza since October 2023 was not a part of this research, as it occurred after the research took place. However, its implications require further investigation and may provide deeper insight into the space of Indigenous-Muslim relationships.

This research helps to build further insight and understanding on how meaningful relationships are developed on Turtle Island through Indigenous communities who bring a rich worldview and carry an ethos of relationality that is embedded in a deep historical tradition, and Muslims who have arrived to this land for the past several generations with their own set of histories, trying to build a presence here with Islamic consciousness. The relationships between them can teach us about our past, our present, and our future as people who share the space and experiences of Turtle Island.

I am grateful to the participants of this study who shared their insights, their perspectives and their experiences so generously, and gave me of their time to meet and learn from them. Their openness and insights are what has enabled the basis of this research.

Glossary of Terminologies Used

It is beneficial to identify terms used in this article to clarify their use and context and to situate readers within the discourses that inform this study.

Faith, Religion, & Spirituality

These terms may sometimes be used interchangeably and inconsistently in existing literature (Zinnbauer, et.al, 1997). For this project, some nuances appeared, including how individuals employ these terms in their own lives. For example, while Indigenous peoples interviewed for this study did not always identify themselves as belonging to a specific religion, whereas Muslim participants in this project clearly and distinctly identified as adhering to the religion of Islam. Oftentimes, the concept of having faith in a Creator and shared spiritual experiences were discussed amongst members of both groups. While variances were not clarified with interviewees, the consistent element that can be taken about these terms is Muslims identifying with Islam as a religion and both groups identifying a shared reference point of believing in a Creator.

Indigenous Peoples

For the purposes of this project, Indigenous peoples have been taken to mean those who identify within one of three groups which is the First Nations, the Métis, who are the descendants of First Nations peoples and the European settlers who came to Canada; and the Inuit, who are the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic (Vowel 2017). As it relates to the Indigenous people interviewed for this project, they all self-identified and shared which Nation and land they belong to.

Muslim

In her 1990 article entitled, “What does it mean to be a Muslim today?” Riffat Hassan articulates that, “to be a Muslim today – or any day- is to live in accordance with the will and pleasure of Allah” (302). She continues to explain that “being a Muslim is dependent essentially only upon one belief: belief in Allah, [the] universal creator and sustainer who sends revelation for guidance of humanity... Believing in Allah and Allah’s revelation to and through the Prophet Muhammad,

preserved in the Qur'an..." (Ibid). Muslims may have multiple intersecting identities, along with being Muslim, such as being Indigenous or Black, being immigrant, being female, etc. Additionally, as with any other group, Muslims are not a homogeneous group, and there is a diverse range of how people interpret and practise Islam. For the purposes of this research, the Muslim people who were interviewed self-identified as being Muslim and were involved in various capacities of community-based relationship-building between Muslim and Indigenous communities.

Turtle Island

The University of British Columbia, with a steering committee of Indigenous education leaders and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association, writes that:

Turtle Island is the name the Lenape, Iroquois, Anishinaabe, and other Woodland Nations gave to North America. The name comes from the story about Sky Woman, who fell to Earth through a hole in the sky. The earth at this time was covered with water. The animals saw her predicament and tried to help her. Muskrat swam to the bottom of the ocean to collect dirt to create land. Turtle offered to carry this dirt on his back, and the collected dirt grew into the land we call North America. The term Turtle Island is now used today for North America by many Indigenous people, Indigenous rights activists, and environmental activists.

(Wilson, 2018, Introduction section)

In the context of this research, all the individuals who identified as Indigenous referenced or used the term Turtle Island which led to its inclusion in this article.

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