

Canadian Muslim Reactive Identity Formation in the Face of Discrimination: The Possibilities of Imagined Localities

Motahareh Nabavi

Abstract

This article looks at the reactive identity formation of Muslim Canadians amidst discrimination and othering. I probe into Canada's history of colonization and racism and the creation of the multicultural policy and explore how immigrant Muslims have formed their identity in reaction to this. I give attention to second-generation Muslims who have been understudied, but whose production of hybridized identities is crucial in this process. Finally, I reflect on circumstances of reactive identity formation of Canadian Muslims who strengthen their identity in the face of discrimination, and the new possibilities they create for Canada's multicultural society.

Keywords: reactive identity formation, multiculturalism, Muslims in Canada, second-generation Muslims, hybridized identities

Canada prides itself in being a multicultural nation, while most of its history holds instances of violence and discrimination against ethnic minorities, most recently in the form of anti-Muslim sentiment. In this article, I will look at the identity formation of Muslims in Canada amidst these narratives. Firstly, I briefly give an overview of Canada's history of colonization and multiculturalism. Then, I discuss different frameworks of identity development, and the importance of studying the geographies of Muslim identity formation. I go on to explore how Muslim identity forms in Canada amidst Islamophobic narratives and instances of discrimination. I then focus on the second-generation Canadian Muslims' identity formation and how it differs from the first generation, demonstrating their creative interaction within their sociocultural space. Finally, I reflect once again on Canada's multiculturalism considering Muslim Canadian identity formation.

Canada's History of Multiculturalism

Canada is a white settler colonial nation built on the elimination of, and discrimination against Indigenous communities. Settler colonialism is the forced occupation and establishment of systems of power and policy, to remove and eradicate the native Indigenous peoples of a land. White settler conceptions of colonial domination were strengthened by Enlightenment philosophy's belief in western universalism.¹ Enlightenment philosophy, by placing logic and rationality above the

¹ Avril Bell, "Recognition or Ethics? De/Centering and the Legacy of Settler Colonialism," *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 6 (2008).

intuitive, spiritual, and religious, created a supremacy complex for the Western world: “the belief that they were rational, progressive, civilized, and modern, while others were irrational, backwards, savage, and traditional.”² These categorizations were “an equally political-ethnic act,”³ - since this use of rationality created “security in and of thought,” which is “deeply related to the security of selfhood and land: political security.”⁴ The West used rationality to secure their ethnic identity and power “through calls to expel and terminate that which is classified as the foreign, strange, and outlandish.”⁵

This “nation building through controlling the other ” is historically entrenched in Canada’s sociopolitical culture, passed down from Western colonialism and orientalism.⁶ Orientalism is the academic lens through which Western scholars subjugated and defined all “others.” Orientalism is “colonialism’s ideological arm,” which essentializes, divides, and breaks down the beliefs and experiences of the other “to facilitate its colonial inscription.”⁷ Since the Enlightenment, race has been used as a political ideology by Western white nations to position themselves as superior over non-white communities, which are seen as backwards and savage. This narrative seeped into Canada’s founding, as the white settlers positioned themselves as paternal caretakers of the Indigenous communities, justifying colonialism and genocide as civilizing tactics.

The idea that Canada is a progressive country is “Canada’s Big Lie.”⁸ Métis author Chelsea Vowel calls this the “colonial imaginary,” stating, “Canada has created an image of itself not so much on historical fact but on ideological interpretation... the idea that Canadian society is evolving and progressing is part of the colonial imaginary.”⁹ She argues that everything we learned about Canadian history is a lie, and says, “how can we possibly learn from the past when this country is so invested in whitewashing it?”¹⁰

Canada continued to explicitly “other” many immigrant populations through policy and discourse until a radical shift in the 1960s and 1970s when Canada established multiculturalism as a state policy. Under this narrative, Canada attempted to distance itself from its history of racism by positioning itself as a liberal democratic nation providing equal treatment and opportunity to all its citizens. Many scholars have critiqued this multicultural policy, however, arguing it is “a story

² Motahareh Nabavi, “Creative Becoming(s): The Spiritual Development of Young Muslims in the West,” Master’s thesis, (University of Ottawa, 2022), 26.

³ Irfan Ahmad, *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 45.

⁴ Nabavi, “Creative Becoming(s),” 27.

⁵ Ahmad, *Religion as Critique*, 37.

⁶ Baljit Nagra, *Securitized Citizens: Canadian Muslims’ Experiences of Race Relations and Identity Formation Post-9/11* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 10.

⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Being a Muslim in the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2016), 29.

⁸ Maxwell Sucharov, “The Ugly Truth to Canada’s Big Lie: A Tale of Ongoing Settler Colonial Genocide of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples and the Creation of an Apartheid State,” *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* 12, no. 2 (2022), 199.

⁹ Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Brantford, ON: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2018), 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 122.

Canada tells about itself” - that it’s merely a façade to hide the country’s colonial roots.¹¹ Hansen argues that “if Canada and Canadians had any particular talent for coping with diversity, then the country’s oldest “minority”- Aboriginal Canadians- would be well incorporated into Canadian society and the Canadian economy.”¹²

Bhabha stresses that we must not see colonialism as an event in the past, but rather as something ongoing that continues to function, hidden under liberal policies that support systems of oppression.¹³ Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, for example, is nothing but rhetorical, and the success of Canada’s immigration policy “has nothing to do with multiculturalism and everything to do with admitting large numbers of highly skilled and highly educated immigrants.”¹⁴ Many academics argue that multiculturalism’s focus on cultural diversity is a political tactic used to hide the marginalization of, and discrimination towards immigrants, while keeping them ignorant of Canada’s racist history. In fact, multiculturalism’s popularity is not due to the benefits of immigration, but to the national identity it provides Canadians as an ostensibly progressive and open society.¹⁵ Thus, the development of Canada’s multicultural policy functions more as a political tool of divergence, rather than a “genuine concern for equality.”¹⁶

The contradiction of multiculturalism lies in its ideological ideals, versus its practical application. Though values of diversity, tolerance, and respect in a pluralistic society are highlighted, there is often a gap “between what multiculturalism promises and what it actually delivers.”¹⁷ While multiculturalism promotes diversity, differences are allowed only in a limited capacity and in conformity to the “Western project of nation building”—maintaining a façade of purity and superiority while hiding the history and ongoing impacts of colonialism.¹⁸ With this brief introduction to Canada’s history of multiculturalism, I turn to the main topic of this article: the study of Muslim identity formation in Canada, and the importance of studying identity development within sociocultural contexts.

Identity Development Frameworks

With the advent of modernity in the western world, the individual tended to become their own site of reason and meaning-making. No longer subject to a “dominant natural order,” the individual became “responsible for creating coherence and meaning herself.”¹⁹ Classical modern social theory and philosophy promoted a notion of an authentic self which existed inherently, waiting to

¹¹ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*, 46.

¹² Randall Hansen, “Why Both the Left and the Right Are Wrong: Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 03 (July 2017), 712.

¹³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴ Hansen, “Why Both,” 714.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹ Kirstine Sinclair, “An Islamic University in the West and the Question of Modern Authenticity,” in *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 150.

be uncovered through the “existential search for personal meaning”²⁰ of the individual separate from dominant society. This individual notion of self was “substantial, essential, and unchanging, as implied by Cartesian, Kantian, and other Enlightenment conceptions of a rational and “‘knowing’ ego.”²¹ This modern identity presented a notion of a singular unified self motivated by an inner purpose towards an outer goal, based on the certainty of objective reason.

In the past six decades, we have moved from capitalist modernity demanding production to consumerist postmodernity necessitating consumption. Postmodernity comprises new frameworks of thinking in direct oppositions to the narratives of modernity. Opposing the essentialist, singular, certain, and individualist notions of modern identity, postmodernism posits identity as multiple, plural, uncertain, ever shifting, and deeply social. Postmodern theories of identity highlight the “fluidity and fragmented nature of personal identities”²² against the essentialist modernist narratives that produced “strong individual/society dichotomy.”²³ This non-essentialist postmodern notion of identity decenters the individual, highlighting the relational, multiple, and hybridized nature of identity, and is constantly in the process of being (re)created. While modernity chose to break the individual from the society, postmodernity sees identity as socioculturally contextualized.²⁴

Both the modern and postmodern conceptions of identity provide only limited lenses, and the distinction between the two is not clear cut. The period of transition from modernity to postmodernity did not discard modernity, but rather expanded “the range of modernities.”²⁵ Like Hadzantonis, I advocate for “a reality which does not confine us to one cultural worldview, but encourages us to include multiple cultural views,” leading to a “pluralistic representation.”²⁶ Following theorists who discuss multiple modernities and successive modernities, I agree that “stages of modernity are ideal types” which “should not be seen as progressive stages of an evolutionary path leading to the replacement of old models with new ones,” since elements of previous types survive and different modernities “can overlap.”²⁷ Jung points out that while modernity was meant to discard religion and tradition, not only did they not disappear, but “they determine to a large extent the ways in which modernization in historically concrete forms

²⁰ Robert G. Dunn, “Modernity and Postmodernity Transformations in Identity Formation,” in *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²² Justin Gest, “Reluctant Pluralists: European Muslims and Essentialist Identities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 11 (2014), 1874.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Larysa Zahrai, “Narrative Identity: Formation Mechanism,” *Journal of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University* 7, no. 2 (2020).

²⁵ Michael Hadzantonis, *English Language Pedagogies for A Northeast Asian Context: Developing and contextually framing the transition theory* (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 251.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ Fabio Vicini, “‘Worship Is Not Everything’: Volunteering and Muslim Life in Modern Turkey,” in *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity*, ed. Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 116.

appears.”²⁸ Therefore, we find that traditional, modern, and postmodern notions of identity persist to this day, along with other interpretations and frameworks.

For the purpose of this article, I largely, but not solely, adopt the postmodern framework, especially the notions of “hybridity, intermediacy, contingency, and multiple engagements” as opposed to monolithic and binary categorizations.²⁹ This “third space of negotiation promotes a creative becoming that is fluid, evolving, and encompassing, rather than static, bound, and exclusionary.”³⁰ This development is socioculturally contextualized, highlighting the “emergence of identity through discourse and discursive action.”³¹ Identity is constructed through “intersubjective relations,”³² in a dialogue between the self and the world, creating the self in the world. Hence, identity is socioculturally situated, contingent on an often-imagined locality.³³

Identity Development and Geography

Prior to modernity, Muslims largely defined themselves and each other by their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This changed in reaction to Western Enlightenment thought, where “Muslims” were identified as the savage “other,” over which Western men were superior. Orientalist narratives depicted Muslim men as savage barbarians and Muslim women as oppressed victims of patriarchal culture. Since then, especially with increased immigration to the West and the aftermath of 9/11, “Muslim” became a significant marker of identity. Immigrant Muslims in diaspora, many of whom might not have identified with Islam previously, “rediscovered a new solidarity with their community,” creating a newly deepened religious identity.³⁴

Aitchison, Hopkins, & Kwan explore the importance and impact of time and place on Muslim identity construction by examining the geographies of Muslim identities.³⁵ They believe that like class and race, religion should be contextualized in time and space to be understood, as the context impacts “their intersections with gender, diaspora and belongings.”³⁶ Since identity and development are place-based and impacted by the sociocultural environment, the development of Muslim identity is deeply tied to the political and social developments of their respective geographies.³⁷ Especially now that Muslims are spread all over the world, it becomes more imperative to study Muslim identity formation in different contexts. So far, very little work has

²⁸ Dietrich Jung, “Modern Muslim Subjectivities: Theories, Concepts, and First Findings,” in *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 14.

²⁹ Hadzantonis, *English Language*, 3.

³⁰ Nabavi, “Creative Becoming(s),” 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Hadzantonis, *English Language*, 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴ Zijad Delic, *Islam in the West: Beyond Integration* (Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 2018), 16.

³⁵ Cara Aitchison, Peter Hopkins, and Mei-Po Kwan, “Introduction: Geographies of Muslim Identities” in *Geographies of Muslim identities: diaspora, gender and belonging* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ Safet Bectovic, “Studying Muslims and constructing Islamic identity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 7 (2011).

been done on theorizing the processes of identity formation on Canadian Muslims, especially among second generation immigrants.³⁸

Overview of Muslim Identity Formation in Canada

Since Muslim identity is tied to a specific time and place, I will now turn to the unique experiences of Muslim identity formation in Canada. I begin by exploring the media representation of Muslims and its impact. I then look at the immigration experience as naturally making individuals more religious, and finally at the reactive identity formation that has occurred amongst Muslims in Canada.

Media's Negative Portrayal of Muslims

Places hold multiple meanings, but the media is a key player “in attempts to fix the meaning of places.”³⁹ The influence of mass media on the negative portrayal of Islam as a violent and regressive religion is undeniable.⁴⁰ Though this reductionist representation of Islam is deeply political, it is presented as value-free and objective journalism, which reproduces “dominant power relations where ‘balance’ equates to ‘white (male) values.’”⁴¹ These mainstream media narratives have serious impacts on the identity formation of immigrant Muslims.

Gendered depiction of Muslims continues to negatively impact both men and women in Canada, who fight these stereotypes daily. Muslim men are portrayed as dangerous, and Muslim women are deeply misrepresented as being repressed and passive victims of an oppressive culture.⁴² Muslim women resist this notion, and those who wear the hijab proudly don it as an act of individual agency, similar to those who do not wear the hijab but still claim their rightful position as free Muslim women. Those who wear hijab do face the most discrimination, however, as “the hijab is seen as a direct challenge to Western notions of modernity, gender equality, and the Western model of cultural behaviour.”⁴³ Furthermore, because Muslim women are seen as “weak and less likely to retaliate,” they face more physical harassment than non-visible Muslims.⁴⁴

Immigration as a Theologizing Experience

In recent decades, Islam moved “from being a homogenous majority religion to that of a heterogeneous minority,” which necessitates the study of the different processes and contexts of

³⁸ Delic, *Islam in the West*.

³⁹ Cameron McAuliffe, “Visible Minorities: Constructing and Deconstructing the Muslim Iranian Diaspora.” in *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 51.

⁴⁰ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*; Safet Bectovic, “Studying Muslims and Constructing Islamic Identity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 7 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2010.528782>; Sahar Khelifa, “A Delicate Mosaic: The Future of Muslims in Canada,” *USURJ: University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.32396/usurj.v3i2.186>.

⁴¹ McAuliffe, “Visible Minorities,” 31.

⁴² Aitchison et al., “Introduction.”

⁴³ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*, 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 90.

Muslim identity formation.⁴⁵ Immigrant Muslims are a minority in Canada, and thus must actively construct the interpretation and practice of their religious identity. Since “immigration itself is often a theologizing experience,” immigrants seek comfort in religious beliefs and practices in the face of alienation in a new land.⁴⁶ Religious community centres are built to create a familiar space, making religious narratives “the building blocks of individual and social identity.”⁴⁷ This Muslim minority identity for immigrants can be vastly different from their identity in Muslim majority countries, “where religion may have been taken for granted.”⁴⁸ Not only are immigrant Muslims internally driven to create this safe space in a foreign land for themselves, but they also feel externally pressured to become organized as a Muslim minority.⁴⁹

Reactive Identity Formation

This external pressure became especially dominant after 9/11. Exploring the identity formation of Muslims in post-9/11 Canada, Nagra found that it was a complex and multifaceted social process “involving both societal and self-ascription.”⁵⁰ She coined the term reactive identity formation as the social process of identity affirmation in the face of discrimination. The aftermath of 9/11 brought an onslaught of social discrimination towards Muslims fueled by the negative and violent portrayal of Islam in the media. In response to this discrimination and misrepresentation, many Muslims actively affirmed their Muslim identity by learning more about Islam and resisting mainstream ideologies. By using their individual agency to reclaim Islam, Muslims started giving precedence to their Muslim identity over other aspects of their identity, as well as “trying to be a positive example of a Muslim in interactions with other Canadians.”⁵¹ Many were forced to become more educated about Islam because of questions from others. Many felt they were stereotyped as being a one-dimensional member of a monolithic identity. By asserting their Muslim identity in the face of such discrimination, their affirmation became resistance, and their identity became emboldened. Resistance is thus an important part of reactive identity formation, as it allows Muslims to resist the abuse of Islam and reclaim their religion, which in turn strengthens their religious identity. Hence Nagra recognizes the complex social process of reactive identity formation, which involves both social forces and individual agency.⁵²

The impacts of this reactive identity formation present themselves in the 2016 Environics study on Canadian Muslims, as 72% of Canadian Muslims consider Islam an important part of their identity, and 42% state that living in Canada positively affected their relationship with Islam, opposed to 5% who stated it had weakened it.⁵³ Hence, it appears that while Muslims are a minority who must

⁴⁵ Delic, *Islam in the West*, 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ Bectovic, “Studying Muslims.”

⁵⁰ Baljit Nagra, “‘Our Faith Was Also Hijacked by Those People’: Reclaiming Muslim Identity in Canada in a Post-9/11 Era,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no.3, (2011), 438.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 434.

⁵² *Ibid*, 438.

⁵³ Delic, *Islam in the West*.

claim their space and identity against negative sociopolitical narratives, this has in fact solidified their religious identity, which they proudly represent in Canadian society. While Muslims strengthened their Muslim identity in Canada, that does not deny that it occurred against negative narratives of Islam, especially within the media. In fact, 30% of Muslims reported having experienced discrimination in the past five years, which has not changed since the 2006 Environics report on Muslims. Muslims, especially women, reported that their primary concern was instances of discrimination by the broader community.⁵⁴ In spite of, or perhaps as a result of such discrimination and fear of it, Muslims have strongly claimed both their Muslim and Canadian identities proudly.

Identity Development of Young Muslims in Canada

Identity is actively grappled with during adolescence, and the ability for youth to come out with a well-developed sense of self creates a positive impact on both the individual and society. During this process, community recognition and acceptance is a big indicator of healthy identity formation. Since “the self is situated in culture” and the culture in the self, one’s identity is formed within the cultural communities one is situated in.⁵⁵ Lack of approval and appreciation from one’s cultural communities distorts an individual’s self-image, creates a fragmented psyche, and denies the chance to function meaningfully in one’s society.⁵⁶

There have been very few studies that explore how religious identity is “constructed, developed, and enacted,” especially by second-generation Muslims.⁵⁷ In this section, I look at the tensions that underlie young Muslims’ identity formation in Canada, and how they overcome these obstacles. Muslim youth growing up in Canada struggle to create a holistic and unified sense of self while resisting binary identities projected onto them because of dichotomous narratives which essentialize and reduce both their Muslim and Canadian identities.⁵⁸ These narratives, utilized by both Western and Muslim officials and scholars, include East vs. West, religion vs. secularism, and tradition vs. modernity; they play out politically and socioculturally, in the media and in mosques, in schools and in homes. Belonging, community, and acceptance play a crucial part in adolescent identity formation, but these clashing narratives create a distorted sense of belonging, community, and acceptance—if any at all. These narratives compel young Muslims to choose between abandoning Islam since it is at odds with their current context or withdrawing from their current context because it is at odds with Islam.⁵⁹ Thus, Muslim youth can face psychological

⁵⁴ Khelifa, “Delicate Mosaic.”

⁵⁵ Dianne Watt, “From the Streets of Peshawar to the Cover of Maclean's Magazine,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 1 (2011), 65.

⁵⁶ Abdullah A. Omar, “Islamic Identity in the Canadian Multicultural Context,” *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (2012).

⁵⁷ Delic, *Islam in the West*, 28.

⁵⁸ Mona Abo-Zena, Barbara Sahli, and Christina Tobias-Nahi, “Testing the courage of their convictions: Muslim youth respond to stereotyping, hostility, and discrimination,” in *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009)

⁵⁹ Marcia Hermansen, “Cultural worlds/culture wars: Contemporary American Muslim perspectives on the role of culture,” *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2009).

distress, identity fragmentation, and a sense of alienation within their Canadian context and their Muslim communities.

Since 9/11, Islam has been seen as “inherently incompatible with Western cultures.”⁶⁰ This tension can be felt everywhere by young Muslims. Within the school system and popular media, the Muslim identity is seen as homogeneous and myopic, which has caused many Muslim students to experience “alienation, marginalization, and a sense of ‘othering.’”⁶¹ The North American school curriculum has an orientalist view of Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East, deepening the sense of othering within the school environment. School curriculums largely depict Muslims and the Middle East as backwards, with oppressive males and oppressed females.⁶² Sensoy and Marshall found that the books and stories studied about this region upheld colonial discourses, especially in their depictions of gender. These stories depict the colonizer as the paternalistic saviour figure, especially coming to the aid of oppressed Muslim women. This saving effort does not seek to “participate in the self-actualization of Muslim girls,” but rather functions to “universalise a particular Western girlhood.”⁶³ These stories essentially serve as soft weapons “in an ongoing imperial project.”⁶⁴ These representations of Muslims, and especially Muslim women “rooted in the colonial discourse of patriarchal care in a Western gaze”⁶⁵ create deep-rooted negative consequences in the education of, and about, Muslims in the West. Muslims, or simply those from the Middle East and South Asia see themselves misrepresented through these narratives. Non-Muslims begin to understand the Muslim identity as represented through their education and Western media. These narratives, however, ignore the ways in which Western colonialism and domination has negatively impacted the lives of Muslims in the Middle East and contributed to their current sociopolitical conditions. They also ignore the patriarchal institutions that dominate the lives of girls in the West, and how Western liberal feminism “upholds colonial interest and conditions”⁶⁶ in which White women are seen as the saviour of helpless Muslim/Brown women.

Within their Muslim communities, youth are also frustrated due to the “lack of culturally relevant, age-appropriate, religious, and social programs.”⁶⁷ At home, their parents place social restrictions on them due to their lack of acceptance of Western culture, and the fear that their children will lose their religious identity through social participation in the West.⁶⁸ This forces Muslim youth to

⁶⁰ Shaza Khan, “Integrating identities: Muslim American youth confronting challenges and creating change” in *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009) 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 28.

⁶² James A. Banks and Özlem Sensoy, “Middle Eastern Americans, Education Of,” *Essay. In Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* 3, 3:1498–1503. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2012.

⁶³ Özlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall, “Missionary Girl Power: Saving the ‘Third World’ One Girl at a Time,” *Gender and Education* 22, no. 3 (2010), 301.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 302.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 308.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ Sameera Ahmed, “Religiosity and Presence of Character Strengths in American Muslim Youth,” *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 4, no. 2 (2009), 106.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

either reject their Western environment or renounce their religious identity due to its seemingly incompatibility with the West.⁶⁹

Hybridity and Third Space

In the quest for the construction of a Muslim identity in a Canadian context, meanings and practices are reconstructed and renegotiated with every emerging generation, leading to “a multiplicity of normative expressions in Islam.”⁷⁰ Thus, the biggest concern for young Canadian Muslims amidst creating their holistic identity is “the challenge of carrying many identities without feeling fragmented or in crisis.”⁷¹ Dichotomous narratives, on the other hand, create psychological distress and fragmentation for young Muslims due to the seeming incompatibility of their various identities. Muslim youth have the challenging task of resisting the weight of these narratives while having to simultaneously defend or explain both narratives, or choose one over the other to be relieved of the psychological burden.

Muslim youth, however, are not the passive victims of a “cultural clash and/or trapped in an identity crisis.”⁷² Despite these popular binary narratives, Muslim youth positively construct their identity as “active agents of their own cultural environment.”⁷³ As they navigate through their challenges, they are engaged in “a constant (re)construction, (re)interpretation, and expression of their identities.”⁷⁴ By destabilizing binary ways of thinking, they open a “third space” which is the fluid space of cultural hybridity.⁷⁵ This third space of cultural hybridity gives rise “to something different... a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”⁷⁶ This in-between space is marked by “shifting psychic, cultural, and territorial boundaries.”⁷⁷ Within this third space, Muslim youth gain newfound historical agency. Muslim identity can come out of its confines, not being controlled by traditionalist Muslims, who “contrast a romanticized past (tradition) against a demonized present (modernity),”⁷⁸ or vilified by Western orientalists. This hybridized Muslim identity can become “a productive tension filled with possibility.”⁷⁹

Within this sociocultural third space, dichotomous narratives are contested and resisted, allowing for the emergence of a new Canadian Muslim identity. When young Canadians claim their Muslim identity and participate in Muslim communities, they do not do so quietly and submissively.

⁶⁹ Hermansen, “Cultural worlds/culture wars.”

⁷⁰ Delic, *Islam in the West*, 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷² Thijl Sunier, “Styles of Religious Practice: Muslim Youth Cultures in Europe,” in *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 129.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Khan, “Integrating identities,” 32.

⁷⁵ Homi Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁷⁶ Homi Bhabha, “The Third Space,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

⁷⁷ Shahnaz Khan, *Aversion and desire negotiating Muslim female identity in the diaspora* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002) 2.

⁷⁸ Nabavi, “Creative Becoming(s),” 29.

⁷⁹ Khan, *Aversion*, xvi.

Rather, they critique their Muslim communities and the older generations who maintain practices that are not aligned with young Muslims. They critique segregation within Muslim communities, popular interpretations of Islam, and instances of gender discrimination in their communities.⁸⁰ As such, the Muslim identity is continuously evolving and expanding to meet each new generation's needs, with outdated practices being interrogated and discarded.

A Reflection on Reactive Identity Formation and Multiculturalism

Since 9/11, Muslims have increasingly become the target of hate crimes and discrimination in Canada, fueled largely by the Canadian media's negative portrayal of Muslims, as well as government inaction, as they "failed to protect Muslim communities from the backlash that followed."⁸¹ Canada had always been suspicious of the "other," and after 9/11, Muslims became the central figure that threatened an "already weak national Canadian identity."⁸² These narratives have recently resulted in the tragic killing of a Muslim family in London in 2021, and the devastating Quebec Mosque shooting in 2017. Muslims still face discrimination in Canadian society; they are treated as second-class citizens, told to go back home, called terrorists, and worst of all, fear for their life.

Despite these facts, Muslim identity has been strengthened in Canada for several interconnected reasons: immigration and living in diaspora strengthens Muslim identity and religious affiliation as minorities in their new country; negative media portrayal of Muslims and hostility towards Muslims brings together diverse Muslim communities in solidarity; and in turn, Muslims identify more strongly with their religious identity and attempt to present a positive face of Islam to the larger Canadian public. Furthermore, second-generation Muslims go one step further to critically reflect on both their Muslim and Canadian identities, discarding what does not fit with their hybrid identities. As such, Muslims continue to proudly claim both their Muslim and Canadian identities, despite hostility from the larger public and negative media coverage. Kazemipur argues that it is the "emotional attachment" that Muslims have to Canada which ensures their loyalty to their new country.⁸³ This creates a "win-win scenario for both Muslim Canadians and Canadian society."⁸⁴

Nagra finds that this "continued attachment to Canada" has many complex reasons. For one, many feel that Canada is more tolerant than other Western countries towards Muslim communities.⁸⁵ Further, they view the symbol of multiculturalism as a deep part of their identity, and use it to resist discrimination, believing the discrimination to be "anti-Canadian."⁸⁶ By claiming Canadian as their identity and using multiculturalism to deny and resist Canada's discriminatory practices,

⁸⁰ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 96.

⁸² *Ibid*, 55.

⁸³ Abdolmohammad Kazemipur, *The Muslim Question in Canada: A Story of Segmented Integration* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

⁸⁴ Khelifa, "Delicate Mosaic," 8.

⁸⁵ Nagra, *Securitized Citizens*, 204.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 204.

Muslim Canadians reject Canada's history and continued practice of colonization, and instead live and act their way into a Canada that is truly inclusive, welcoming, and multicultural.

Conclusion

We began with Canada's dark founding and history of colonization and ended with Muslims' practice of Canadian-ness which resists Canada's racist foundations. The reactive identity formation that Muslims undergo in Canada against its negative presentation of and discrimination against Muslims interestingly turns out to be the very thing that strengthens both their Muslim and Canadian identities.

Through their reactive identity formation against discrimination, Muslims in Canada take up the post-modern project of identity formation; they resist the dominant narrative and instead create coherence and meaning within their situated environment for themselves. They resist monolithic categorizations and instead embrace hybridity within a third space where their multiple identities can be renegotiated. As such, they represent a creative becoming⁸⁷- deeply situated in their imagined locality. In doing so, they face Canada and their future within this country positively and proactively.

This deeply socioculturally situated identity demonstrates the relational interaction between Muslims and the negative Muslim narrative in their immediate environment, which gives rise to a strengthened Muslim identity that resists and exists beyond limited depictions. Only through their exposure to, and awareness of their environment which propagated these narratives, do Muslim Canadians positively stand against them, claiming their newly strengthened Muslim and Canadian identity. Through their belief in, and practice of Canadian multiculturalism, they take their rightful place within Canadian society and slowly create a reality out of their imagined locality.

However, we must not be fooled to ignore Canada's Big Lie. It is necessary for Muslims to not only resist negative representations of Muslims, but also all negative representations in favour of a truly multicultural Canada. Muslims must become aware of Canada's past and present colonial practices against Indigenous peoples, and stand firmly against the narratives, policies, and actions that allow this continued colonization. It is only through awareness, and subsequent productive action, that the newly strengthened Canadian Muslims can move forward in a way that ensures the multicultural Canada that they believe in can become a reality for all—especially for its rightful Indigenous populations.

⁸⁷ Nabavi, "Creative Becoming(s)."

Abo-Zena, Mona, Barbara Sahil, and Christina Nahi-Tobias. "Testing the Courage of Their Convictions: Muslim Youth Respond to Stereotyping, Hostility, and Discrimination." Essay. In *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009.

Ahmad, Irfan. *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Ahmed, Sameera. "Religiosity and Presence of Character Strengths in American Muslim Youth." *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 4, no. 2 (2009): 104–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564900903245642>.

Aitchison, Cara, Peter E. Hopkins, and Mei-po Kwan. "Introduction: Geographies of Muslim Identities." Introduction. In *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging*, 1–9. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

Banks, James A., and Ozlem Sensoy. "Middle Eastern Americans, Education Of." Essay. In *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* 3, 3:1498–1503. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2012.

Bectovic, Safet. "Studying Muslims and Constructing Islamic Identity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 7 (2011): 1120–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2010.528782>.

Bell, Avril. "Recognition or Ethics? De/Centering and the Legacy of Settler Colonialism." *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 6 (2008): 850–69.

Bhabha, Homi. "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences." Essay. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998.

———. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

———. "The Third Space." Essay. In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

Dabashi, Hamid. *Being a Muslim in the World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2016.

Delic, Zijad. *Islam in the West: Beyond Integration*. Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 2018.

Dunn, Robert G. "Modernity and Postmodernity Transformations in Identity Formation." Essay. In *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity*, 51–80. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Gest, Justin. "Reluctant Pluralists: European Muslims and Essentialist Identities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 11 (2014): 1868–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.920092>.

Hadzantonis, Michael. *English-Language Pedagogies for a Northeast Asian Context: Developing and Contextually Framing the Transition Theory*. Taylor & Francis, 2017.

Hansen, Randall. "Why Both the Left and the Right Are Wrong: Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 03 (July 2017): 712–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000476>.

Hermansen, Marcia. "Cultural Worlds/Culture Wars: Contemporary American Muslim Perspectives on the Role of Culture." *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2009): 185–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15288171003693470>.

Jung, Dietrich. "Modern Muslim Subjectivities: Theories, Concepts, and First Findings." Essay. In *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, 11–32. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020.

Kazemipur, Abdolmohammad. *The Muslim Question in Canada a Story of Segmented Integration*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2014.

Khan, Shahnaz. *Aversion and Desire Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2002.

Khan, Shaza. "Integrating Identities: Muslim American Youth Confronting Challenges and Creating Change." Essay. In *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism*, 27–40. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009.

Khelifa, Sahar. "A Delicate Mosaic: The Future of Muslims in Canada." *USURJ: University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.32396/usurj.v3i2.186>.

McAuliffe, Cameron. "Visible Minorities: Constructing and Deconstructing the Muslim Iranian Diaspora." Essay. In *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging*, 29–55. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

Nabavi, Motahareh. "Creative Becoming(s): The Spiritual Development of Young Muslims in the West." Master's thesis. University of Ottawa, 2022.

Nagra, Baljit. "'Our Faith Was Also Hijacked by Those People': Reclaiming Muslim Identity in Canada in a Post-9/11 Era." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 425–441.

- . *Securitized Citizens: Canadian Muslims' Experiences of Race Relations and Identity Formation Post-9/11*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Omar, Abdullah A. "Islamic Identity in the Canadian Multicultural Context." *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (2012).
- Sensoy, Özlem, and Elizabeth Marshall. "Missionary Girl Power: Saving the 'Third World' One Girl at a Time." *Gender and Education* 22, no. 3 (2010): 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250903289451>.
- Sinclair, Kirstine. "An Islamic University in the West and the Question of Modern Authenticity." Essay. In *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, 147–65. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020.
- Sucharov, Maxwell. "The Ugly Truth to Canada's Big Lie: A Tale of Ongoing Settler Colonial Genocide of Canada's Indigenous Peoples and the Creation of an Apartheid State." *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* 17, no. 2 (2022): 196–206. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/24720038.2022.2046753>.
- Sunier, Thijl. "Styles of Religious Practice: Muslim Youth Cultures in Europe." Essay. In *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*, 125–38. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Vicini, Fabio. "'Worship Is Not Everything': Volunteering and Muslim Life in Modern Turkey." In *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity*, edited by Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair, 97-120. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004425576_007.
- Vowel, Chelsea. *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Issues in Canada*. Brantford, Ontario: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2018.
- Watt, Dianne. "From the Streets of Peshawar to the Cover of Maclean's Magazine." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 1 (2011): 64–86.
- Zahrai, Larysa. "Narrative Identity: Formation Mechanism." *Journal of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University* 7, no. 2 (2020): 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.15330/jpnu.7.2.85-91>.