Original Research Article

Say-Walahi Diaspora Youth, Islamophobia and Anti-Black Racism: Implications for Education

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Abstract
This article highlights the ways in which Muslim Black/African youth situated in Toronto, Canada have constructed a unique cultural identity that merges their Islamic values with their Somali heritage, centering on the term *Say-Walahi*, ('swear to God'). Over a period of 24 months, 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-identifying Muslim youth, aged 18–22 years. Analysis from the interviews highlights the ways in which these youth experience both Islamophobia and anti-Black racism. The author suggests that we need to rethink the educational system as a means of centering the identity of Black Muslim youths in the classroom and in urban education research.

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The Diaspora is not a new social phenomenon, yet as humans get displaced, relocated (largely to urban centers), and assert new identities, the very concept of Diaspora embodies evolving values, cultural norms, and social markers. The concepts of race, gender, and culture in urban Diaspora settings are important where the population is diverse and especially when the political landscape is tense, for example, because of anti-Muslim and/or racist ideologies that are often articulated to racialize Muslim youth in North America (see Bilal Nasir, 2022). As such, Diaspora identities are a guiding theoretical framework for this work, which examines notions of shared identity connected to culture as well as historical and present experiences. In his paper 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' the late Stuart Hall (1990) explains: '[O]ur cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence' (p. 223). Looking at Diaspora conceptually offers us a unique analysis of how identities, cultures, and communities are formed across borders (see Clifford, 1994; Gordon & Anderson, 1999; Safran, 1991). Diaspora can show us how communities in large urban centers self-identify, organize, and embody transnational identities (see Ibrahim, 2019; Jamal et al., 2022; Smith, 2023; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2020) In its essence, Diaspora embodies and performs the cultural features of an identity that are conjecturally rooted in an ancestral homeland while being located in a new homeland. Kay Deaux (2006) reflects on group collectivism for Diasporas explaining how identity includes 'self-definition, language usage, social and cultural habits, friendship networks, and other significant aspects of social and psychological life. For the immigrant, identity negotiation is a continuing process of situating oneself—of defining the self in relation to other people or other groups, all taking place under the larger societal umbrella' (p. 7). For youth and young people, these identities have a profound effect on their educational experiences, which in turn shape their relationship to society.

This article seeks to add to the discussion of urban education by highlighting how Black Muslim youth have constructed Diasporic identities to exercise agency and create community in their schools as an attempt to disrupt the deficit narratives ascribed to them. H. Richard Milner (2012) in his essay 'But What is Urban Education?' provides a conceptual understanding of urban education through an empirical and contextual look at distinctive quantitative features of urbanization. While considerations of concepts and definitions of urban education are outside the scope of this paper (see Welsh & Swain, 2020), for the purposes of this discussion, the educational setting of

this study is the population center of Toronto, Ontario (population >5.6 million in 2021; see Statistics Canada, 2022) and can be considered intensive urban (Milner, 2012). This article thus takes up Milner's notions of urbanization and urban education to look at the lived experiences of racialized Black Muslim youth who live in the underprivileged community of Rexdale in Toronto, Canada.

This qualitative study of a specific community of Canadian youth of Somali descent living in Canada's largest urban center reveals the complexities and strengths of a Diasporic identity situated at the cultural intersection of race (Blackness) and religion (being Muslim). Délice Mugabo (2016), in her essay called 'On Rocks and Hard Places: A Reflection on Antiblackness in Organizing against Islamophobia,' describes the unforgiving nature of both Islamophobia and anti-Blackness and the ways in which the Black Muslim body is always out of place, evicted from social life for the Black subject in North America. Indeed, because of the ways in which race is organized globally, with whiteness at the top of the apex, the Black Muslim body is rendered invisible because it is socially positioned as Black, non-Arab, and non-south Asian–a category outside of the universality of Islam, while Islam, meanwhile, is labelled as an 'uncivilized' danger to the West (Razack, 2007). This identity intersection leads to surveillance both as Black/African *and* as Muslims in a post 9/11 world. For the past few years, mainstream media such as Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), The New York Times, and The Toronto Star, just to name a few, have been highlighting the ways in which Islamophobia, anti-Black racism, and growing anti-immigration policies and sentiments have been on the rise in Europe and in North America. Within Canadian context, Nimao Ali (2021) in a CBC news article calls the Black Muslim community a 'minority within a minority' with multi-layered identity intersections often creating very complex and invisible social realities.

Say-Wahali *Youth: Black and Muslim in Toronto, Canada*

The *Say-Walahi* youth community are first and/or second-generation children of Somalis who begin escaping Somalia's long civil war in the early 1990s and settled in large urban centers throughout the English-speaking world. The population in this research study was born primarily in Toronto, and they are a part of an estimated 56,555 Somalis living in the province of Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The Black/African Muslim Diaspora in Canada embody an identity that is dualistically taken up in urban society and schools in often negative ways.

Muslims are viewed as immigrants (foreigners) who practice an uncivilized, even dangerous, religion (Islam), one that is constructed as very oppressive, particularly to women and girls. In their work 'transnational feminist approaches to Anti-Muslim Racism,' Korkman & Razack (2021) eloquently explain the ways in which gender is conceptualized onto the Muslim body through a colonial lens to be subjected to violence:

> Anti-Muslim racism forges a global whiteness as it moves, installing a civilizational divide between Muslims, conjured as barbaric, misogynist, premodern Others who require force and Europeans, imagined as a people especially given to rationality and possessing a deep commitment to democracy and gender equality that must be protected. As it travels, anti-Muslim racism hitches a ride on local conflicts, enabling violence to be directed at Muslim communities with impunity in the name, for instance, of combatting 'global terrorism.' Muslims come to be cast as Europe's atavistic Others when they contest the supremacy of the West and resist racial and imperial governance. They become targets of violence when their lands are desired. Whether refugees at the border, citizens holding the state to its promise of liberal inclusion, or populations who stand in the way of empire, Muslims are imagined as threats who must be met with force. (p. 263)

It is through this lens that the Muslim body is subjected to anti-Muslim violence in the West. Moreover, to be Black and Muslim is to be categorized as not only as a global terrorist but as a non-human racial Black subject (see Mauleón, 2018). Black males in particular are seen through a lens of white anxiety as being prone to violent, criminal, and/or gang activity (see Simmons-Horton & Gibson, 2022). As far as Diasporas are concerned, the Somali population in Toronto has managed to both construct and embody an identity that transcends the contemporary realities of being Muslim, while also Black, in the West. For the Somali Diaspora globally, the location of identity is prone to more anti-terrorism violence by both state and non-state actors, as articulated by Catherine Besteman (2017):

> The security practices that are producing the new security empire take the form of drone strikes and missile attacks launched into Somalia on behalf of other states from foreign and international waters and lands, counterterrorist interventions by state-backed foreign militaries and non-state-backed foreign militias, the collapse of local policing, militias led by warlords and funded by foreigners, secret operations by foreign intelligence agencies who use local underground prisons as rendition sites, and the sealing of borders by neighboring states against the flight of refugees whose lives have been made utterly insecure by

the combined effect of multiple and competing security regimes imposed from afar. (p. 405)

Unfortunately, not only is a continuous cycle of violence imposed on the homeland (Somalia), but the violence is experienced even as Somalis attempt to escape the violence, and when one is born in the West and/or flees that homeland, the new security empire is attached to their identities in the form of surveillance, detention, and/or deportation.

The Black, Muslim, Canadian-born youth interviewed for this study have constructed a Diasporic culture characterized by unique linguistic expressions and an identity location (i.e., the social context and identity features expressed in any social setting) that merges their Islamic values with being Black/African. Somali Canadian Diaspora is not defined by a homogenous identity; while most Somalis trace their ancestral origins to the Horn of Africa, the Somali identity particularly within Diasporic context is heterogeneous, hybrid, and multi-centric because of the history of colonization in the region that resulted in migrations of peoples throughout history (Ilmi 2014). These particular Somali youth are often referred to as the *Say-Walahi* by older generations of Somalis, whether in the Diasporas or in the Horn of Africa, and they have developed a complex system of coded communication to interpret their world. The term *Say-Walahi* is a fusion of English and Somali, and it loosely translates to 'swear to God.' It embodies the idea of an inherently good or moral being, a kind of spiritual or religious invocation, the idea of God as my witness, in both English and Somali. The meme, now present in all social media platforms, is a youthful culture phenomenon taken up by Somali Canadians, other Muslim Canadians, and any exposed to this unique Diasporic culture. Most importantly, it represents a culture taken up by Somali Diasporas throughout the English-speaking world. The importance of memes in contemporary youth culture, memes which allow youth to express their multiple identities and shared experiences, through the creation of new cultural expressions, has been noted by many scholars (see Oswald et al., 2023). In the social media age in which today's Diaspora youth are living, the *Say-Walahi* meme allows these youth to engage in identity activism online. According to Shifman (2013), internet memes serve as a discursive tool for online political participation through creating or sharing content as well as liking or commenting on a post.

Say-Walahi as a code of communication is operationalized within certain social contexts amongst other English-speaking youth, where the fusion of English and Somali is constantly creating and recreating cultural boundaries that are only to be understood by those who can relate to English-speaking Somali Diasporic experiences. As such, this hyperdilation does not make

sense either to purely Somali speakers or English speakers. What is also incurably unique is that Somali Diasporas have been living in urban centres in the United Kingdom (see Fagioli-Ndlovu, 2015) and in United States–in vibrant Black communities of New York–since the turn of the nineteenth century (see Hussan, 2023). This Diasporic culture encapsulates race, faith-based identity, and African heritage and expands to new territories, experiences, and the community-based notion of being Somali-Canadian Muslims. Although there is a religious element embodied in this culture (i.e., being Muslim), it is not articulated in a 'pure' sense of Islam, that is, one requiring consistent religious practice or strict Islamic doctrine. In fact, it is not even necessary to be Muslim and/or practicing Islam to be part of *Say-Walahi* culture.

Another fascinating aspect of *Say-Walahi* is the ways in which community youth have also infused hip-hop culture in their swagger, attire, and coded lingo, such that these are capable of telling stories about being young and Black. Here the duality of being Muslim and Black enables the youth to recombine both traditions to create something new, a youthful and authentic culture that manifests not only resilience but also pride and even joy. Interestingly, there are elements of self-regulation in the prohibitions of Islam as well as elements that fall outside of Islam. These internal self-regulations create the space of a contemporary youthful communal expression that is authentically speaking to Diasporic identity, to living in the moment, and more importantly to questions of anti-Blackness and Islamophobia (see Abu-Bakare, 2022; Akande, 2023; Goodwin, 2020, Rana et al., 2020). The contemporary *Say-Walahi* signifies an important intersectional juncture of a Diasporic Black/African Muslim identity that allows these youth to navigate the world. It also enables them to embody both individualistic and group identity within their urban location, an embodiment that tells a story of their multiple identities.

Culturally, *Say-Walahi* is operationalized to construct group social boundaries, where those who are a part of the group, or have some affinity to the group, operate in association with a fluid code of hybrid cultural norms that are understood amongst the cohort. Of significance are also categories of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion, because they serve as social markers that signal authenticity but also mark the essence of struggle in society and in schooling. As such, *Say-Walahi* provides cultural capital from which the youth can express themselves and be part of a community. From an identity perspective, the youth also formulate organic hybridized identities with direct implications on how they self-identify as Black, African, Muslim, or as being part of an ethnic and/or a national identity, through processes of constant negotiating of values and experiences. *Say-Walahi* also links youth histories and cultures with both African and Islamic worldviews that are steeped in

traditions that often have to be negotiated as Black Muslims. *Say-Walahi* as a social phenomenon is grounded in aspirations of Diaspora youth to belong and to embody their multiple identities, giving way to a state of being Black/African that is also Muslim. Therefore, *Say-Walahi* constitutes a Diasporic Blackness, and because of the ways in which it has been taken up, it need not be tied to an ethnic, cultural, and/or religious affiliation, allowing the youth to navigate various spaces amid authority figures both in their urban education setting and, when they graduate, in urban society as a whole.

Say-Walahi *in Schooling and Society*

In the past three decades, members of the Somali community have built vibrant communities that highlight their ethnic, cultural, and Islamic heritages. As a racialized Muslim community, the youth face significant challenges in schooling because of their racial categorization. 'According to data collected by the [Toronto District School Board], students of Somali descent are experiencing a significant, persistent achievement gap when compared to TDSB students overall' (TDSB, 2014). The data from this report indicated that these Black students performed below average for their grade level and were at a higher risk of dropping out or being suspended from school: 'The risk of dropping out is 33% among Somali-speaking male students and 17% among females. Somali males are also more likely than Somali females to be suspended, achieve below standard on grade 6 EQAO, and be identified as Special Education students' (TDSB, 2014). This alarming disparity facing *Say-Walahi* youth in the educational system is a disparity that the Canadian Somali Diaspora community and Black community as a whole have been struggling with for years. In the context of a post-9/11 world, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (2003) in their work *Theorizing Diaspora* remind us of the ways in which specific Diasporic communities are facing challenges with respect to their racial and cultural communal identities within the nation-state. As a Diaspora community, *Say-Walahi* youth experience Islamophobia (Farooqui & Kaushik, 2022) and are also subject to racial profiling as a result of their intersectional identities (Rahman, 2021). As a cohort in the educational system, their Islamic identity tends to overshadow their ethnic and racial identities, overlooking the unique ways in which they are Black/African and Muslim experiences (Rahman, 2021). This presents challenges, not in terms of how the youth self-identify but rather in the ways in which questions of race and ethnicity are socially located broadly within schooling.

This qualitative research study is guided by the following questions: 1) How do Muslim Black youth take up their racial, religious, and

Diasporic identities? 2) How does Islamophobia and anti-Black racism impact community youth? 3) How do Black Muslim youth resist multiple oppressions in their education? 4) What roles do educators, administrators, and policy makers play in creating spaces for students to be able to holistically embody their identities in their urban community schools? 5) What possibilities do identity markers offer in connecting identity to schooling, knowledge production, and larger societal questions?

Methods

During a 24-month study in the Rexdale community with self-identifying Muslim youth, a total of 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews (45–60 min) were conducted with male and female youth aged 18–22 years, all born in Ontario, Canada. This community was selected because it contains not only a large and vibrant Somali Diaspora but also many community hubs, business establishments, and Mosques in the area. Within this predominately Muslim population, the terminology of *Say-Walahi* and code of communication was understood. I was accustomed hearing it wherever community members converge, whether in someone's home, a coffee shop, or in a local urban community setting. As a self-identifying Black/African male of Somali ancestry, I was and am seen as a local in community hubs, coffee shops, and the Mosques within the vicinity of Rexdale, because I am a regular attendee in these settings who shares many social, cultural, racial/ethnic, and religious attributes. Therefore, I was naturally or organically assigned an insider status, aided by the fact I had a good sociocultural understanding of the ways in which Black youth take up their identities. However, my roots in the community were somewhat offset by my role as an academic researcher as well as my age, factors which set me apart from this community of young people. Nevertheless, as I conducted the interviews, I spent time getting to know the youth to get a better understanding of the social environment. All study participants identified as practicing Muslims and gave informed written consent to take part in this research. All interviews were conducted in English, video recorded and transcribed, with additional notes taken to document social interaction. Data were collected as interview transcriptions and field notes, with participants identified by gender, age, and pseudonyms. Interview transcriptions and field notes were coded for thematic analysis using VoVo software, and video recordings were reviewed for reflective note-taking and further organization of emerging themes. Thematic analysis centered on the intersection of the identity categories of religion (Muslim) and race (Black/African), and how youth both internalize and present their religious, racial, and Diasporic identities.

Results

Emerging Themes from the Study

One of the reoccurring themes that emerged from the data analysis was the participants multiple Diasporic identities that the youth embody as a living testament of their lived experiences as Black Muslims in Canada. Although the youth stressed that their identities were self-defined, qualitative analysis revealed these identities are both unified and complex. All participants described themselves as Black and with roots in a national/ethnic identity. I therefore paid attention to how the participants articulated their own understanding of who they were in relation to their schooling experiences and society at large.

My overall objective was to listen to the youths' voices as they articulated various personal and communal struggles in their everyday lives. In providing the space and listening, I was mindful of the ways in which the participants' identities were intersectional and made room for discussions of race, religion, gender, and identity. At the early stages of the interview process, most of the youth were reluctant to talk about anti-Black racism and/or Islamophobia and initially expressed notions of belonging and community, speaking broadly about where they were from. However, as the interviews progressed, and youth felt comfortable enough to share, experiences of anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and social exclusion were quite evident.

The Intersection of Race and Religion

For Muslim Diaspora, especially those that are situated in the West, the reality of being racialized is very complicated because of the ways in which Islam becomes a signifier of a people and a way of life that is not only multiracial but also not tied to any particular race. Junaid Rana (2016) explains that the racialization of Muslims goes beyond a racial phenotypology and proposes a concept, coined as the 'racial becoming' of the Muslim body:

> [a] system of race that is deemed to not be race. In this paradox Muslim racialization perhaps reflects racism but not a racial group; it is always becoming yet will never be. It is a historicity without a futurity because the future is what must be pre-empted in the language of counterterror. White supremacy as a biopolitical system depends upon multiple and variegated forms of racial becoming… for Muslim racial becoming, the transformation into racial formation is constructed as impossible—it just cannot be, and that is the racial formation of becoming for Muslims. It is a racialization that denies the existence of Muslim as a racial group because it is argued that it is a religious group, or

because it is multiracial, or because religion is ideological, and any other number of reasons that perpetuates this tautology or racial becoming and racialization. Being stuck in this tautological reasoning of Muslim racial becoming is precisely the innovation of the theory of race and racism in the context of terror prevention and logics of the security state. (p. 121)

Therefore, being Muslim, especially in the West within a Diaspora context is associated with an inherent danger of being policed by the state. I wish to emphasize that when one is both Muslim and Black/African, race is even more unforgiving, because of the ways in which Blackness is stereotyped as criminal. Stanley Ilango Thangaraj (2021) cautions us about the importance of understanding the correlation between being both Black and Muslim in terms of race especially when it come to understanding the experiences of racialization.

Although oversimplified, one clear aspect of the youths' identity struggles is that they embody two intersecting identities, one of being of African/Black origin, and other of being Muslim. Hajji, a 21-year-old male, eloquently captured this identity location:

With Blacks they can understand the race thing, and with Muslims you don't have to explain how the world is Islamophobic…. I fear for my mother cuz she is a hijabi and she is always afraid my brothers and I will get arrested for nothing, it is unforgiving either way.

Say-Walahi youth talked about experiencing anti-Black racism and Islamophobia in school, and they shared moments in which they felt targeted because of their identity. They also expressed the degree to which they were disproportionality subjected to discipline in their schools. Abdi, a 19-year-old male, explains this in the context of coming to school on Fridays dressed for Jummah:

I could feel the tension when I walked into the schools every Friday wearing a thobe [Islamic attire for men] … when we're minding our own business … it's [as if] they were waiting for us to make the wrong move.

Abdi's feelings of being targeted in his school highlight the tension inherent in how his identity is taken up in the school. Samiha Rahman, in her article 'Black Muslim Brilliance: Confronting Antiblackness and Islamophobia Through Transnational Educational Migration,' articulates this predicament very well:

> Muslim youth are construed as objects of moral and political concern due to their racial, religious, and gender identities. Black youth of all genders are often seen to be at risk for a range of social, academic, and psychological problems, which in turn leads to them being disproportionality policed, trafficked, expelled, and incarcerated (Noguera, 2003). The salience of the 'terrorist' to the perception that Muslim boys and young men are prone to violence, while Muslim girls and young women are often pathologized as experiencing religiously sanctioned forms of gender-based oppression (Rahman, 2021, p. 58).

Not only is this tendency to be constructed as subjects of concern harmful to the souls and psyches of Black Muslim youth, but it is something that is palpably evident in their schools. During the process of his interview, Abdi went on to explain that even when he tries to do good and participate and raise his hand, the teacher would not call on him, and when he just uttered the answers, he was disciplined for speaking. His perception was that other non-racialized and white students were often praised by the teacher for voicing their opinion. Abdi went on to explain:

> I use[d] to love going to school, it was my thing until I got to high school…there everything changed, my grades started plummeting, and for the first time I noticed that all the friends from childhood that looked like me started disappearing and often hearing of them dropping [out] … soon after classes were not fun, the environment was hostile and in so many ways we were told that we did not belong … I couldn't continue and did what my parents couldn't imagine … I ain't proud of that.

Indeed, an anti-Black, anti-Muslim climate in school negatively affected the academic endeavours of the youth. It is well documented that positive community schooling experiences provide students with the social milieu to excel and to become productive members of society (Atkins, 2012; Codjoe, 2006; Smith et al., 2005). With respect to an anti-Black, anti-Muslim schooling climate, my field work found that youth constantly felt a sense of alienation outside of their communities. Yet, they also spoke about some positive experiences as Black Muslim youth, and they recalled the various moments when they felt a sense of pride for being part of a collective identity, part of the *Ummah* (see Ali, 2018; Bendixsen, 2013). A prime example is the celebration of Islamic heritage, held every October in the Toronto District School Board, when Islamic heritage and histories are recognized and celebrated with displays of Islamic cultures, arts, and attire. The youth I interviewed displayed tremendous pride in being Muslim when they reflected on some of the positive aspects of their schooling.

Prayer Spaces: The Gift of Belonging

Participants also stressed the importance of having prayer spaces during school hours. However, the youth also highlighted that school principals, teacher, and administrators often singled them out for requesting to leave classes to go and pray at prayer times. Participants spoke of being questioned about the prayer times and/or if they were really going to pray. As was the case too often some of the students were seen as skipping classes and hanging out it in the hallways instead of being in class, and their intentions were questioned. The mention of both Islamic heritage months and the importance of prayer spaces highlights the importance participants placed on their Islamic faith and spiritual practice. Given how rare it was for the youth to see their Islamic identity in a positive light, particularly post 9/11, instances where the youth can come together to celebrate and/or to practice their Islamic faith gave them a platform to express their identity. Thus, the idea of being Black Muslims signified a stigmatization of the students that resulted in differential treatment based on both race and religious beliefs. Yet the participants indicated that practicing their Islamic faith through prayers provided a sense of collective identity grounded in Islamic faith. Jasmine Zine (2000) in her article 'Redefining Resistance: Towards an Islamic Subculture in Schools' explains:

> [An] Islamic subculture is the level of student interaction, cohesion and support, which is represented as the social infrastructure. The social and cultural life within schools is mediated through the subculture, where students organise social activities, as well as providing effectual peer support. The social infrastructure of Islamic student subcultures represents a social network of Muslim students based on common beliefs, practices and goals. The nature of interaction which takes place among students is structured to conform to Islamic moral codes and conduct. (p. 298)

In support of Zine's ideas, Zhara, a 19-year-old female, offered the following explanation as to how the Islamic subculture operated in her school as she reflected on prayer time at school:

> Sometimes I would wait for the other Muslim students to walk up to the teacher and excuse themselves to go pray … then I would just follow along. But when we got to the prayer space it was just us standing before Allah [God] and nothing … no one could take that way from us, especially Fridays cuz everyone was serious and came together … the brothers would have their space and we would have our space. But I always notified the tension walking back into class … sometimes the teacher would be looking at the time …

Zhara's words highlight how the congregations of peers provided a sense of spiritual belonging, a place where they could not only practice their Islamic faith but also retreat from being singled out for being Muslim. In fact, many participants mentioned that praying in school provided them with a positive representation of their Islamic identity. As such, Zhara's experiences might have limited her academic trajectory and affected her overall progress. Her narrative highlights the ways in which she as a racialized Black Muslim student has learned to navigate an anti-Black and Islamophobic environment. Carolyn Rouse (2004) in her book *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*, describes how complex processed of being racialized within a collective communal space amongst other women are, a sentiment articulated by Zhara. Moreover, although Zhara has learnt to keep her head down and avoid confrontation, her behavior demonstrates her ability to navigate and develop a support system amongst other Black Muslim youth at school through acts of worship.

Black, Muslim, and Female: The Hijab and Public Perception

Another Islamic identity feature that was central to the ways in which Islamophobia was experienced was linked to the *hijab*, the headscarf worn by Muslim females. This research study highlighted the ways in which Muslim female identities experience a particular kind of racialization, one where there is ultimately a double gaze: the Western perception of the covered Muslim female as oppressed, and the gaze from within the Muslim community (see Abu-Lughod, 2002; Khan, 2022; Lone, 2019; Ruby, 2006). The practice of wearing the hijab represents an Islamic womanhood (Zine, 2006), a modesty in practicing Islam. But in Western society the act of wearing the hijab is viewed as backwards, and women who wear the hijab could be subjected not only to gender discrimination, but also Islamophobia. Some of the female participants felt that their hijab was seen to represent them living under oppressive Islamic regimes and therefore lacking a voice because of their Islamic religion (see Mohammadi, 2018; Nagra, 2018; Rahmath et al., 2016; Ruby, 2006). One of the most poignant statements was from Amina, a 22-year-old female, who said, 'I am a hijabi girl … how do you think the world sees me? I am voiceless, silent to the world.' This dominant misrepresentation of Muslim women wearing the hijab has a profound impact on the educational experiences of Muslim girls, because it sets up a narrative around Islamic gender oppression to construct the Muslim female as being void of agency or any ability to be heard. Thus, the hijab marks an unfreedom solely associated with the act of wearing it. Moreover, the hijab is often associated with being foreign by virtue of it

being linked to Middle Eastern and/or Arab cultures. Therefore, the Diasporic Black Muslim female born in Canada is categorized as an Other. As such, the combination of the hijab as a distinct Islamic clothing article together with Muslim ethics and practices and Blackness as a skin colour represents a particular kind of racialization that is not only located within the parameters of race, religion, and gender. Aisha, a 19-year-old female study participant, stated the following:

> As soon as I started wearing the hijab my friends at school started asking me if my family was forcing me to put on the hijab, and although initially seemed supportive they eventually all started disappearing from my life … Even when I am in public I find people will often avoid speaking to me, and when they have to they often keep it short. It is as if wearing the hijab equates to me not speaking English. I am the same person, just now wearing a hijab. Things were quite different before I started covering. So, I really don't get it when they are sometimes bold enough to ask me where I am from …

Aisha's sentiment captures a mainstream perception of the Black Muslim woman/girl as an immigrant, signifying practical notions of unbelonging because of their Islamic traditional womanhood values. In addition, the religious body politic together with etiquettes and the cultural expression represented by the hijab contribute to the perception of the Muslim Black women as oppressed. Moreover, the vision of the hijab on a young Black Muslim woman sets new social boundaries between the racialized/civilized and the general public, communicated through very little or no interaction with someone wearing the hijab (Mirza, 2013; McGuire et al., 2016). Most importantly, misconceptions around the hijab, especially post 9/11 and in the current anti-Muslim political climate, ignore notions of individualism and the right to self-expression. For these young women, the decision to wear or not to wear the hijab becomes more about preference or religious *choice* than religious *conviction*. Lori Peek (2011) in her book titled *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11* examines anti-Islamic sentiments in the US during the 2000s and highlights that after the 9/11 attacks, many Muslim women began to wear the hijab as a means of expressing solidarity with other Muslims who were expressing harassment at the time. Thus, the act of wearing hijab as an identity politic becomes an act of self-representation and resistance.

For some of the female participants, wearing the hijab carried some internal tension between their Islamic practices and beliefs and living the West. Importantly, this has less to do with who they are and what they wear and more to do with how society views them. Therefore, in understanding the

intersections of race, religion and gender, attention must be paid to the ways in which attitudes around Muslim *hijabi* women and girls are deeply gendered, that is, the issue of the hijab was far less significant to the non-female participants in the study. It is also worth noting that the issue is much more complex because of the ways in which society conceptualizes the hijab as not a simple clothing article but as a means of regulating the Muslim female body.

Halal and Diasporic Youth Culture

The concept of halal has its roots in Arabic language, and within Islamic practices it pertains to what is permissible under the guidelines of Islam. The idea of what is halal in many ways serves as a principle of what a Muslim chooses to (or not to) eat, drink, and/or do (O'Brien, 2017). As far as Islamic religious practices are concerned, what constitutes halal encompasses a wide range of Islamic beliefs and practices, and what is interesting is that the *Say-Walahi* youth operationalize this concept to not only navigate their world but also negotiate in their everyday lives. For them, the idea of halal is as much about their Islamic identity as Muslims in North America as it is about how they choose to carry themselves. Therefore, processes of embodying and adhering to halal vs. haram are anchored questions such as What is my religion? How do I practice my religion? What does it mean to be Muslim in the West? Such a line of questioning would typically entail constantly being mindful of what is halal vs what is haram. Within the Diasporic context of the *Say-Walahi* youth, this has profound implications on how they see themselves within their societies as well as their overall self-esteem. As youth who are socialized in Western cultures, there could be tension and/or competing interests between Islamic values and the dominant culture and value systems (Nilan, 2017; Ryan, 2014; Tindongan, 2011). Interestingly, most of the interviewed youth were not only aware of this tension but had also developed an Islamically coded cultural capital that was understood amongst their Muslim peers. This allowed them to construct their own Diasporic identity and project their voices. Salama, a 22-year-old female, explained this predicament thus:

> Our parents want us to be a certain way. Society thinks we are oppressed, and we are trying to figure it out … there is always the feeling of not belonging anywhere, so we have to make our own spaces.

Salama articulates how her Islamic identity is situated both in her country of birth and in her private home life. An identity that is highly contested

(O'Brien, 2017), it is a racialized identity that is in the making. This process of identity development comprises a series of decisions around which values, ideologies, and cultural claims to embody are carried out in a social, political, and cultural terrain that is not always favorable to the Muslim body. Nevertheless, the question of a Black Muslim identity here is one of self-articulation and self-determination as a means of responding to how the youth understand their religious values within their context, because there is a strong link between the youths' social identity and living in the West. The reality of being Muslim, particularly amongst other Muslim youth, becomes a unifying factor to speak of identity; that is, being Muslim serves as a starting point. Another unifying factor seems to be that as Black Muslim youth born in Canada; they are collectively facing challenges that their parents perhaps did not face. In essence, the principles of haram and halal enable the youth to construct social, moral, and political boundaries that bind them together in their attempt to subvert and challenge Islamophobia. Moreover, the moral and political boundaries also allow the youth to treasure their collective experiences of being Black and Muslim in and through a social life understood only by their peer groups. As Muslims, the moral values of haram and halal allow for 'Muslim space making' (Fischer, 2009), that is, 'the production of the 'social space' of networks and identities created as individuals interact in new contexts, as well as the 'cultural space' that emerges in a wide variety of ways as Muslims interact with one another and with the larger community' (Fischer, 2009, p. 4).

Therefore, for these *Say-Walahi* youth to take up their identity is essential both as a mode of survival and as a mechanism to avoid threats, while simultaneously being part of a greater Muslim youth community where the shared bond is being both of Black/African ancestry and Muslim. This sentiment was captured by Mohammed, a 20-year-old male: 'I am just trying to be. Nothing is halal in this world, I am Black on top of that. I try to be a good person, good Muslim and all, but it ain't easy.' In essence, being part of a community is also an important identity anchor that enables one to be rooted. As such, the Black Muslim identity can best be understood as a means of interpreting the world and meditating social conflict while being in an intense identity dislocation. The attempt to 'keep it halal' signifies a fundamental cultural space to exercise and express a Diasporic communal way of being (Tindongan, 2011).

Easy Targets in Political Crisis

One of the overarching salient themes that most of the interviewed youth spoke about was the notion that they saw themselves as easy targets particularly during times of political crisis involving Muslims and/or a Muslim

society. A majority of the participants in this dialogue alluded to the tension with their identity when, for instance, an act of terrorism took place locally and/or internationally and became part of public discourse. In such times they felt the tension and found themselves to be quite vulnerable to microaggressions such as 'you guys,' especially from students, that went unquestioned. More disturbingly however, the youth felt that teachers would implicate Islam and the Muslim students in the school when educating students about the wrongfulness of acts of terror. Taking on the role of public safety agents, teachers perhaps inadvertently create an environment where the Muslim body is interrogated for local or international events in subtle ways. In such cases, the Muslim identity becomes symbolic of the terrorist threats facing society. Therefore, under the guise of public good/safety, every Muslim, according to these youth, is inherently suspect. Microaggressions create a social/political separation between the authority (i.e., the teacher) and the Muslim terror 'suspect' (i.e., the *Say-Walahi* youth), where the only correlation is that of religion. This separation on the basis of one's Muslim identity is not only harmful but also steeped in a dominant Western logic about safety and security. Kadija, a 22-year-old female participant in the study recalls her homeroom teacher telling her that she is not 'that kind of Muslim' during a conversation after a terrorist attack took place in the United States. Kadija, reflecting on this interaction many years later, stated that she remembers thinking to herself, 'What kind of Muslim am I?' But she also felt that she couldn't speak her mind at the time without repercussions. Kadija's frame of thinking underscores the ways in which her Islamic identity is categorized as a danger in a tense social/political climate. Moreover, what is worth noting is that she challenges her teacher's negative assertion in her head as an act of resistance. Such occurrences highlight the ways in which the notion of guilt simply for being Muslim causes the students to feel unsafe in their community schools. The tension arising from the acts of terror and the ways in which they are interpreted by this teacher results in characterization of the student as a danger to society on the basis of their faith alone. Encounters such as these could have everlasting effects on a student well into adulthood.

Discussion: Implications for Urban Education and Educators

The question of education is central to the ways in which one's identity is positioned in any given society. The key question for the *Say-Walahi* youth is what does it mean to be Black/African and Muslim within an urban

Diasporic context in Canada? Education is more than a physical classroom space, curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, peers, and administrators. Education establishes a student's place in their society. Looking at the ways in which the *Say-Walahi* take up and claim their multiple identities as Black/African and Muslim offers a nuanced understanding of contemporary youth particularly as it relates to anti-Blackness and Islamophobia in education. This identity location offers new ways of remapping the possibilities of claiming, producing, and re-producing identities outside the confines of colonial knowledge and discourses that have been instrumental in boxing in racialized identities as the Other (see Hochman, 2019). For the interviewees, their African/Black Muslim identities are rooted in their ancestral heritage, customs, and cultures that connect them to their communities in the Diaspora. They have been able to imaginatively invoke a subversive communication code, youthful cultural capital, and cultural resistance that is rooted in their understanding of their Islamic faith. This study highlights their efforts to escape the constant colonial gaze in educational spaces by creating spaces that connect them to other Black Muslim youth. The question of culture, particularly of Diasporic culture, is of importance because it enables the youth to express themselves and to be whole and complete in ways that only they can define themselves.

As such, *Say-Walahi* youth, along with other members of the Black/African Muslim Diaspora, will benefit from having their multiple identities centered in the classroom and in community schools. We therefore need an educational system that is able to holistically engage the learner's mind, body, spirit, heritage, culture, history and identity. Education must also cultivate notions of the self that are whole and connected to community and/or society. In that sense, education cannot be disconnected from self, community, culture, and identity. If we are to think seriously about Black Muslim youth in education, we must wrestle with a multi-centric, community-rooted model for transformative education. This study is a call to rethink the educational system as a means of incorporating methods of teaching and learning to create spaces where Black Muslim youth can flourish and be proud of their accomplishments as members of their communities and society at large.

For educators and school administrators to grasp the many challenges imposed on their students, they must be willing to question the very assumptions they hold against the populations they serve. It is not uncommon for schools serving economically underprivileged students from racialized and/or immigrant backgrounds to be branded as troubled schools, often referred to in an urban setting as 'ghetto schools,' a place where parents with means will often not send their town children. This misconception is highly problematic because it produces low expectations through stereotypical assumptions

about the students being racialized in the school (see Marsh & Walker, 2022; Noguera, 2003). The central question for me is: Are schools labeled as 'ghetto' actually located in impoverished communities, or are the people these schools are serving being thus labeled? The 'ghetto' branding of a school is often tied to an achievement gap and low student expectations (see Rothstein, 2015). Teachers, administrators and staff working in school settings where racialized Black Muslim students are learning must be willing to uncover and challenge their unconscious biases and assumptions about their students. Particularly if they themselves are white and/or otherwise privileged, staff must consciously de-center the racializing whiteness in their classrooms and school community. Importantly, racializing whiteness is found not only in the social structures of the institution but also in the curriculum and teaching culture, and it is responsible for creating an exclusionary white space in the education system (see Milner, 2010, 2017).

School educators and administrators must also work courageously to create and develop curriculum that centers student identities and is culturally inclusive. The centrality of curriculum is that it encompasses all aspects of a structured systemic plan of learning designed to guide student learning, and in particular both what and *how* they learn. Therefore, educators must be culturally responsive in what and how they teach, working to incorporate their students' cultural knowledges, lived experiences, epistemological knowledge foundations and worldviews, all to make knowledge, and learning, more culturally relevant (see Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Students need to encounter and experience a curriculum that speaks to their lived experiences and world views (Milner, 2005).

We must proceed on the premise that teachers who work in schools where there are racialized Muslim students can successfully teach them and positively impact their schooling experiences irrespective of their own cultural background. However, we must center the idea that cultural, ethnic, and religious identities are an integral part of a student's personhood, with the understanding that educational experiences can not be fully realized without a complete affirmation of the student identity. Much can be learned from the ways in which these *Say-Walahi* youth are and were engaged as students in their schools. Clearly, it is essential for teachers to move away from pervasive traditional (i.e., white; see Milner, 2010, 2017, 2020) teaching strategies and philosophiesto a place where they can center the students' identities in their teaching, through creative lesson planning and specific application of curricular requirements. We must also move away from the traditional binaries between secularism and religion in our public educational system, as notions of secularism are attached to values of modernity and Westernization that are closely linked to Judeo-Christian values and

worldviews (see Memon & Chanicka, 2024). Through concerted efforts, teachers can provide a holistic learning environment that is more capable of fostering student growth. Indeed, the centering of student cultures and identities in the classroom has the potential to benefit all students through the celebration of diversity and the fostering of empathy and inclusivity. For *Say-Walahi* youth and indeed for other Black/African and/or Muslim students, teachers must be committed to developing an understanding of how to engage with multiple and complex dimensions of Blackness and Islam in their classrooms and community schools, with an understanding of how negative misconceptions about race, ethnicity, and religion can negatively impact these students. The challenge is to become conscious of negative perceptions and racializing Islamophobic attitudes and beliefs that often shape teachers' attitudes and unconscious biases towards their students, which will in turn influence how teachers interact with their students. Gavan Gay, in her article 'Teaching In and Through Diversity,' explains: 'Positive attitudes about ethnic, racial, and gender differences generate positive instructional expectations and actions toward diverse students, which, in turn, have positive effects on students' learning efforts and outcomes. Conversely, negative teacher beliefs produce negative teaching and learning behaviors' (Gay, 2013, p. 56.). It is our work as educators to be mindful of how we *see* our students and schooling communities.

In thinking about educational research, we must be willing to conceptualize education broadly to be able center questions of identity and lived experiences in educational research. In this article, youth voices demonstrate the centrality of community in education, in preocular notions of creating communities and being a part of something greater than the self in identity, culture, heritage, history, ways of knowing, and religious or spiritual beliefs. Without a doubt, *Say-Walahi* youth experience anti-Black racism and Islamophobia. The question is not how they experience one dehumanizing oppression relative to the other, but rather how they embody their intersectional identities to create spaces for themselves both in the home and schooling communities. As argued throughout this article, the location of the youths' identities within a Diaspora provides them with cultural resources (see Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012) that encompass racial, ethic, and religious identities with roots in an ancestral homeland while still calling Canada home. Educational research must account for the ways in which race, gender, ethnicity, language, and culture constitute an identity that students bring to school, with each identity category being entangled with imbalanced power relations. Moreover, we must be mindful of the political/social climate in which the research is being conducted, asking ourselves why, how, and by whom the research is being done, and to whose benefit? To this end, educational

research must also anchor non-Western/non-European ways of knowing in research questions and methodology to bring forth a genuine and nuanced understanding of the social context in which the research is being conducted.

Of the upmost importance, in my opinion, are notions of community, community interest, and community relations when carrying out research, to avoid producing/reproducing dominant images, discourse, and hegemonic ideas about the research community to reproduce the 'other.' This approach would allow transformative community research to take place, instead of reinscribing dominant power relations that are embedded in the Western hierarchical order of knowledge. Community in research also allows for the research community to exhibit and develop subversive resistant ways of knowing that holistically enable members of the community to chart their own cultural, spiritual/religious, emotional, physical, psychological, and mental wellbeing. For instance, today's youth are encouraged to center themselves in their everyday life in school and in society at large; however, for the participants in this study, the youth's identities are often silenced, taken up as hyper-violent, and/or oppressed. Therefore, for many youths the idea of truly expressing themselves in schools and outside their local communities is not an option and at times comes at an enormous cost.

Conclusion

The reality of being Black and Muslim within contemporary urban centers is situated at the intersection between a post 9/11 world and Black Lives Matter protests in response to incessant unjust Black death. This intersection is central to questions of identity, particularly the complex ways in which the multiplicities of Blackness intersect with being Muslim. This study brings multiple new perspectives on how Islamophobia and anti-Black racism impact youth living in Toronto, including discussion on how these youth referred to as the *Say-Walahi* embody a Diasporic identity that forms a tight community within an urban intensive setting. These youth in essence highlight the complexities of identity formation, with particular claims to identities that are rooted in rural Somalia and dispersed throughout urban centers in the English-speaking world. There are profound possibilities not so much in questions of origins and/or cultural roots but rather in the ways in which these urban Diaspora youth in Canada speak of being Muslim and Black, with their social context, and the cultural logics that they themselves operationalize. Certainly, not every Black Muslim youth of Somali ancestry will subscribe to being Black and Muslim in the same way. But the question of this contemporary Black, Muslim, and youthful identity is an important part of understanding the educational experiences of urban Diasporas. This

understanding is built upon the notion that being African/Black is culturally steeped into African Indigenous traditions and ancestral ways of knowing and being, which are distinctly not urban but rather connected to land, spirit, and local community (Ilmi, 2014, 2015). The teaching of, learning from, and engaging with students' African cultural heritage and Islamic faith could contribute positively to the schooling experience and overall well-being of not only these youth but also the wider student population. Working with what community youth as learners know about (i.e., their living and/or lived experience) can help affirm their identities and allow them to develop a path to claim their identities and exercise agency over their collective futures. If humanity is to survive living in dense urban centers among diverse identities, celebrating diversity and uniqueness is our path to teaching youth to know and value themselves while affording the same to others. This can be the contribution of urban education to peaceful co-existence and a better world for future generations.

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