Abstract

This thesis deals with the conversion stories of five female converts to Islam; dealing with the expectations my interlocutors have faced, the pressures to tell a certain type of narrative, the formation of their practice and the stories they choose to narrate. The concept of an ‘epiphany’ narrative, a story of inspiration and divine intervention, will be discussed and placed into tension with ‘rupture’ narratives; the stories my interlocutors tell in order to ‘make sense’ of their conversions.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my interlocutors for the time, insight, tea and friendship they have shared with me. My thanks also go to my dear family, friends, and professors who have given so generously to support me in my endeavors. Special gratitude goes to Prof. Amira Mittermaier and Prof. Kevin O’Neill for their time and efforts.
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Introduction

Judy, Silvia, Veronica and I stood talking in the Toronto Subway’s Pape station on a cold Friday afternoon in January. As the bundled up commuters came to and fro on damp, cold subway line, weaving around us their haste, the four of us discussed the prayer service, juma’a (the Muslim Friday afternoon congregational prayer) we had just attended. Silvia and Judy, both white Western converts to Islam and interlocutors for my thesis project, had invited me to come to juma’a to visit their small, enthusiastic, activist Muslim mosque community, wherein they seek to build a gender-equal, queer-friendly, and religiously non-discriminatory space to worship. Despite the dampness and the cold city air blowing through the drafty station, we lingered on, engaged in a conversation about Veronica’s recent conversion to Islam. She spoke to us about the struggles she has had in her nearby city, London, Ontario, in finding a Muslim community wherein she could feel ‘at home’. Though there are many Muslim spaces in her city, Veronica, a Caucasian woman who possesses no recognizable signifiers of Muslim-ness (a Muslim name, hijab, etc.), often feels outside of the various communities within the London Muslim faithful. “Just do what I’ve been doing”, Silvia joked, “Form your own space. Carve out your own way.” Judy piped in that she had felt the same way when she converted to Islam twelve years ago when she was in her first year of her undergraduate degree. She hadn’t felt comfortable with the members of the MSA (Muslim Student Association) on campus and spent years questioning; “If I didn’t belong with the Muslim community around me, where did I belong? How was I Muslim?” Silvia jumped in at this moment, saying something which echoed a conversation we had had two months prior;
I spent years thinking about my Muslim-ness, what I was, how I was Muslim. But you know, I’ve spent so many years struggling and thinking and studying. And it got to the point where, even if I didn’t want to be Muslim, it’s too late. It’s become so apart of my identity that I couldn’t un-become, even if I wanted to. (Silvia)

In September of 2010, I began my master’s thesis project, choosing to write ethnography about female North American converts to Islam.¹ Earlier in the summer, I had asked my two friends, Carmen and Laura, both converts to Islam, to participate in ethnographic interviews; a request to which they happily agreed. Initially, I had intended to find a group of ten to fifteen converts, from diverse walks of life and practices in order to create a diverse collage of conversion stories. My preliminary conceptual framework for this project was to consider my interlocutors’ conversions as metaphoric and symbolic transition between borders, religions, communities and worlds. This approach was inspired by Michael D. Jackson’s discussion of Victor Turner’s conception of ‘liminality.’ (Turner 1969, 102) Jackson’s investigation into the idea of borderlands and passages helps to conceptualize the notion of conversion as the search for belonging and the journey through spiritual/ emotional/ social crossings. (Jackson 2009, 5)

As I look back on my initial interviews and the list of questions with which I began, I realize that I was seeking a story of inspiration from my interlocutors. My preliminary line of questioning sought answers which described a ‘rupture’ narrative; a time of rapid and all

¹It should be noted that only two of my five interlocutors, Laura and Ellen, were born and raised and converted to Islam in Canada (though they now all live in and around Toronto). Carmen was born in the United States, raised in both Michigan and Ontario, and converted while living in the US. Silvia is an American who spent the majority of her life in the US; converting to Islam and living there as a Muslim for almost twenty years. She moved to Canada four years ago. Judy also converted to Islam in the US and moved to Canada about ten years later. As such, I have chosen to use North America, or Canada and the United States, as a characterization for situating my interlocutors geographically (unless I am speaking about their present location).
encompassing change in one’s life and the perspective of one’s existence. Since then, my ethnographic research has guided me to ask different questions. Conversations with my interlocutors reoriented my relationship to the topic and led me to change my foundational queries about conversion. Instead of predominantly examining the story of a ‘rupture’ or the romanticized liminal existence of a convert, I have sought to examine the mechanics of the narration of conversion stories, the pressures to tell these narratives, and my interlocutors quest for recognition as Muslims. The change that occurred in my project’s focus can be considered within Michel Foucault’s notion of an ‘incitement to discourse’; the “institutional incitement” to speak about a subject and the production of discursive spaces, and Judith Butler’s conception of ‘the call’ to “give an account of oneself”, which explains that a subject must formulate her account as a response to the individual or social/institution body which questions her. (Foucault 1978, 18, Butler 2005, 10) As such, this project seeks to investigate ‘the call’ to narrate one’s experience as a convert, and the assumptions, pre-conceptions, demands and suppositions that mediate each and every account.

Instead of spreading out my study into a larger body of interlocutors and a wide dispersion of converts, I have chosen to focus on the conversion experiences and histories of five women. In doing so, I have been able to engage in a more in-depth analysis of their experiences and the stories they tell. My interlocutors for this project became five Muslim converts, four academics and one educated professional, who live in and around Toronto, Canada. I began my fieldwork in September of 2010, beginning with conversations with my friends Carmen and Laura, and continued through the fall, finding three other interlocutors; Ellen, Judy and Silvia. The many conversations I had with my interlocutors were often recorded. On the occasions that these exchanges were not recorded, I wrote detailed notes and then, followed up with my interlocutors; cross-checking my notes and quotes I recorded with subsequent questions. The
exchanges with my interlocutors most often took place in the form of informal conversations, rather than formal interviews.

My ethnographic research did not happen in a far off ‘field’ in a foreign country and within a group or society which could immediately recognize me as an ethnographer, as an ‘other’. My ‘field’ became the coffee shops, restaurants, homes and cars of my interlocutors. Nor, conversely, could I recognize any of my interlocutors as ‘others’. Two of my interlocutors have been my close friends for a number of years. With the remaining three women, I quickly built a close rapport, and thus, our dialogues soon took on an ease and an intimacy. With each of these women I have a great deal in common; our engagement with academia, an invested interest in the Middle East and Islamic Studies, as well as a shared appreciation for the same coffee shops. Looking back upon the notes and transcriptions of our conversations, I recognize that often, some of the ethnographic exchanges most significant to this project occurred when tensions developed within our friend/friend and interlocutor/ethnographer relationship. I have chosen a number of these moments and interspersed them within this ethnography; highlighting my role within the ‘call for an account’ construction, and my interlocutors’ responses to this call.

My interlocutors were five highly motivated, educated individuals who could be categorized as an analytic and self-reflective group in their conception of and relationship to their conversion and their ‘Muslim-ness’. These women categorize themselves as ‘outsiders’ and consider themselves often treated as such; “not quite fitting into any regular appearance or form of Muslim”. ² I have approached my relationship to my interlocutor’s ‘Muslim-ness’ in a similar spirit to Vincent Crapanzano’s ethnographic experiment of *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*; a

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² Laura: explaining the ‘otherness’ of her Muslim-ness during a phone conversation in mid-October, 2010.
study which examines the ethnographer’s relationship to his interlocutor through the use of “personal” or “case history”. (Crapanzano 1980, 5, 8) While Tuhami, an illiterate Moroccan Arab tile maker, bears little resemblance to my own interlocutors; his “outsider” status and the meditational approach his ethnographer took in their analyzing their exchanges, carries significance in this project’s narrative voice. (Crapanzano 1980, 5, 11) My analysis and evaluation of my interlocutors, like any ethnographic encounter, has been mediated by their responses, stories, questions, and “moments fixed in time”. (Crapanzano 1980, 9) As such, I have been particularly focused on the ‘performative’ aspect of my interlocutors’ accounts; considering the significance of how it is they tell their stories to others and to me.

Having such reflective, motivated and highly intelligent interlocutors has been a blessing. Not only have they been gracious enough to spend their time sipping coffee, tea and chatting with me; their thoughtful feedback and commentary on this project’s purpose and process has helped immeasurably in the formation of a framework. Though within a conceptualization of a North American Muslim ‘community’ (or even a North American convert community), my interlocutors are relatively marginalized, they have each been afforded relative freedoms to construct and conceptualize their own beliefs and practices. This formative freedom, paired with their position as highly educated women, has afforded them considerable space in which to intellectually, conceptually, and philosophically consider their conversions. In studying this small, intimate group of intellectuals, I follow a trend within anthropology which seeks to study elites; their agency and power relations within their societies. These women, whose “self-recognition and consciousness” allows an active reflection on their own positions within their society and their relationship to their faith, have provided me with accounts which complicate preconceived notions of conversion. (Shore 2002, 3) Laura, who is in the second year of her PhD in International Relations; Ellen, who has just completed the first year of a Communications
PhD program; Carmen, who has a MA in Political Science; Judy, who is finishing her PhD thesis in Religious Studies; and Silvia, who is a scholar of Islamic Studies; provided me with and their accounts, conceptions, reflections, and philosophies of both their conversions, and their ‘Muslim-ness’. Their accounts delve into the messiness and complexity of a conversion; challenging the oft expected formulaic ‘epiphany’ conversion story and the pre-conceptions of what a convert or ‘revert’ looks like.  

1. Recognition as Muslims

With no immediate religious signifiers, like the hijab or Muslim names, Carmen, Laura, Ellen, Silvia and Judy are not immediately recognizable as Muslims. As a result, when they “come out” as Muslims, they generally face a confused or incredulous public, a barrage of questions, or are critiqued by a more conservative Muslim public for not practicing in the ‘expected’ way. My interlocutors have lamented the occasions when they attend mosques, Muslim community centers or other Muslim spaces in Toronto and in their hometowns, wherein they find themselves feeling ‘left out’; excluded by or isolated from various confessional or immigrant communities. As a result, they perpetually search for like-minded Muslims (men or women) and spaces wherein they are able to ‘feel at home’. Carmen discussed with me her relationship to many of the Muslim spaces in Toronto and explained her desire to “find a space” of her own:

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3 Reversion: according to Islamic doctrine, children are born with an innate knowledge of God and thus, are born Muslim. Therefore, when an adult converts to Islam, it is said that they are in essence ‘reverting’ to an original or pure stasis. They have returned to their former belief. I will continue to use the term convert instead of revert throughout my project; unless I am quoting my interlocutors.

4 My interlocutors do not have Muslim first names or family names. However, it should be noted that the names used here are pseudonyms. I have also used pseudonyms for their friends, family and colleagues.
I haven’t really found a Muslim community so to speak in my friends and acquaintances, but individuals have gathered one by one. I’ve yet to find a mosque that felt like home in that way. I wish that I’ve found such a thing. Noor centre comes close but there are just not enough spaces like that in the city. But generally speaking, mosques here, I get tripped up on the gender issue. And I don’t want to be perceived as unkind, but it’s the immigration thing. Any gathering of Muslims here is always one step removed from a conversation about immigration or the experience of an immigrant. Which I certainly recognize as an important conversation and a very valid experience, but it’s just not my experience, with Canada, the States or my religion. I don’t go to the mosque to have a debate about immigration, but that is always there. (Carmen)

2. Why are you writing this anyway?

At a party for the New Year of 2011, I was asked by one of the guests; “So, why did you choose to write about Muslim women? Are you Muslim?” This was not the first nor last time this question was posed to me. Indeed, I was initially surprised at how often those with whom I talked about my thesis, (acquaintances, colleagues, friends of my family: random people who ask ‘so, what do you do?’), leading to a discussion of my master’s program and, inevitably, my thesis), assumed that I, too, was Muslim or considering converting to Islam. So when, at the New Year’s party, a Scottish man named Rory asked me if I was Muslim in front of a group mixed with childhood friends, acquaintances and strangers, I experienced what Judith Butler, in Giving an Account of Oneself, terms as ‘a call’ to give ‘an account’. (Butler 2005, 55) At that

5 Noor Cultural Centre, located in Toronto, is a mosque and Islamic centre. It seeks to be “a centre for Islamic learning and a celebration of Islamic culture”, which respects the “diversity in peoples and religions as directed by the Qur’an”. Noor’s programming attempts to serve and be representative of the variety of Canadian Muslim experiences (including children’s programming, which one of my interlocutor’s characterized as an ‘Islamic-like equivalent to Brownies’). Its programming also seeks to reach out for dialogue with other faith based groups. Through a donation from Toronto’s Lakhani family, Noor centre established a Chair for Islamic Studies at University, which in turn has created a series of ongoing lectures. The majority of Noor’s funding comes from wealthy South African donors.
moment, I was pressed to decide how I ought to “take up that call”. How was I to respond to this query? My answer would situate me, and my relationship to my thesis project, in the eyes of the captive audience before me. How was I to characterize my relationship to my project, my interlocutors, and, more specifically to his pointed question, Islam, within this specific situation? The tactic that I chose, that of a refusal to give an account, resonates with the variety of responses my interlocutors give to similar queries. In a successful attempt at evading a direct response to his query, I chose to explain that an important intention of my project was challenging the prevailing conceptions and characterization of Muslims in Western media. It is this aspect of my project to which I now turn my attention.

In her ethnography Translated Woman, Ruth Behar uses Walter Benjamin’s “The Story Teller” as a way to make sense of her own telling of Esperanza’s life; the story of a an indigenous Mexican street peddler. Behar explains that Benjamin writes of the craft of a storyteller, the one who moves those active listeners to become the tellers of that same story. In this process, the art of storytelling becomes not only one of entertainment or the passing of knowledge; it is the act of inspiration. As “one storyteller speaks to another” the listener is moved, motivated to share and perhaps, stirred to action. (Behar 1993, 26) Behar’s purpose in taking Esperanza’s story across the border is to compose a political act of anthropology. Esperanza’s story is intended to act as a counter narrative to problematic press in the United States about Mexican migrants and the “expendability of unnamed Mexican bodies”; “illegal aliens” from the “wrong side of border”. (Behar 1993, xxi, 263) By writing Esperanza’s account, her historia, Behar hoped that she would, in some way, provide a rebuttal to racist or heartless accounts depicting those who stay on ‘the other side’ and those who cross the border. As she wrote her book, at a time when the line separating the US from its southern neighbor was rife
with tensions, which have only become more amplified, she sought to find a space wherein a “gesture of peace” could be expressed. (Behar 1993, xi)

In considering Behar’s objectives and intentions in writing Esperanza’s historia, I have pondered my own purposes in writing the stories of my own interlocutors; five women, two of whom are dear friends, who have entrusted their stories to my proverbial pen. Months ago, I wrote in my University of Toronto Ethic’s Review Application;

*It is my hope that in writing this thesis, a space for conversations and opinions which are seldom heard, will be opened... My writing, should it be published, could contribute to a more empathetic understanding of Muslim converts.*

This intention certainly remains true. One of my overarching purposes in writing this thesis is to create a space wherein the experiences of these women might be considered, their choices honored and their stories told. In the present, often hostile, climate, wherein “Islam and terrorism” have become “closely related within public discourse”, there exists a great deal of suspicion and negative understandings of Muslims. (Ewing 2008, 1) So too, the public consumption of media representations have led to limited and racist understandings of who a ‘Muslim’ is, and where Muslims come from. Katherine Ewing discusses how media representations, centered on a “radicalized category of Arab-Middle Eastern” or South Asian Muslims, reinforce a drastically limited and parochial understanding of both Muslim and Islam. (Ewing 2008, 5) I can only hope that through this, admittedly, limited project, the stories my interlocutors, their own work, activism and daily lives, might themselves create another kind of dialogue or story to be told as a counter narrative to grossly inadequate and incomplete understanding of Muslims in the West and in general. Indeed, as I record my carefully optimistic
intentions and idealist expectations, I recognize that my interlocutors are publishing their own representations of themselves through their own lives and work. Through their own personal ventures, Judy and Laura, with their academic work, Ellen, through her blogging and academic writing, Silvia, within her activism and academic work, and Carmen, through the values and pride she lives by and instills in her children; these dynamic women all endeavor to put forth a confident and positive representation of their individual understandings of their Islam and how they practice their faith.

However, cautionary words should be added to my grand synopses of my interlocutors’ work. Valorizing writing and heroic biography is a great temptation. In his ethnography *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, Philippe Bourgois explains anthropology’s preoccupation with the “exotic other”, which discourages studying that which can be found within anthropologists’ own societies. (Bourgois 1996, 14, Di Leonardo 1998, 15) This ‘obsession’ with finding the exotic worries Bourgois, as he contemplates the temptation to ‘exoticize’ or voyeuristically celebrate interlocutors at home. Although Bourgois wants to avoid valorizing his interlocutors, neither does he wish to vilify them or paint lives as a “pornography of violence”. (Bourgois 1996, 18) No ethnographer wishes to “make the people they study look ugly”. (Bourgois 1996, 15) Ruth Behar asserts that ethnography requires a vulnerable observer; a sensitive soul that might trace the emotion and ‘truths’ of her interlocutors. (Behar 1996, 33) I would argue that the aversion to ‘ugliness’ added to the vulnerability, sensitivity and proximity of the ethnographer to her/his interlocutor, tempt the Anthropologist to view and recognize her interlocutors in the most favorable of lights.

As I consider the lives of my interlocutors, two of whom are my dear friends, I’ve had to guard against writing glowing depictions of their own Muslim identities or their activism.
Indeed, I recognize an inherent danger in the heroic characterization of my interlocutors, focusing on their activism and valorizing their individual efforts to put forth a positive understanding of Islam. My interlocutors face significant pressure from society and media to put forth a positive image of their religion, faith and their identities as Muslim women. This pressure of representation can be a significant burden. These depictions fall into a deeper risk when one considers the extant binaries discussed by Mahmood Mamdani in *Good Muslim Bad Muslim*. Mamdani asserts that in a post 9/11 world, Muslims are called upon to fit into the political identity of either ‘good’ or ‘bad’; pitting the ‘good’ Muslims, who are “modern, secular and Westernized, against the ‘bad’ fundamentalists and extremists. (Mamdani 2004, 15, 24) He argues that the construction of these binaries “masks a refusal to address our own failure to make a political analysis of our times”. (Mamdani 2004, 16)

Throughout the course of this project, I have contemplated how the discussions of my interlocutors’ lives, heralding their confident, positive representations of their individual understandings of conversion and practice, have avoided or indulged these ‘good’/’bad’ binaries. Michel Foucault’s discussion of an ‘incitement to discourse, the conceptualization of a societal/institutional demand for a certain kind of narrative and the space which is provided for that narrative, has helped to situate this project’s relationship to these binaries. I recognize that this ‘incitement to discourse’ cannot be completely averted by either my interlocutors or I. (Foucault 1978, 34) As such, this project seeks to discuss and analyze my interlocutor’s stories through a reflexive framework; remaining conscious of why interlocutor and ethnographer, alike, would be incited to tell certain stories.
3. *And Representing the Muslims, we have…*

All of my interlocutors are called upon by a wide variety of people within their society to be an informant of Muslim culture or Islamic doctrine. As each of these women have devoted their professional and academic lives to Islamic scholarship and Muslim societies, or, have travelled widely throughout Muslim countries; this call to be an informant is something they take very seriously, and sometimes question or bemoan. At the beginning of October, Laura and I went to her hometown for the weekend to spend thanksgiving with her family. On the way there, gliding down the highway in her white Grand-AM, we talked about how she is uncomfortable with being a representative for Muslim women. She joked about how her colleagues came to her, to ask about her opinion on an article they were reading for one of their courses. “One of them said to me, ‘As our representative for Muslims and the Global South, what do you think of this article?’” I laughed in dismay and she explained, “I mean at the time I laughed, and I think they were half-joking, but how sad is that? Hey Laura, you are our token Muslim. And who am I as a white Western woman to be representing the Global South?!”

Recently, my friend Carmen placed a wonderful link on her Facebook page; a lecture given by the Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Adichie entitled “The Danger of the Single Story”. In her lecture she spoke of the power of story telling, the manner in which others’ stories can shape one’s identity, and the danger of making one account the ‘definitive’ story of that person. This warning evokes Butler’s discussion of ‘an account of oneself’, wherein she asserts that any account “is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story”. (Butler 2005, 40) Just as one will never be able to give a complete account of oneself, nor can

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6 The lecture can be found on the nonprofit website, “TED: Ideas Worth Spreading” http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
one give a definitive account of another. Adichie’s lecture reminds me of the care I must take in the characterization and depiction my interlocutors. As such, their stories cannot be read as authoritative depictions of their lives or their conversions, nor can their accounts be considered as definitive representatives of the Canadian or US Muslim ‘experience’. Indeed, their conversion stories should not be understood as definitively characteristic or symbolic of a female convert’s experience, even within the Canadian context. However, it remains impossible to entirely rule out the question of representation. My interlocutors are converts and Muslim women, and thus, represent a part of the Canadian Muslim experience. Though each of their accounts should be understood as distinct and personal narratives; when added to a collage of North American/global Muslim experience, these narratives illuminate the variety and breadth of encounters which can be found.

Ultimately, I remain mindful of what Behar discusses regarding George Devereux’s notion of the subjectivity of anthropology, wherein the observer “never observes the behavioral event which ‘would have taken place’ in his absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person.” (Behar 1996, 6) The exchanges and conversations between anthropologists and their interlocutors are unique and fleeting instances, performed in the moment and for that moment, and “always in the past.” (Behar 1996, 7) The accounts and stories which remain, recorded on hours of tape or hastily scribbled in journals are left to the discretion and sensibilities of the ethnographer. Just as Esperanza gave Behar the permission to write her historia, stating “it’s up to you” when asked what Behar ought to include in the book, my interlocutors have given me the responsibility and privilege to tell their stories and experiences. (Behar 1993, 232)
4. The Introductions:

4.1. Laura

In the fall of 2006 I went to the Sultanate of Oman to teach English directly after graduating from my bachelor degree. Wishing to duplicate my amazing university exchange experience, spending part of my fourth year in Cairo, Egypt, I assumed that Oman might be a more conservative but comparable part of the Middle East. I was placed by the company that recruited me in a small village in the north of the country, and after two days procuring my visa and attempting to find my footing in this new geography and society, I quickly decided that this would be nothing like Cairo. Upon arriving at my college, Laura, a Caucasian Canadian woman with striking green eyes, wearing a black *abaya*, introduced herself. She had recently completed her masters in Political Science at her hometown university, and had moved to Oman to be with her husband, a Muslim Arab Canadian, who had an engineering job in our town. She had converted to Islam three years earlier, before marrying her husband. Laura and I immediately became friends. Throughout the course of the year we drank twenty gallons of tea together. Since her move to Toronto in 2008, we have consumed many more cups of tea, Tim Horton’s medium double doubles and everything bagels with cream cheese. She is now in the second year of her PhD in Political Science. Laura is twenty-eight years old and has been a Muslim for nine years.

4.2. Carmen

I met Carmen in Cairo, Egypt, in her cozy Zamalek apartment for a house party. Her living room was filled to the brim with about fifteen people; her three children, friends and work

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7 Laura and her husband divorced in the spring of 2010 after six years of marriage.
colleagues. Upon heading to Cairo, Laura gave me the contact information for Carmen, her friend from Laura’s hometown university. They had also lived together in Cairo for a four month university exchange. Carmen was a friend from the first moment. A warm, sharply humorous woman, she invited me into her home whenever there was a gathering and we often went out to local coffee shops. She knew Cairo inside and out and moved around the city with ease, fluently speaking the Egyptian dialect. She had lived there off and on with her Muslim Arab husband, until they divorced ten years later, and their three children. Carmen converted to Islam when she was nineteen years old, shortly after marriage and while pregnant with her first child. Carmen is now forty years old and has been a Muslim for twenty-one years.

Carmen also moved back to Toronto in the summer of 2008, serendipitously coinciding with my own move to the same city for my master’s degree. She began working for the city of Toronto after completing her MA thesis in political science. Carmen and Laura provided my inspiration for the initial choice of this thesis topic. They both remain an essential source of encouragement for my personal and academic endeavors.

4.3. Ellen

At the time Ellen and I met, she had recently moved to Montreal for her PhD, after completing her masters in her hometown Toronto. Our mutual friend, Shireen, had put us in contact and I met her in a café one blustery afternoon while she was home for a weekend trip to visit her family. The isolation and loneliness that comes from moving to a new place had been difficult for Ellen, and she spoke of the challenges of ‘breaking’ into a Muslim community. Ellen is doing a PhD in communications at a Montreal university and intends to do her research on representations of Muslim women in the media. She converted to Islam four years ago and is in her late twenties.
4.4. Judy

I met Judy one frigidly cold late November afternoon in her university department. My friend Shireen, a fellow graduate student, had put us in contact and Judy immediately agreed to participate in my project. We headed out into the cold to a nearby café where they have excellent baked goods, picked up a coffee and a treat, then, sat down on bar stools to chat. We talked for three hours non-stop and she was a fabulous conversationalist. This was the first time I had met her and I was very impressed with her articulate, thoughtful comments and expressive nature. Judy was born in Germany in the late seventies, immigrated to the United States when she was sixteen years old. She converted to Islam when she was in her first year of university and has been a Muslim for twelve years.

4.5. Silvia

Silvia was born in California in the late 1960s. In the early 1990s, she finished her masters in Islamic studies in the United States and then went on to complete her PhD in Islamic Studies from the same institution in the early 2000s. Silvia moved to Canada four years ago to be with her husband and began teaching at a Toronto university as a visiting Islamic Studies professor. Silvia considers herself a ‘progressive and activist Muslim’ and has helped found a gender-equal, queer-friendly, and religiously non-discriminatory Mosque in downtown Toronto. Silvia converted to Islam when she was in her mid-twenties.
5. Embarking

The five women, with whom I have been conducting my fieldwork, recount that they are requested, even pushed to tell their conversion story on a regular basis. For many in their fascinated and/or dubious audience, the ‘why’ explanation of their conversion is intrinsically tied to the ‘how’: Were you influenced by a particular sheikh, sect, or interpretation? Where did the inspiration come to you (in a mosque or praying)? Did you convert because you were dating or married a Muslim man?

Chapter one, “Performing Piety and the Search for Recognition”, will delve into my interlocutor’s ‘performances of piety’, most specifically during the time of their initial conversion, and their search for recognition thereafter. My intention is to situate the investigation of my ethnographic research within an exploration of the epiphany narrative within Butler’s theory of ‘performativity’ in which the self must go through a process of unending self construction. The process by which they perform their Muslim identities, form their own ritual and ethical practices, and constitute themselves as Muslims in the spaces they inhabit, will be central to my discussion.

Chapter two, “The Epiphany Narrative”, will focus on the call for and construction of a conversion story as an ‘epiphany narrative’, a tale of inspiration, a touch with the divine; a moment of religious understanding and clarity. Though little literature on conversion exists, those studies which are extant tend to use a cursory label of ‘epiphany’ or divine inspiration equivalent to account for the ‘great change’ in the subjects’ religious constitution.

In her ethnographic study of African American women who have converted to Islam, Engaged Surrender, Carolyn Moxley Rouse frames her informants’ conversion experiences as “a
spiritual, social, political, and personal epiphanies”. (Rouse 2004, 10 emphasis added) In one instance, Rouse uses “epiphany” as synonymous with “surrender”; explaining that her interlocutors discovered a “social epiphany” by “coming to terms” with the “restrictions as well as the freedoms they have embraced”. (Rouse 2004, 20) However, many of the conversion narratives included in her ethnography do not seem to fit this ‘divine inspiration’ model. Afaf, a postal worker in Southern California, converted to Islam after a long process of exploration of various Muslim communities and doctrines. She joined the Nation of Islam after a “spiritual quest” and a long period of ‘transition’, but went to the masjid (mosque) sporadically. She then joined the Sunni Muslim community in her city, enjoined by “the message of self-sufficiency and discipline”. (Rouse 2004, 114) Rouse does not attempt to characterize or define her interlocutors’ epiphanies; and nowhere in Engaged Surrender does a story of ‘epiphany’, a sudden manifestation or intuitive realization of religious understanding, really appear. Her interlocutors’ experiences and the manner in which Rouse’s ethnography tells their accounts, is reminiscent of my own interlocutors’ stories of deliberation, contemplation, and even confusion, before converting and throughout their conversions. (Rouse 2004, 10, 20, 95, 215-16)

In my consideration of the ‘epiphany narrative’, I turn to Judith Butler’s gender theory and her notion of ‘becoming’, which I apply to my interlocutors’ ‘identity’ formation. Butler’s problematique with identity asks that if the identities that we profess are indeed constructed, do we ever actually become these intended selves or are we in a constant mode of becoming without end? This notion contends that one who wishes to become a Muslim will be in a perpetual mode of making oneself Muslim; engaged in a constant process of making oneself and performing/mis-performing an identity. Other salient questions that arise in this performative construction: what role does an audience play? For whom is the subject performing? Why does she perform? (Butler 2005, 66)
In this construction, must one consider what is demanded of a convert by a society? What could be considered some general presumptions or expectations when a convert is called to give an account? Butler argues that any conceptions of a subject are presupposed, and therefore seeing a subject ‘as she is’, is impossible. (Butler 2005, 83) Considering this; how is a convert ‘seen’/constructed within her society? How will this inform how she performs her Muslim-ness? Finally, drawing on Foucault’s conception of ‘an incitement to discourse’, I will also attempt to engage with the relationship between the call for an epiphany narrative, my interlocutor’s willingness meet the expectations of their audience or their resistance to delivering this narrative.

Finally, chapter three, “The Rupture Narrative” deals with the notion of a ‘rupture’, the stories that my interlocutors narrate in order to explain their own conversions and the influences they had in their lives during that time. After providing a discussion of the ‘performance of piety’ and the ‘epiphany’ narrative, problematized by each of my interlocutors, I move to the stories they told me regarding the time before, throughout and after their conversions.

In his article “Continuous Conversion?”, Simon Coleman discusses the limitations of defining the act of conversion as a “transfer of primary religious affiliation” and jokingly considers the merits of following Comaroffs’s “metaphorical throwing up of hands” and deeming the word ‘conversion’ as void of meaning “as an analytical category because it cannot grasp the highly variable, syncretistic manner in which social identities and cultural styles are transformed in contexts of mission”. (Coleman 2003, 17) Coleman’s interlocutors, the faithful of charismatic Protestantism, frame their conversions within the ‘epiphany’ narrative, using the language of “crossovers”. In charismatic Christian conversions in Sweden, the event of salvation and the act
of submission, “is seen as a moment, an instant”, and thus the two lives of the convert are cleft in twain.

In his discussion of global Pentecostalism, Joel Robbins explains that Ghanaians “completely break” with their pasts upon conversions to Pentecostal charismatic Christianity. In Bolivia, converts are said to make a ‘sharp distinction’ “between their pre- and post conversion lives” (Robbins 2004, 127). Conversions are “rituals of rupture”; “world-breaking” transformation in which the subject’s ‘moral fields’ are reoriented. Disjunction, discontinuity, and ultimately, irreversibility are terms invoked in order to connote a complete transformation. (Robbins 2004, 128, 129) Barring the act of throwing up one’s hands or willfully dismissing the ‘crossover/epiphany’ narrative, chapter three, seeks to analytically delve into the ‘rupture’ using Foucault’s notion of “rupture with self” from his lectures, “Technologies of the Self”. (Foucault 1988, 43) The discussion of the ‘rupture’ narratives will capture the tensions between the ‘epiphany’, ‘world breaking’, ‘instantaneous’ conversion narrative, considering the stories my interlocutors tell in order to ‘make sense’ of their conversions; telling ‘a story that works’.  

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8 Much of the tensions mentioned here were discussed in one of my first conversations with Silvia.
Chapter 1
Performing Piety and the Search for Recognition

After securing the contented cooperation of my first two interlocutors, Laura, Carmen, and I spent the month of September in 2010 putting out requests with friends and colleagues; asking for help to find other interlocutors. On a sunny day in mid-September, my friend Khalidah came into the café where we usually study, beaming. “You are going to love me!” she exclaimed. She had been talking to Silvia, a Muslim activist, scholar and convert, who worked in Khalidah’s university department. Silvia had immediately agreed to speak with me about her conversion, upon Khalidah’s request. “She told me that she usually likes to have the opportunity to talk about her experiences,” Khalidah explained to me, “and she hasn’t had the opportunity to do this in a while.”

This chapter begins with a topic which was brought up in my first conversation with Silvia. It is a subject which sheds light on the tensions between the ‘performativity’ of my interlocutors’ self/socially constituted ‘identities’ as Muslims, and their own conceptions of the ‘internal’ manifestations of humility and religiosity. These tensions will be explored by using Saba Mahmood and Judith Butler’s conceptions of ‘interiority’; how humility may or may not become internalized. I will then move on to the topic of recognition, considering how my interlocutors perform their Muslim-ness or ‘publish’ themselves as Muslims. Finally, I will provide my interlocutors’ accounts of the Muslim ‘interference’ and unwanted advice they experience in terms of the performance of their rituals and practices. Many of these discussions will be put into conversation with Foucault’s ‘incitement to discourse’ in order to consider how
my interlocutors’ practices, performances, and search for recognition as Muslims might be conceptualized within relation to dispersed social/institutional fields of power.

Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* has proven influential in conceptualizing the notion of the formation of a practice; the process by which my interlocutors incorporate their “Muslim- ness” and pious/religious practices into their lives. For the pietists in Mahmood’s study, “bodily behavior is at the core of the proper realization of the norm”. (Mahmood 2005, 24) The piety of word and deed, a formation of an ethical practice embodied, becomes a method to obtain a pious interior. The inner and outer manifestation of piety can be attained if one cultivates one’s piety within a “complex disciplinary program”, which “requires that the individual perform those acts of worship made incumbent upon Muslims by God, as well as Islamic virtues and acts of beneficence that secure God’s pleasure. The attitude with which they perform their acts of piety “is as important as their prescribed form”. When these acts are performed with the correct attitude, then piety may become manifest and “excellence and virtuosity in piety are measured and marked.” (Mahmood 2005, 123)

The crux of the nuanced difference between Mahmood and Butler’s arguments regarding how piety may or may not become manifest, rests within the notion of an ‘interiority’, how it is may be ‘consummated’. (Mahmood 2005, 23) Whereas Butler argues that “interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse” and “essence and identity” can be considered “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means”, Mahmood argues for the agency of an actor which allows for ‘norms’ to be “lived and inhabited” and the desire for an interiority of piety ‘consummated’. (Butler 1999, 185, Mahmood 2005, 23) These theories of ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ have proven useful in much of my analysis of my interlocutors’ formation of their own ethical practices; and it is to this
structure that I now turn in order to frame Silvia’s discussion of the “psycho” stage of conversion.

1. Bad Converts, the Psycho Period and Performing Humility

On a dark rainy evening in December, Silvia and I met at a fancy café in downtown Toronto to discuss her conversion story. We began our conversation with a discussion of the first two years after she converted and those people who influenced her the most during this period. As we crunched on rock-hard almond biscotti, the conversation turned to Silvia’s experience with certain new and ‘zealous’ converts to Islam; their self-righteousness and desire to ‘cultivate humility’. Beginning by explaining the trials and tribulations of a conversion, Silvia rationalized those “zealous” feelings that many converts experience;

*When you’re a convert you feel as though there is a box you have to fit in. There is a box of rules and you have to follow them. The only choices you have are in the box.* (Silvia)

Silvia was speaking of her fellow Caucasian converts who went through what she termed as a ‘psycho-period’, in which they attempted to attain a ‘level of piety’ which she considers as ‘excessive’. She told me the story of a female colleague she knew while attaining her master’s degree at her east coast U.S. university, who went through the throws of a ‘psycho-period’. This woman, whom Silvia termed as a “white psycho convert”, was in her early twenties when she converted to Islam. She told Silvia the story of her behaviour during at the time of her father’s death, the details of which appalled Silvia. The convert’s father, a fire-fighter, suffered a
horrible work related injury and landed in the hospital, dying. She had shown up at the hospital, where her father lay dying, wearing niqab and upsetting her entire family.  

So, she shows up in niqab and she sees her father for the last time in niqab, her whole family in the hospital room. (Silvia emphasized 'in niqab') This is a perfect example of this ‘convert righteousness’. I told her ‘God will punish you!’ And I never say that to anybody! This all goes to show that it isn’t necessarily the best kind of people who convert to Islam, some people are just jerks and though maybe they are trying to do better. Assholes convert too! (Silvia)

Silvia is highly critical of the righteousness that she charges many Western converts to Islam of possessing. She asserts that it is a sense of false humility and an ‘obsessive’ devotion to doctrine;

I mean, this is Pharaonic...it goes back to Pharaonic times. You have to kill the part inside of yourself that thinks its God. So you cultivate humility: yeah sure, that’s nice, but that’s not easy. What is humility anyway? Lots of people say, ‘oh ya, I’m humble, I’m cultivating humility’ but what they’re really doing is performing humility...and when someone compliments you, ‘masha’allah’ you can say ‘oh no, really, ‘alham dulillah’. (she lowered her voice in a mocking tone) Yeah right! You are being Pharaonic. You’re not actually feeling humility; you’re feeling the pride of humility! You are just performing humility. (Silvia)

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9 Niqab is a form of hijab, which covers not only the hair and neck, but the entire face. Generally, holes for eyes or the entire area from above the nose to the hair line are left open. There are also forms of niqab which cover the entire face with a veil.
Silvia counts herself as a participant of this convert ‘psycho period’. Throughout the years she has had many frank conversations with other white western female converts, friends, colleagues and strangers with whom she shares a common experience; the ‘strip-down’ or ‘psycho’ period. Silvia went on to describe the pressures that religious authority figures (Sufi scholars she studied with and her own (ex) husband) placed upon her. At this time, she reasoned through the “nagging doubts” in her mind by thinking to herself, “these people are educated, they have authority, they are people I admire so they must be right and I must be wrong. So then there is this moment when you know you’re not wrong. And I tried to throw that aside.” She explained to me that, “in this place I completely lost my bearings, lost a sense of the core of myself, which I inevitably had to try to recover. I found that I had to pull back and realize that I turned doctrine into an idol. I turned other people into idols.”

The tensions between Butler and Mahmood’s arguments regarding the “interiority” of an ethical subject have been helpful in my consideration of Silvia’s discussion regarding how one may or may not succeed in ‘cultivating’ or ‘performing’ humility. Mahmood argues that it is important to “think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated.” (Mahmood 2005, 23) It is on the topic of “consummation” - the ability of a subject to realize piety, humility, or any interior state - wherein Mahmood and Butler part ways. Mahmood asserts that in terms of the forming of a subject, Butler is more interested in “agonistic and dualist framework – one in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion”. She argues that, as a result, within Butler’s discussion “one gets little sense of what goes on beyond this register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject”. (Mahmood 2005, 22)
Silvia’s distrust in the performance of the converts she discussed, and their ability to actualize a manifested embodiment of humility, resonates best with Butler’s conception of a mode of ‘becoming’, diverging with Mahmood’s assertion that one can constitute piety through continued diligent performance. Silvia asserts that the ‘empty’ performances of the converts will not allow piety to become ‘consummated’, even with sustained performance. Rather the unending performance fits with Butler’s theory of ‘performativity’ which is described in part as, “not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body”, sustains a mode of being wherein the body “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality”. (Butler 1999, xv, 185)

Silvia, however, unlike Butler, is interested in the notion of a ‘true’ interiority or ‘core’ of oneself; which for Silvia is a precondition for any true manifestation of piety. This notion can be situated and put into dialogue with part of a conversation with another convert, my friend Brandy. During one of our many phone conversations, we discussed the importance of prayer in her ethical life, Brandy told me, “In the end, I believe that your niyya (intention) has to be the most important part. I can pray every prayer, do everything to the letter, and still not have the right intention. And that’s just going through the motions.”

Silvia’s discussion of ‘false’ humility; a practice performed but not manifested in the interior, and like Brandy’s ‘going through the motions’, speaks against the Mahmood’s contemplation of exteriority as a means to interiority; a method akin to the Cairo mosques’ pietists. (Mahmood 134-135) Rather, both Silvia and Brandy argue that one must begin with a

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10 Brandy, the younger sister of Carmen, lives in a city south of Toronto with her husband and two little girls. She is also a convert to Islam and has been a Muslim for ten years. She is far more ‘ritually’ conservative Muslim than the rest of my interlocutors, choosing to wear the hijab and praying. Brandy is the director of her local Muslim centre.
pious interior for a real consummation of piety. They argue that through daily ethical rituals, and
the performance of virtuous habits, one may endeavour to reform and direct one’s niyya toward
the embodiment of an ethics. Through this fastidious and highly conscious ritual, “the habitus is
inhabited”; the ethical self may only then be “acquired through human industry, assiduous
practice, and discipline, such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person’s character.”
(Mahmood 2005, 135-36) Also significant is that Brandy, like the pietists, focuses on her own
ethical ritual and personal actions, emphasising “human activity and deliberation, rather than
divine grace or divine will, as determinants of moral conduct. (Mahmood 2005, 136)

Like Brandy, Silvia believes that a person’s niyya is the most important aspect of prayer.
Though she is constantly endeavouring to improve her own prayer ritual, as well as teaching
those who attend her ‘people friendly’ mosque group form to improve their prayer; she maintains
that it is the intention that remains of the upmost importance.\footnote{Founded in two years ago, the ‘people friendly mosque’, is Toronto’s first juma’a (Friday congregational prayer) mosque which seeks to form a space which is gender equal, queer-friendly, and religiously non-discriminatory. The juma’a prayer, held every week, is led by members of the congregation and men, women, and trans-gendered individuals are encouraged to pray side by side. Until recently this prayer space was held in the homes of its congregation but has now found its more-permanent home in a prayer centre in downtown Toronto.} Using this same argument, it is
not the performance of humility in Muslim converts that Silvia challenges, but rather their true
niyya; a desire for real humility which is paired with one’s embodied practice. The missing part
of the equation in ‘zealous’ new converts’ attempts to embody piety are their conscious
intentions. They are merely ‘going through the motions’. Indeed, Silvia believes that Muslims
and Muslim converts alike must derive their piety from a true ‘core’, an ‘interiority’, which
through a refinement of practice may become manifest in an exteriority. Also significant is that
both Silvia and Brandy, like Mahmood’s pietists, focus on their own ethical ritual and personal
actions, emphasizing “human activity and deliberation, rather than divine grace or divine will, as determinants of moral conduct. (Mahmood 2005, 136)

Although Silvia, who has read and studied Butler, evokes Butler’s theory of ‘performativity’ in terms of the converts’ inability to ‘consummate’ humility and piety, she contradicts Butler with her assertion that there exits a true ‘core’ or ‘self’. Butler argues that because the self is constituted within society, one’s ethics, values and mode of being can never be a natural or permanent stasis, but rather, a set of performances one must continuously perform and re-perform. In contrast to this assertion, Silvia spoke of a betrayal of her “core value system” and a denial of her “core self” when she denounced and criticized LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered) in the first few years after her conversion. She recalled the friends whom she spoke to during this time; those whom she criticized or demeaned because of their sexual orientation. She told me that; “for a long time, I tried to convince myself that it (their sexual orientation/way of life) was wrong, and I betrayed my core values. And now for years I have tried to apologize to all the people who’ve I’ve talked to, with a smile on my face, saying ‘well, that’s not really halal’”. For years now, as a passionate LGBQ Muslim activist/ally, Silvia maintains that she has returned to that ‘part of herself’ she once denied.

Unlike Silvia, my friend Laura, a second year PhD student in an International Relations program, has not found herself in many situations wherein she has come into contact with converts who suffer from the “psycho period”, or what Laura terms as, ‘convert-titis’. Laura characterized ‘convert-titis’ as a period of intense and fervent religiosity and practice, which she
herself had experienced when she was a teenager. At the age of fifteen she joined a conservative Christian group, attended weekly prayer meetings and youth events, fasted, and engaged in long periods of prayer. “In essence,” she explained,

*I had already gone through that very intense, fundamentalist stage in my spiritual life. As I became more mature, I think I knew I just didn’t have that intensity. If I was expected to go ‘fundamentalist’, I knew I couldn’t. I had gone through a fundamentalist stage in my life already and I now really want to reject any extremes.* (Laura)

Laura has generally surrounded herself with other like minded converts; those who have experienced a similar conversion path. The few times she has met more ardent converts or those who were born Muslims (usually when she has attempted to join on-campus Muslim groups and societies) she found herself turned off by their zealousness.

Though Carmen denies that she went through a period of ‘convert-titis’, she believes that she went through a “more intense period of practice” in which she became “more judgmental of others’ practices”. Through she had never participated in proselytizing; she became more vocal about Islam in her daily life, the reasons for her conversion and personal choice of Islam. During

12 After speaking to Laura to characterize convert-titis, she sent me a link found on the website “Islam for Today” which addressed this very subject (which we both found to be hilarious).

http://www.islamfortoday.com/ummzaid02.htm Below is an excerpt from the link:

“The Case of the Insta-Scholar Jane who took her shahada (proclamation of faith) last week: She was a ‘regular American’ who studied a little about Islam, hemmed and hawed over the dress and dietary codes, decided it was the truth, and accepted it into her life. Many sisters in the community looked forward to helping Jane learn the basics of Islam, such as the salat (prayers), the five pillars, the six articles of faith, and so on. Now, this week, we see that Jane has changed her name to ‘Ai'sha,’ is wearing full niqab (black only), buying everything (even potato chips--which she may stop buying as it is ‘imitation of the kufar’ [non-believers]) from the halal market, getting into interfaith debates at her job, using a miswak (Islamic toothbrush), telling the other sisters what they ‘ought to be doing,’ and what they are ‘doing wrong,’ and considering accepting a marriage proposal to be a co-wife.
this time she found herself prioritizing the ‘Islamic world’ as a better place and viewing North America as a land of decadence, lacking Islamic values. However, she explained that “there were a good many occasions when Muslim immigrants would put me in my place.”

I’ll start this with a story about a good Muslim man in Detroit, a balanced and kind man who had recently arrived in U.S. from Egypt. He was trained as a lawyer but he was working 15 hours in a store, undocumented. A very good Muslim man, warm and kind. One day we started a conversation, it was during Ramadan I think, and asked him, why would you choose to come here? Why would you do that? Basically I was implying that he had come from Egypt, what I considered to be the land of God, so basically I was saying something like “you lived in God’s house, why would you come to this God-forsaken place?” He looked up to me and he was genuinely shocked. He said something to me that gave me pause then, and still resonates to this day; that God created the whole earth and there was really no privilege for those who come from one region or the other. So when I think about my experience as a Muslim and my relationship to Islam, I think, God created the whole world. And God has given me my whole experience. So I was not mistakenly born in the States and meant to find my way back to Egypt. I am not mistaken in coming back to Toronto. (Carmen)

Why might a convert be incited to perform their Muslim-ness with a fervent intensity? What social or institutional pressures exist which pressure converts to ‘enact a piety’ which fits into the ‘box of rules’? In her discussion of the ‘psycho period’ Silvia asserted that white female converts are often made to feel that;
We had to reach a level of piety that no one else was expected to reach. Because we were ‘tainted’ by our western feminism and tainted by our privilege; we felt we had to be super uptight, and outdo and be better than everyone else. (Silvia)

These pressures, perhaps derived from a more conservative interpretation and application of Islam, can be considered within Foucault’s conception of an ‘incitement to discourse’, wherein the ‘sins’ of the converts former lives have preemptively ‘tainted’ their efforts toward attaining piety. As such, a ‘discourse’ must “trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following all its meanderings: beneath the surface of the sins” in order to “lay bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh”; in the case of the white feminist converts, this ‘authority’ lays bare a zealous, performative discourse of piety. (Foucault 1978, 20)

2. Recognition

2.1. Publishing Oneself as a Muslim for other Muslims

It’s a hard negotiation and it’s strange for many people to recognize my Muslim-ness. Being religious but not appearing religious, not generally speaking religious unless it is with close friends, but then throwing them off by fasting during Ramadan. People don’t know how to take me. I mean, this is a strange divide anyway. But if I was Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic and really religious personally and not publicly, you wouldn’t be able to see signs of that, right? Unless I wore a big honkin’ crucifix around my neck (we laughed at this). It’s this divide between the secular public and the religious personal that I have to negotiate. (Laura)
Laura admits that she understands why people, Muslim and non-Muslim, find it difficult to recognize her as a Muslim. Why should they be able to? She doesn’t wear hijab, have a Muslim last name, or fastidiously practice her daily prayers (though she does endeavor to pray istikhara [a prayer for guidance] and tries to pray more during the month of Ramadan). Nor does she profess any interest in wearing the hijab and walking around as a “beacon of Muslim-ness”.

Laura, as well as my other four interlocutors, prefers to keep her religion and faith personal; sharing only with whom she chooses. However, when she does share her faith with others, she dislikes being as a Muslim convert rather than a simply a Muslim; or worse, not being recognized at all.

Laura’s negotiation with others’ recognition of her identity can be placed within Butler’s discussion of ‘acknowledgement’. Butler states that a subject’s “willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgement itself” is an important realization; for it is an impossibility to give a complete account of oneself. In this sense, regardless of the account Laura provides, the “limits of acknowledgement” will provide the very parameters of the subject’s forming of her ethical self. (Butler 2005, 42) The subject can never give a complete account of herself, nor will the expectation of the demand be fulfilled. The subject remains in a constant state of performing oneself, and in many senses, constructing, formulating, reconstructing and reformulating herself in relation to the other. Though Laura sees herself, her ‘identity’, as Muslim, she often finds herself considering how she shows/or does not show herself as a Muslim.

The following anecdotal story serves as an example of this consideration of ‘recognition’ in the lives of the five women in this ethnography. A common thread within my conversations with my interlocutors has been their various responses to others’ acknowledgement, recognition and reaction to their ‘Muslim-ness’. People’s reactions to my interlocutors, their ‘identities’ as
Muslim women and coverts, has led them to raise questions regarding how they formulate, shape, and ultimately perform or ‘publish’ their ‘identities’.

One cold Saturday night in October, Carmen and I headed out for shisha. She came over to my apartment for a visit after her long day at work. We sat down on my uncomfortable couch and I offered her tea and a meager bowl of almonds and walnuts, having forgotten to buy cookies. In what I hope was not a response to my poor hosting skills, Carmen spontaneously suggested that we ought to ‘hit the town’. As our shoes clicked on the pavement on our way to the subway station, we chatted about her work, my classes, her rapidly increasing ambition to return to university and begin another masters in urban planning.

On the subway we changed our academic planning conversation to my project, as this had been the purpose of our getting together. As we chatted, leaving the subway, I noticed a classmate from my Arabic class, a friendly man from Algeria, Rami, to whom I had spoken only briefly. He was with a male friend, also a student from the university, a shy but friendly young man who wore a neatly trimmed beard. They both came over to Carmen and I saying, “Salam” to me and “hello, how are you?” to Carmen. “Salam” I smiled in reply and Carmen returned; “wa alaykum as-salam”. Rami looked a little surprise and immediately asked Carmen if she spoke Arabic. She replied in her cheeky Egyptian accent, that she had learned Arabic in the ‘mother of the world’ (umm al dunya), as Egypt is referred to in Arabic. We talked for about fifteen or twenty minutes in the crowded subway station about a variety of topics, learning Arabic, living in Arab countries, and then Ramadan in those respective countries, switching from English to Arabic. As the conversation ventured into ‘religious’ topics Carmen’s speech became infused with more religious terminology. Rami and his friend, from their dress, use of religious phrases, and their manners, gave the vibe that they were practicing Muslims. Carmen, who
confided in me later that she enjoyed running into such “nice young guys”, seemed happy to have found in Rami a random kindred spirit with whom she was able to talk about Islam.

My interlocutor’s desire to be acknowledged as Muslims can be considered within Butler’s consideration of the “struggle of recognition”. (Butler 2005, 29) Butler asserts that it cannot “merely be the other who is able to know and recognize me”; bearing the burden of proof to discover that which is ‘me’. Instead, the only way a self might become ‘readable’ to another is only by “entering into a visual frame that conditions its readability”. This ‘readability’, in the case of my interlocutors and their relationship to the ‘other’ from whom they desire recognition, most often cannot take the form of the ‘appearance’ of Muslim-ness (as my interlocutors do not regularly wear hijab). Instead, and as the anecdote above discusses, my interlocutors may perform or ‘publish’ themselves as Muslims by using religious speak: often through the use of Arabic and invoking religious sayings.

2.2. The Two Flags of Muslim-ness

My interlocutors have discussed how their abstinence from alcohol and pork, both widely known signifiers of Muslim-ness, have played a role in how they are identified and recognized as Muslims. In September, during Eid, the celebration held at the end of the holy month Ramadan, Carmen held a party at her house. She met each of us at the door, always the warmest of hostesses, smiling and wishing all the Muslim guests a Happy Eid. Most of the guests were Muslim themselves or married to a Muslim. We chatted for a bit, sipping on Carmen’s homemade cranberry punch, and then headed into the kitchen when Carmen gave the orders to start dinner. While leaning over the perfectly delectable spread that Carmen had laid out buffet style on the counter, I overheard one of Carmen’s friends telling her husband to be careful in case one of the dishes contained pork. Carmen overheard her as well and said; “It might have
been the bottle of wine throwing you off, but, no, there is no pork in this house.” Carmen’s reaction to her friend’s comment is significant in terms of the search for recognition; particularly the notion of the formation of the self in being constructed within relation to the “limits of acknowledgement” (Butler 2005, 42) In this instance, Carmen found herself performing for her own friends, within her own house; feeling that her Muslim-ness had been called into question.

One of the most frustrating reoccurring experiences Laura has faced in recent years, especially since beginning her PhD, has been the pressure to partake in the consumption of alcohol. Many of her colleagues and friends are understanding and accept her choice. However, there are some who will constantly and “obnoxiously insist” on ‘challenging’ her. On one occasion, a fellow second year PhD student approached her at a department social event. He came up to her, unprovoked, and asked her if she wanted a drink. When she refused, “he put his hand awkwardly on my shoulder and said ‘oh ya, you don’t drink because you are Muslim. You hide that so well.’ Then he walked off. Awkward!”

My other four interlocutors also refrain from eating pork, but Judy, Silvia and Carmen all consume alcoholic beverages. In terms of her consumption of alcohol, Carmen makes no apologies to anyone and does not hide the fact that she drinks, nor does she attempt to reconcile it with an interpretation of doctrine nor or excuse herself in any manner. Once in Cairo, when asked in front of a large mixed group of Egyptians, Canadians, Americans, Muslims and Non-Muslims, why she, as a Muslim, drank; she answered cheekily, “I guess I’m just a bad girl!” Meaning, yes, she was Muslim, but she was not behaving or ‘performing’ like a good Muslim.
2.3. (In)Visibility, Recognition and the Hijab

Of my five interlocutors, Ellen is the most vocal about her frustration with explaining her choice of faith to Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Like Silvia, Ellen’s activism and her PhD research on Muslim women in the Western media causes her Muslim-ness to be more perceptible, and therefore, more exposed to public scrutiny and questioning. Another factor in Ellen’s visibility as a Muslim is her commitment to daily prayer. She attempts to structure her routine in order to incorporate the five prayers, and for this reason she generally wears a scarf around her neck or carries it on her person. As Ellen does not wear hijab in public, putting it on only when she enters her student prayer centre, attends a mosque or an Islamic conference; she must negotiate what she explains as “moving in and out of hijab”. She becomes visible as a Muslim woman in some instances, and disappears for others.

Muslims and non-Muslims alike are confused by Ellen’s perceived complicated ‘in-between-ness’ and (in)visibility as a Muslim. On the one hand, many Muslims with whom she prays, see her as a muhajaba (a woman who wears hijab) in the prayer centre, mosque or conferences she frequents. When these fellow Muslims see Ellen outside of these spaces and events, they become confused by her alternation. Her non-Muslim colleagues and new friends within the university department are also perplexed by her fluctuation between these different spaces and modes of being. Of course there are people who understand her choices, but generally, Ellen’s ‘movability’ causes confusion. “People think, you either wear it or you don’t”, Ellen stated, explaining the assumptions that she has faced in terms of her apparent inability “to fit what people expect of a Muslim and a convert”. She has considered whether wearing the hijab, for the purpose of identity and religious signification, would make life easier. She facetiously explained that this choice could possibly have two positive outcomes; a) building “Muslim cred (credibility)” in terms of the wearer’s “ability to pass as a recognizable Muslim”,
and b) the freedom to allow people to “make their own assumptions” instead of constantly explaining the reasoning behind her religious choices. “But”, she reflected, in wearing the hijab she would become “permanently visible”, and “it would end up raising more questions in the end”.

Despite the desire to avoid assumptions about her faith, Ellen wants people to recognize her Muslim-ness. In essence, she wants recognition without any uninvited interrogation or stereotypical suppositions. She categorizes this as a case of “having my cake and wanting to eat it too.” Ellen often finds herself looking for recognition; and most specifically from Muslims. It is sometimes lonely for Ellen to recognize a muhajiba (woman who wears hijab) and “feel as though she wants to say something to her, trade a ‘salam’ or even a smile, ‘Hey, I’m Muslim too’”. “It’s not like I can randomly say ‘Salam’ to these random women” she explained, “but sometimes I think that that recognition would be nice, to be recognized by the community, on the street. It’s nice when you are in a new city and you’re lonely and there’s this random girl on the metro that follows the same religion as you…” she laughed. Carmen has also professed her desire for recognition, specifically from other Muslim women who wear the hijab;

*It’s funny, I see a woman in hijab and it makes me want to say ‘salam alaykum’*.  
*But it’s funny how rarely I get ‘wa alakum issalam’ right back. Usually they’re just shocked. And I think that part of the reaction is that they might see me as being somewhat patronizing. That I’m not a Muslim. I can see on their faces that perhaps I’m this bleeding heart feminist. That you’re being... (she paused) the type of liberal that I don’t like, quite frankly (and we laugh at this). Maybe it’s Ramadan and you want to offer some kind of support and you get the impression that they’re thinking, who is this woman? What are you? (Carmen)*
Ellen explained to me that when she sees any person, man or woman, who is visibly Muslim, “I want to be able to say, ‘you’re one of mine!’ or ‘I’m one of yours!’” As for Judy, that moment of “recognizing and being recognized”, is also “very important”. Indeed, all five of my interlocutors consider this specific kind of recognition, that simple ‘salam’ from a fellow Muslim, to be a significant form of acknowledgement.

Carmen has worn the hijab throughout three different periods in her life; when she first converted for about two of years, five years later for three years, and again, ten years later, for another year. She framed her choice to wear hijab as a quest for modesty as well as a desire to be recognized as a Muslim. This search for recognition brought reactions and results with which she was not comfortable.

*And I didn’t like the identity it brought. I felt it made my religion very public, that it was inviting questions. And I’m not ready to be a poster child for my religion. For me it is a really intimate relationship. I wouldn’t share with you the details of my life with my partner and I don’t know that I would necessarily want to share all the details of my relationship with God, to all and sundry. (Carmen)*

The presence of the hijab “invited people to ask questions” and “opened a dialogue” that Carmen “was not particularly wont to sign up for”. The response to Carmen’s appearance was sometimes a frustration and at other points, an annoyance. University colleagues would feel free to question Carmen about Islamic doctrine and random strangers in her city would question her about her faith. She claims that she didn’t feel at ease with some many questions as they “implied that I know all the answers, and I don’t. It implied that I speak for everyone, and I
don’t. It implied that my journey had finished, that I know exactly where I stand, and I don’t. I just felt as though this wasn’t a dialogue that I could have.”

For Silvia, wearing the *hijab* for any other reason than prayer is a non-starter. Her response to my query, ‘have you ever worn the *hijab*?’ was straight and to the point. “I could never do it” she stated bluntly, “It distracts. I feel like it just attracts attention. I don’t want to be stared at. I don’t want to be looked at.” Laura has a similar complaint about the *hijab*. In early October, while at her family’s house for thanksgiving, we laid in the bunk beds of the guest room, chatting. We had started talking about ‘old times’ while living in the gulf (the heat, the conservative clothes we wore) and our conversation turned to the *hijab*. “Ms.,” I asked her in the dark, “do you miss wearing the *hijab*?” She paused, “Yes”, then, quickly retracting, “No, I don’t.” She went on to explain her complicated relationship to the *hijab*, lamenting its visibility; as an immediate signifier which leads to unwanted attention. She does, however, also miss this signifier of her ‘identity’.

Judy’s feelings about the *hijab* are very similar to Laura and Carmen’s. She exclaimed that the “biggest beef” she had with the *hijab* is that when you wear it “people feel entitled to tell you what to do.” “You are so visible, and it seems to attract all the people you don’t want to meet or don’t want telling you what to do.” Judy framed her choice to don the *hijab* as a political decision. It was her first year of university when she converted to Islam and she began wearing the *hijab* shortly after, at the end of 1999. She wore it for three years while attending a state university in the United States. The form of *hijab* Judy chose to wear was the *khimar*; a head scarf that descends to the waist, billowing out when it reaches the shoulders. Though she tried to obey the “letter of the law” by wearing the *khimar* with a “spirit of modesty”, Judy enjoyed “flaunting and having fun” with her *hijab*. She told me how she tried to wear a variety of colours, “pinks and prints”, and opted not to wear black. Her philosophy on this matter was
this: “If I was going to stick out and be a unique person anyway I might as well have a little fun with it.” The hijab did attract a great deal of attention. She explained that the negative reactions that people had to hijab surprised and upset her. There were strangers who came up to her in public places and told her to “go home”.

2.4. You’re not Part of Us

While attending Muslim conferences, like Toronto’s “Reviving the Islamic Spirit”, Ellen wears the hijab and is able to find that “comradery” she misses throughout her daily life.\(^\text{13}\) She asserts that she wears her hijab to Muslim conferences for two reasons a) to be asked fewer questions about her conversion and b) in order to not appear as an ‘outsider’;

“When I go to a masjid or an Islamic gathering I make sure that I wear a really neat, conservative hijab with lots of pins in it so I don’t have to touch it. I find I get far fewer questions if I look like what people expect from a convert. If I’m wearing a haphazardly draped scarf around my head, I get far more questions about my Islam, how I practice, why I converted. There seems to be an equation; more pins, fewer questions. I don’t want to have to deal with the questions. And more than just the conversations, when you are there and you’re just this random white woman without hijab, people just assume that you don’t belong there and you’re not Muslim. I’m better at shrugging that off now, but that in the beginning

\(^{13}\) “Reviving the Islamic Spirit” is an annual conference held in Toronto in December. It began in 2003. The convention is characterized as “an attempt by the youth to help overcome new challenges of communication and integration.” The convention aims to promote stronger ties within the North American Society through reviving the Islamic tradition of education, tolerance and introspection, and across cultural lines through points of commonality and respect.” It is held every year at the end of December and includes a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim speakers from all over the globe (including Shaykh Hamza Yousef, Tariq Ramadan, Robert Fisk, etc.) The conference generally includes a concert at the end of the conference. Past entertainers have been; Sami Yousef, and hiphop groups Native Deen and Outlandish.

http://www.revivingtheislamicspirit.com/
was really hard to deal with for a really long time, that ‘you’re not part of us’ assumption. (Ellen)

Ellen reflected that her choice to wear the hijab, and the manner in which she wears it, affects the way that people interact with her. It’s not just “whether or not she is covered”, but “how” she is covered. Through wearing a neat, conservative hijab, Ellen blends in easily and is temporarily incorporated into that community. However, if the hijab is not fastidiously neat, tied, and tucked in, “then it’s like a big, bright, flashing new girl sign.” ‘Moving in and out’ of the hijab is a complicated negotiation for Ellen. She doesn’t understand why so many people cannot comprehend the ‘move-ability’ the hijab. She also laments the positive treatment she receives from other Muslims when she wears the hijab; and the subsequent lack of recognition when she takes it off. “How much credibility I have and the way people treat me sometimes has a disarming correlation between whether or not they think I wear hijab full time,” she explained.

Ellen: If I can pull off that it looks good enough for them to believe that I normally wear it people treat me really differently. I guess this was the reason I considered wearing the hijab earlier on...

Emily: It must come up a lot, the fact that you are Muslim, pray five times a day and don’t generally wear hijab.

Ellen: It does. Sometimes people give me the benefit of the doubt and assume that I am new to this and I’ll wear it eventually. They’ll see me at gatherings and conferences as a practicing Muslim, they’ll see me praying, and in conversations when it comes up they say things that hint to the fact that I will wear hijab in the future, and that I’m just not there yet. I’ve had a girl say that; “oh you’re just not to that point yet”...and I was like, ‘Listen, I’ve been praying and practicing for two years, come on’. I’ve had people say things like “When you start wearing hijab....
Emily: So do you go into a long explanation when they think you wear it?

Ellen: I don’t usually try to correct them and let them assume. And you know it is possible that someday I will wear it. But at the moment I am perfectly comfortable not wearing it. And it’s not a conversation that I try to get into. I just let people assume what they want, and let them go on and change the conversation. And again I am dressing modestly; I’ve really always dressed modestly. My hair is showing but I could be wearing a hijab and tighter clothes. If I haven’t been wearing it and I take it out when I’m about to pray, I find so many people will say ‘oh masha’allah you look so beautiful!’ And I always think ‘oh, no I’m not, you are just saying that!’ (We laughed) But I definitely strive to dress modestly. Even if I were to put it on, I don’t feel like it would be about modesty, genuinely feeling like I was following the religion, but it would be more about being recognized as a Muslim, as an identity thing. The assumption that I don’t belong…that’s the hardest thing.

Carmen has also faced the ‘you’re not part of us’ frustration. In January of 2009, Carmen, myself and a number of our friends attended a protest of Israel’s war on Gaza, which began in Dundas square and marched through the street to the Israeli consulate on Bloor. As the mass of people made their way north, there were many individuals and groups handing out pamphlets; information on the bombardment or about their own organizations, to the passersby. One man, who wore a beard and a thawb (long robe/dress) under a long winter jacket, was calling out for Muslims who were participating in the march to take a pamphlet. Carmen, accompanied by myself and male friend, walked over to the man and she asked him for one of his papers. Strangely and rather rudely, he refused her request stating that he was only giving them out Muslims. Perhaps he had a limited supply of pamphlets or he worried about proselytizing in this way; but he behaved discourteously regardless. Carmen no longer wears a hijab, so she no longer stands out as a Muslim woman. She was furious at this man. She told him that she was indeed
Muslim (if I remember correctly, she said this first part in Arabic: *ana muslima!*), that she had been for twenty years, that he was ridiculous to isolate and alienate himself, and his Islam, from the rest of the population, and that if that was his attitude then she didn’t want his literature anyway. Two years later, in her warm kitchen, as we munched on popcorn, Carmen reflected on her annoyed response to the man’s rudeness. “Even when I said, ‘I’m Muslim!’, clearly I’m not the right kind of Muslim for him or I’m not Muslim enough for him,” she scoffed. “That’s fine, because he’s not Muslim enough for me either!”

Butler’s discussion of Adrianna Cavarero’s argument that a subject is “fundamentally exposed, visible, seen existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance”, has a particular resonance in the lack of recognition Carmen experienced at the rally. (Butler 2005, 33) In the eyes of the rude Muslim pamphleteer, Carmen’s un-hijabed body was, as Butler explains, her “singularity”. As she was not visibly ‘the right kind of Muslim’, the pamphleteer had cause to dismiss Carmen and deny her any recognition. Butler goes on to explain that within this discussion of recognition, one must address “our fundamental dependency on the other, the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the other”, asserting that there is no way to rid ourselves of “our fundamental sociality”. This point does not, however, declare that, because my interlocutors are sometimes not recognized as Muslims, that they, indeed, fail to be Muslims. The second part of Butler’s argument asserts that “because we are not the same as the other”, recognition is not counted in the same way. There are certain people who we may recognize, and who may recognize us, more fully. (Butler 2005, 33) This argument is particularly salient in terms of my interlocutor’s quest for recognition. That Carmen or Ellen might not be ‘Muslim enough’ in the eyes of other Muslims can be understood using this construction. Not everyone recognizes my interlocutors’ Muslim-ness to the same degree, and thus, they “feel more properly recognized by some people” than they do by others.
3. **Judgment, Guidance and Interference**

3.1. **Unwanted Helpful Hints**

“Yeah, I’ve had all kinds of people trying to tell me how I need to do things” Ellen complained. We had begun speaking about the formation of Ellen’s religious rituals (prayer, fasting, etc.) when our conversation branched into a description of the occasions when she found other Muslims correcting and criticizing how she performs her practice. She listed off the helpful hints or commands she has received from other Muslims, ranging from where to put her feet and elbows when praying, to how to do *wudu* (ablutions), or how one should dress as a Muslim woman. These helpful hints have usually been given to her after prayer at various mosques or while in conversation with Muslim friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. Ellen assured me that she tries not to take these criticisms personally or think of people who make comments about her practice as anything but “well meaning”. However, at times, the critiques wear thin. In our conversations, most of my interlocutors have questioned why Muslims converts seem to be placed under far more scrutiny than those who were born Muslim. “It is just a sense I have,” Ellen said, about her suspicions of being singled out for criticism, “that it was the flashing new girl sign. This (having her practice corrected) doesn’t happen often now. I’m far more secure in my practice and just being Muslim.”

Each of my interlocutors has expressed her frustration with the attempts by other Muslims to interfere with their ritual practices including prayer, doing *wudu* or even the process by which they should break their fast during Ramadan. Laura once discussed this topic with me during one of our long phone conversations:
Sometimes people feel the need to help improve my practice. I don’t do wudu in front of people I do wudu at home because I really don’t want to be corrected. I think people are very ritualistic and I really don’t want someone saying to me, oh, you’ve washed your hands and arms in the wrong way. I’ve had people say things like ‘oh, your nails are very long and they shouldn’t be that long’ which is kind of ridiculous. (Laura)

Ellen, Judy and Carmen are vigilant about doing their wudu before they pray in public. They have each talked to me about the judgment they have faced about their practices. The process of doing wudu and the detailed ritual of prayer seems to be the most common, and irritating, drawer of unsolicited advice.

The first time I prayed in public, two years ago, was in a huge gathering. At first it was...daunting. I mean, I learned how to pray from an online course, and I knew what I was doing...but I’m really glad that no one tried to correct my prayer that time because it probably would have shaken me...but no one did, that time! There are so many other times when people correct my wudu, my salat (prayers)...from where my feet are placed to whether or not I have to wear socks...it used to shake me. (Ellen)

The first time Ellen was given unsolicited advice, which was “really a long lecture” about the “mistakes” in her prayer ritual, was by a stranger in the Vancouver mosque she was attending. “It really threw me”, she exclaimed. In the beginning she became defensive and then she began to doubt herself.
Emily: So how did you respond to her criticism?

Ellen: At first, I felt really defensive and then I thought, oh no, she must know and I’ve been praying wrong all this time.

Emily: But what was her problem?

Ellen: Really, it was about where my elbows were and then eventually we had that discussion. And the way that this girl learned to pray was different, so I wasn’t wrong. It was a different interpretation. But that was then. I’ve learned to say, ‘it’s a difference in schools, your way of praying is entirely valid, but I have my way and I’m doing it according to my way.’ Or, if I am talking to someone who I think might be the preachy type I usually find a way to subtly leave the conversation and back away. I’ve never actually told someone to mind their own business. But I did want to say ‘I don’t think God cares where your elbows are’.

Later that same week, Ellen ended up researching the matter of the elbows and discovered that, indeed, according to two different Islamic schools they each followed, they were both ‘right’. They were simply following different schools of interpretation on the matter.

3.2. You don’t wear the hijab?

Emily: I have a lot of my own assumptions about why or why not certain people wear or don’t wear the hijab, why do you choose not to wear it other than for prayer?

Ellen: If I felt very strongly that it were certainly a religious requirement, then I would definitely wear it but I think that I’ve decided from the readings that I’ve done that it shouldn’t be worn in my context. I definitely don’t feel either that it is Not a religious requirement, but to me head covering is a culturally normalist thing. In our culture however, covering
up your head is not necessarily a sign of modesty. It’s now an attention grabber and kind of does the opposite thing that it’s supposed to do.

Hijab, the way it is worn or not worn, has also been an attraction of unsolicited advice or criticism. Though there are many Muslim women that choose not to wear the hijab, there have been Muslims who become confused when they discover that my interlocutors, as converts, do not wear the hijab. All of my interlocutors have a similar philosophy to Ellen’s; that the hijab is not obligatory and that modest dress, though optimal, is subject to a variety of interpretations. Laura, who has never worn the hijab in North America for any other reason than during her prayer, explained to me the reactions of Muslims who question why she doesn’t wear the hijab.

Many Muslims assumed it (wearing the hijab) to be a natural progression as you become more religious. There are those people who expect you to become this ultra Muslim; to jump immediately to niqab and then digress from there. Those are the two options; that you will become ultra religious right away or the other way, that you will slowly work up as you get more faith. (Laura)

Ellen has heard this response as well. She explained that she has never been told by anyone explicitly, “you should be wearing it”, but rather, there has been “an implied assumption that wearing the hijab was something I had not quite gotten yet and a level that I was inevitably going to reach. It was a necessary progression.” She recalled a conversation she had with a Pakistani Muslim woman who came to her home to visit her roommate. During the course of her discussion with the woman, it “came out” that she only wore the hijab for prayer. When Ellen told her about her reasoning, the woman replied, “oh, you’re just not at that level yet”. She was
insinuating that, in the future, Ellen would choose to wear *hijab* when she learned more about her faith.

### 4. Trusting Her Instincts

Over the last three years after her conversion, Ellen has placed an importance on fostering faith in the way she develops her practice, learning to trust her own knowledge of interpretations and her ability to research the answers to questions about her practice. In the beginning she worried about judgment from other Muslims who critiqued her ritual of prayer and interpretation of doctrine. She gave me a number of examples of how she has developed her faith in her practice, stating “I am now more comfortable in my ability to research and not doubt my instincts. I trust my own knowledge.” She remembers going to her first Muslim conference in British Columbia in her fourth year of university, and questioning her ability to give a critique of some of the presenters there. At this conference there was a Muslim scholar who urged the audience to avoid watching television programs like “Little Mosque on the Prairie” because it is “promoting ‘progressive’ interpretations of Islam.” Ellen was taken aback by these sentiments. She explained to me that “at that time was like *woah*, this seems weird. Part of me was worried that I was this white western feminist coming in and giving an unfair critique.” She doubted her position as a new and white convert and questioned her right to give a critique of the presenter and what she termed as his “questionable” “unreasonable” and “ultra-conservative” subject matter.
In the end I trusted my own instincts and realized that it was just pretty crazy. People that I talked to afterward kind of validated my reactions. There was never a time when I said to myself, well that seems sketchy and was told by my people, oh no, that is generally practiced, this is fine and normal. Most people said, yeah! That was really sketchy. It was nice to have that back up but more importantly it was nice to know that despite the fact that I hadn’t been Muslim for that long that I actually knew a good deal. (Ellen)

Ellen also stressed how much her friends, as well as her own moral compass and good sense, had protected her from any kind of ‘interference’ or negative influence in terms of her learning process. She told me that she “wanted to be in control of who my influences were. Now looking back I think that this was pretty smart because I think I’ve avoided a lot of craziness that I’ve seen other people go through.”

5. Performance, Practice and Recognition

My interlocutors have had various influences (some of which/whom will be further discussed in chapter three) which have shaped and formed their conceptions, interpretations and performances of their practices. However, as they are all highly reflexive, educated converts who have chosen their religion while in their early-mid twenties; a considerable amount of time in their ‘formative’ years was spent in relatively independent study and reflection. They have each narrated to me a process of intellectual contemplation; a time of reading, investigating and analyzing. This is not to say that my interlocutors have avoided considerable intrusion and affect; as evidenced by the above narratives discussing the interference in their practice, the pressure to reach or perform an excessive level of piety, and the insistence that they conform to a particular form of ‘Muslim-ness’ in order to gain recognition. As I go on to my discussion of the
‘epiphany’ and ‘rupture’ narratives in chapters two and three; these ‘dispersed authorities’ and ‘multiplications of discourse’ which ‘incite’ my interlocutors to perform will continue to be examined, specifically, within the consideration of my interlocutor’s negotiation with these discursive forces. (Foucault 1978, 18)
Chapter 2
The Epiphany Narrative

1. Pressure to Tell the Story

One evening in late September, my friend Laura spent the night so we could chat about my project and the questions which my thesis project intended to address. Having just gotten into our pyjamas and in the process of getting cozy in our beds, we chatted and laughed about topics completely unrelated to conversion, piety, and religion; topics which indeed might have been categorized as irreverent. Just as I suggested that I make us some tea, there was a knock at the door. It was Leila, my neighbour from the graduate residence, a law student from Pakistan who is Sufi, quite conservative, and a fabulous cook. Our flow of juicy gossip ended immediately and we branched into an intensive discussion about Leila’s research, her studies of shari’a (Islamic Law) at the university and Laura’s papers written on Islamic banking when she was doing her master’s degree. Then Leila changed the topic. “So, you’re Muslim?” she stated/asked bluntly voicing her pleasure regarding this fact. Laura replied that yes, she was. Leila went on to ask her the hows, whys and wherefores of her conversion; peppering Laura with a barrage of questions. As is her habit when facing this line of questioning, Laura gave her regular twenty second answer; generally summarized as ‘I did a lot of research, and it all made sense, it took a long time but in the end it was the best path for me.’ Leila was unsatisfied with this answer. Laura, however, deftly changed the topic to Leila’s Islamic Law class and its syllabus and I excused myself to make the tea. At the bottom of the stairs I chuckled to myself as I overheard Leila balk at the conversation takeover, reiterating a more direct question, “So really, how did you convert?”
2. Dissatisfaction

Leila’s disappointment with Laura’s answer was tangible. What kind of narrative was she expecting to hear? Why was Laura’s response dissatisfactory? Her cut and dry response obviously lacked an essential component in Leila’s eyes. Surely, there must be more to the story than this. That question: “so really, how did you convert?”, or alternatively, that moment of disappointment after a convert gives a cursory, abbreviated reply, is a common occurrence for the five female Muslim converts I interviewed. Laura, Carmen, Ellen, Judy and Silvia have each found themselves in this very situation numerous times throughout their lives after converting to Islam. Those who enquire have been from all walks of life, Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and non-religious; all wanting to know the reasoning behind my interlocutors becoming Muslim. When, for whatever reason my interlocutors feel they do not want to give an account (because of the tedium of the question, a suspect reasoning behind the question, etc.), they each have, at the ready, a cursory response. These responses, stilted, impersonal, and often vague and imprecise, are stated for the sake of brevity and very often in order to erect a barrier to further conversation on the topic. “A one-two liner can put up a block and avoid this line of questioning when you either don’t want to talk about such things, or don’t necessarily like the manner in which they ask the question”, says Ellen.

But again, why the dissatisfaction? What are those who enquire expecting? What answers are my interlocutors failing to provide? It has been helpful to consider the call for a person to narrate one’s conversion within Butler’s construction of ‘giving an account of oneself’. In this account, Butler suggests that one must construct what “our relation to the other ought to be” and that although the conception of a ‘norm’ or mode of being is used in “constituting the intelligibility of the subject”, we reach these ‘norms’ though “proximate and living exchanges”.
(Butler 2005, 30) Differently put, when we are called upon to answer the question “who are you?” and construct what “our relation to the other ought to be”, this construction is formed not by an illusionary ‘fixed’ inner self but by a cultural demand or “imperative of coherence, intelligence and recognizability in order to allow participation in being and society.” (Butler 1997, 27: 2005, 30) As it has not been within the scope of my research to poll a pool of inquirers and attempt to discover their intentions and this ‘cultural demand’, I have relied on the reflections and responses of my five informants regarding this ‘call for an account’. Their experiences navigating this line of questioning have led them to certain assumptions about the expectations of their questioners; be they colleagues, friends, attendees at a Muslim conference, or strangers on a bus.

3. Arriving at the ‘Epiphany’ Moment

On October 28th 2010, I met Ellen in a cozy, Timothy’s coffee shop. We sat in cushy plush red chairs by the window on a blustery fall day, a spot I had secured forty-five minutes before she came. It was the first time we had met, and I was pouring over my notes in preparation. As she had told me that she had only an hour and a bit to speak with me, I wanted to be very prepared, concise and make the most of that short time. I must admit that I was nervous. Before this first meeting, our mutual friend Shireen had told me that Ellen deeply disliked being pumped for information regarding her conversion. It had taken Shireen more than a little convincing to get Ellen to agree to speak with me.

When Ellen arrived at the café, we greeted, and sat down briefly with small talk. I then, awkwardly, got up to order us something to drink. When I returned to our table, with my black
coffee, her organic smoothie, and a giant smarties cookie, we started into the subject at hand. After considering what Shireen had told me about Ellen’s negative reactions to questions about her conversion, I had written a note to myself; “Do NOT delve right in.” I began the discussion carefully. Rather than plunging right into the ‘how did you convert?’ question, I asked her to talk about her frustrations with the question itself. This strategy served to open a fascinating and fruitful discussion; helping me to approach the topic of conversion in a way in which I had not previously conceived. Through initially avoiding that “how did you convert” question, Ellen and I engaged in a ‘meta-talk’ conversation, discussing the ‘telling’ of a conversion, the expectations of those who ask converts about their conversion, and the process of ‘becoming’ a convert. Ellen assisted me in the exploration of the ‘epiphany narrative’ framework, the characterization of a kind of conversion story she has no interest in telling.

3.1. Epiphany: That’s the word!

Ellen and I talked for three hours straight. Fortunately her schedule had been cleared as her date with friends was delayed. For the first two hours, we mostly discussed Muslim and non-Muslim expectations regarding a narrative of conversion, her replies to queries, and the reasons why she often does not appreciate the question; “How/why did you convert?” We began by her explanation of the feeling of disappointment she senses from those who ask the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of her conversion;

*I felt, for me, that it happened in a really natural way. Things just fell together in a really natural process. It’s hard to put that into any story that sounds at all interesting to people. So when people seem disappointed and seem to say, well, isn’t there more to it, I kind of say no, that’s it, that’s what happened! (Ellen)*
She mustered an expression of disappointment, which might have dramatized the audience of her anticlimactic conversion story telling. “It is as if they are always looking for something more…some inspirational explanation. But no, that’s it, that’s all.” We laughed at this and I interjected, sweeping my arms dramatically above my head exclaiming;

Emily:  But, come on! The sky must have opened up and a light came down! And…

Ellen: (she laughed) Seriously, I should start doing that, just making stuff up!

Emily: It would be far more entertaining! (Pause, and more serious) What kind of conversion would you call this? That light from the sky conversion…”

Ellen: (thought for a couple of seconds) I know exactly what you mean. I’m trying to find the word… Have you ever seen those You-tube clips, people who record their conversion stories online? There are so many videos with converts who profess with being overtaken with an immediate desire to be Muslim. They’re like that. Exactly like that. It’s so annoying! You’re not supposed to say this, now people are going to expect that from me! (We laugh.)

Emily: I’m totally drawing a blank…I’m searching for a word for what kind of narrative this is…

Ellen: (paused, then…) I’ve got the word! It’s an epiphany conversion! Call it an epiphany narrative.”

An epiphany, as used in the religious sense, refers to a moment of religious understanding and clarity. In terms of a religious conversion, this moment provides a clean cut story without messiness or confusion, deliberating or doubt. Later that evening I looked up ‘Muslim conversion stories’ on Utube and spent hours watching narratives that Ellen and I had been
discussing. She mentioned particularly Laura Booth as one of the more famous and notable ‘epiphany’ conversion stories. Lauren Booth, Tony Blair’s sister-in-law and peace activist, characterized her conversion to Islam as a spontaneous divine inspiration, “an intense spiritual awakening” while visiting a mosque in Iran.\(^{14}\) Ellen explained to me that “she was sitting in this mosque in Iran and had this moment of light and yada yada”. Ellen asserted that her frustration with these narratives stems from the numerous requests she must field; calling for a similar narrative.

### 3.2. In Search of Inspiration

*Often when someone asks me why I became Muslim, whether they are Muslim or not, they are looking for a ‘Damascus Road Story’, suddenly everything changed in your life.*\(^{15}\) They expect you to be the ultra, über Muslim. They’re looking for a tear jerker story of transformation and divine inspiration. (Laura)

The first time I talked to Laura about her conversion was in my apartment in Oman in 2006, over cups of green tea and digestive biscuits. Laura had come to Oman to join her husband, who had just gotten a job as an engineer in a small conservative coastal town. She had converted to Islam two years before, and decided to wear the head scarf in order to fit into her community. Her decision, as she explained to me, was multi-faceted; a desire to be recognized as Muslim herself and the expectation of being married to an Arab, Muslim man while living in a

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\(^{14}\) This quote was taken from an interview with Laura Booth, found on the Islamic website “Memri”. http://m.memri.org/14500/show/213b9277927907af71d70651412ee8b8&t=11bcd639a9e9e01368a8bd4e95ae83e7

\(^{15}\) The Road to Damascus is a reference to a religious conversion; a revelation. A dramatic change in belief. This idea comes from the biblical story of St. Paul, who converted from Judaism to Christianity while travelling on the road to Damascus.
conservative Gulf village. At this time, Laura experienced this line of questioning almost daily; “Why did you convert?” In the college where we worked and in the community where we lived, Omanis and expats alike were intrigued by this beautiful white Western woman, wearing a black *abaya* (dress), or chic yet conservative clothing and a head scarf; either a more conservative black hijab, ‘spanish’ or ‘Egyptian’ style hijab. She used the “Damascus Road story” then as well, refreshing my memories of Sunday school stories; Paul, the apostle of God falling off his horse on the road to Damascus. More than the questions themselves, which she often felt to be intrusive and too personal, the assumptions that people made about the reasoning for her conversion were frustrating.

Until Ellen, Carmen, and Silvia had expressed to me their frustration with this query “Why did you convert?”, I had never really considered the various reasoning inquisitors might possess for asking the question. More than just a general sense of pressing curiosity, what assumptions and expectations might drive the questioner to ask a convert for an account of her conversion? The manner in which the question is asked is a great indicator of the assumptions which drive them. During my first conversation with Silvia I asked; “How do people generally pose the question? What do you feel that they are looking for?” She answered that she believes that most people who ask are looking for an inspiring story; “I would just love to hear how you discovered Islam. What inspired you to become Muslim?” As I look back on this moment with Silvia, I recognize that, not only was I calling upon my interlocutors to give me their accounts, I too was looking for that story of inspiration. My initial conception for an analytical framework, that of the ‘fruitful’ and ‘productive’ ‘liminal’ period of conversion; incited certain responses and called for a particular narrative. The difference between my approach, and those individuals who ask my interlocutors outright, was subtle or non-existent. For instance, I recall the occasion I asked Laura; “who influenced or inspired you when you were converting?”
A relevant point in this discussion is the consideration of who forms this notion of a society and who is asking the question, requesting/demanding an account. Just as there is not a uniform type of convert, nor is there a uniform individual, representative of the ‘society’ who requests an answer to the question “Who are you?” Just as a colleague at work, or a fellow graduate student, or stranger on a bus could ask one of my interlocutors for an account; their expectations, political projects and responses will be varied. In the above quote, Laura stated that “They’re looking for a tear jerker story of transformation and divine inspiration (emphasis added).” Who are the ‘they’ to which Laura refers? Why are ‘they’ inciting this particular discourse? It should be noted that ‘they’, are not monolithic, and thus, hold a number of the varying expectations, wherein they formulate their question in order to ‘incite’ her story. In terms of my analysis, because Butler’s and Foucault’s framework conceptualize a general society and ‘dispersed authority’ within which the subject is called upon to give an account, little room is left for a consideration of the expectations of special interest groups, individual relationships; the multi-faceted, dynamic and diverging expectations found within that general society.

Considering Ellen’s case, the fact that the ‘public’ requesting her account at this time are all Muslims attending an Islamic conference, does not delimit the diverse expectations ‘they’ may have or the varied questions ‘they’ may ask. For this reason, I have relied predominantly on my interlocutor’s accounts, and their intuitions regarding the intentions and assumptions of those who call for my interlocutors to narrate their accounts.

So the question remains: why do so many people anticipate the epiphany? Why are these women’s answers sometimes so disappointing? In asking converts to tell their stories, are those inquisitors, questioners in search of ‘magic’ or inspiration; someone else’s brush with the divine?
Emily: *At times are there people who you like to tell this story to? Do you like giving an inspirational story?*

Ellen: *Yeah, I’ve had people ask me that. I’ve had a friend tell me that it was really inspiring for her. Normally it will bother me because of a set of assumptions that people are projecting on you, that may or may not be fact.*

Emily: *But do you ever feel encouraged or happy to tell the story?*

Ellen: *One woman asked me because her daughter was in a relationship with a non-Muslim who was thinking of becoming Muslim in order to marry her basically. At first I brushed her off and then after she explained the situation to me I saw, that, ‘oh, you really are looking for information on this’ and I talked with her and shared my own experiences. That was nice. But I don’t think I gave her an ‘epiphany’. Actually, I told her about my progression*

In *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Foucault discusses how “the multiplication of discourses concerning sex” was in itself an exercise in power; the power to control how sex was talked about and what was said. (Foucault 1978, 18) In the consideration of the expectations for discourse that rests on my interlocutors; the manner, degree and frequency in which they are encouraged (even pushed) to tell an epiphany story; I have found Foucault’s notion of an ‘incitement to discourse’ incredibly helpful. Just as a subject may be ‘incited’ to speak in a certain way about sex, so too may an individual be subjected to an “institutional incitement to speak about” conversion. (Foucault 1978, 18)

**3.3. Being Forthcoming with Inspiration**

Judy too believes that her conversion is a private and very personal story; one with which she is not generally forthcoming. She explained that within an academic or professional setting, she
is particularly guarded about her faith. Her concern is that in a secular, academic environment, she will be judged for her faith and stigmatized for a public expression of religiosity. However, there are times and places wherein Judy is happy to talk about her conversion. For her, the decision to narrate depends on her audience. While she lived and did her PhD research in Syria, Judy often found herself compelled to tell her conversion story. The majority of her audience and inquisitors were Syrians, mostly women, and also Iraqi refugees with whom she met in her daily life in Damascus. She spoke to me about her reasoning for feeling obligated, and many times, happy, to speak about her conversion:

*I’ll talk about my conversion to anyone who finds inspiration in it and renewal in its telling. How could I look at a refugee Iraqi woman and be so rude as to refuse telling her something that could bring any amount of hope or joy? And it’s also a sharing of faith. (Judy)*

For Judy, being asked to tell her story, within the right circumstances, can provide an opportunity to share a moment of faith. She is happy to speak within any setting wherein she feels that her faith might offer an audience that ‘inspiration’ or ‘renewal’.

4. *In Search for a Practical Answer*

Inspiration, faith sharing, curiosity and a desire for an entertaining story are not the only perceived impetuses that drive inquisitors to ask my interlocutors the question “why did you convert?” Laura differentiated among the types of expectations people seem to possess when they ask her for an account of her conversion and, particularly, the reasons for which she
converted in the first place. She also noted the progression of questioning which often occurs. Should an inquisitor be permitted to continue along his or her line of questioning, Laura assures me that the question; “Did you marry a Muslim?” will follow close behind the initial question “How did you become Muslim?” Ellen, Carmen, Judy and Silvia have all experienced this line of questioning. If a convert does not show signs of possessing that expected fervent passion of a convert, 

Most people want to know if I married someone (Muslim). It’s an assumption that I would have had a partner or husband that was Muslim, and that I converted for him, for love. Some people will ask me that because they think that the only rational explanation for a white western woman becoming Muslim, especially in this political climate, would be for marriage. So I find people hinting at this possibility (when they ask) if they don’t ask directly. If they either expect you to have a Damascus road story or would just expect that I had a partner and that I converted for marriage. People have asked me that point blank. (Laura) 

5. Cursory responses

Ellen: Sometimes I’ll avoid this line of questioning completely, when I just don’t want to get into a long drawn out conversation.

Emily: So what is your general response? When you don’t want to get ‘into’ it?

Ellen: I have a two line response; I learned about it and loved it. Islam just made sense for me.

Emily: What is your shortest, to-the-point answer to the question (how did you convert)? The one that helps you escape that long line of questioning?
Laura: I would say that it was a very long process, and that it came after a long period of discovery and learning. I’d just say that Islam was the best path for me.

My interlocutors each described to me their tactics and, for Silvia and Ellen, discussed their rehearsed script for avoiding unwanted questioning. Many times, simply by being evasive, my interlocutors are able to avoid intrusive or irritating questioning. In other cases they must be perseverant in order to side step interrogation. Ellen gave me an example of how she had recently been given an opportunity to opt out of providing her colleague with an account of her conversion. The female colleague, from one of her graduate classes, asked Ellen if she was Muslim upon hearing about Ellen’s PhD research and her blog; both dealing with the representation of Muslim women in the media. Upon broaching the topic, Ellen explained to me that her colleague quickly dropped the subject. Ellen assumed that her face must have betrayed her disinterest in telling the story.

*She asked (how Ellen became Muslim) and then she said ‘oh is that a personal question?’ and I was just happy to have that ‘out’. Most people don’t give you that out. Most people just ask straight out. (Ellen)*

Silvia’s response is equally as direct, sometimes to the point of being curt. “I say there are private answers that I’m not going to share with you”. If she feels like being indirect and avoiding the personal nature of the question all the “baggage” its answer entails, she will delve into a discussion of the history of social justice in Islam, saying, “I decided Islam was best for me because of its ethical roots.” On other occasions she will explain how she was drawn to “the
esthetics of the Muslim world ... designs, the sound of the Quran, the architecture, the art." She will often state that she “responded to the beauty in Islam” and leave out all other explanations or personal history. For Silvia, the detail she shares regarding her relation to Islam depends on the intentions and purpose of the person who asks her the question. For those questioners whose intentions she suspects, for whatever reason, as being “politically dubious or suspect”, she will fashion her answer in the form of an impersonal, hazy reply.

Carmen and I joked about her ability to avoid answering the question; “how/why did you convert?” Setting up a typical scenario, riding a bus in her hometown and a Muslim woman engaging her in conversation, she described a typical line of questioning she used to experience when she wore the hijab. 16

‘Ah, you’re a revert! 17 So how did you convert?’ ‘Oh I converted when I was much younger.’ ‘But, why did you convert?’ ‘Oh well, I thought it was interesting. So what stop are you getting off at?’ (Carmen)

We laughed at her characterization of this general exchange, but she was quick to caution me that she is not always so brusque with her answers to this line of questioning. She explained that “sometimes it can lead to a deep intimate philosophical discussion”, depending on intentions and manners of the person asking the question.

16 Throughout the past twenty-three years, during the various periods when she has worn the hijab, questions about her being Muslim and then subsequent questions about her conversion have increased greatly. Carmen explains this as a factor of being more visible and therefore more of a target for queries.

17 See previous note on reversion (footnote 3).
6. **Giving the Audience What They Want to Hear**

When I first approached the notion of an “epiphany narrative” with Judy, she surprised me with her positive response to the “climatic telling” of a conversion. She assured me that, though she avoids the question with those whose intentions she suspects (e.g. those who are not respectful, Islamo-phobic, etc.), she will ‘perform’ her conversion story for “whoever asks”; though she tries to avoid talking about her faith within a professional or academic context. For Judy, the ‘moment’ of a conversion, that final decision to accept a system of faith, is extremely important. She explained that it is in the narrative’s ‘telling’ that the ‘moment’ of faith becomes important.

> If you don’t deliver this narrative it so often puts you ‘outside’. If you can’t fit into a total embracing and total change construction then people just don’t know what to make of you. People get confused and people get bored when you don’t have that ‘climax’. It becomes a boring story and I don’t want to tell them a boring story about something so important and personal. Also, in terms of faith it needs to be a moment. (Judy)

In a society obsessed by spectacle and sensationalism, it is no wonder that when considering a supposed life changing phenomenon such as a conversion, that people would expect “an epiphany narrative”. Reality television shows abound; detailing individuals’ stories of pregnancy, weight loss, and struggles with drugs or alcoholism. Talk shows like Oprah delve into the intimate details of the lives of celebrities, public figures and ‘ordinary’ people; urging them to bare their souls to a captive studio/national audience. In our discussion, Ellen offered a
number of explanations as to why a person might feel pressured to convert their story into a more engaging or “fast paced” story.

I almost wonder sometimes if people start telling their stories in a way that fits into an epiphany narrative because that’s what people want, just from what I’ve seen from some other women who have become Muslim. I feel as though that might be something at play, the pressure to tell a good story because of the audience. It’s what your audience wants. And it’s not necessarily that they’re making it up, they might just look into their own history and give importance and highlight certain moments in order to make it into a good story. And I could name a few moments when things for me seemed a little clearer than they had before, or something that. I don’t know. Maybe if someone was waiting for this, maybe I could make up an epiphany story out of my own experiences. (Ellen)

At the end of the interview, despite all our discussions about the epiphany narrative and the search for inspiration, I proceeded to ask Ellen what has been the most inspiring for her in terms of her relationship to her religion. Regardless of my covert tactics addressing conversion as a meta-talk subject, I persisted in attempting to incite a certain kind of narrative; I continued to look for inspiration. Ellen responded to my question by speaking again of the frustrations of her practice. She told me that she had been “thinking a lot now about struggles that I’ve been having living in a new city and not knowing a lot of Muslims and having to find places to pray. I’m feeling so grateful for all that I have right now in my life.”
7. Refusal to perform

Of my five interlocutors, Ellen is the most reluctant to talk about her conversion. “Well, frankly, it’s really nobody’s business.” she told me when I first asked her about her hesitancy to speak on the subject. She quickly softened that first harshly stated reply by explaining that she regrets that her status as a Muslim convert, too often overshadows the fact that she is Muslim. “I want to be recognized by other Muslims as a Muslim, not as a Muslim convert”. She laments the fact that often, rather than focusing on how she practices or embodies her Islam (in her prayer, dealings with others, or activism), most Muslims she meets focus on the conversion; and more specifically, how she converted.

Ellen, however, doesn’t want to disappoint people or be perceived as rude by refusing to talk about the subject, especially if they appear earnestly interested. She told me the story of a Turkish woman she met at a Toronto Mosque in 2009. Her English was a little broken, but they managed a short conversation about her recent immigration to Canada and the difficult Canadian winter. Then the woman asked Ellen how she had come to be Muslim. Ellen gave her regular “two-line answer” and hoped that would be enough, but the woman looked confused and told her, “I don’t understand”. Ellen rephrased her answer; generally, “I read a lot and learned about it. Islam worked best for me.” After prayer the woman came back to her and tried again in French, apologizing that her English wasn’t so good. Perhaps Ellen had not understood what she was asking. “Comment devenez vous musulmane?” “I almost laughed”, she chuckled. “I wanted to say, no, it’s not the language barrier, I just don’t want to talk about it!”

Butler asserts that it is always possible to refuse to become a “self narrating being” and to take refuge in silence. (Butler 2005, 11) In this case the subject either “refuses the relation that the enquirer presupposes or changes that relation” in order to refuse the other who queried.
There have been occasions when Carmen has refused to answer those who asked the question, “Why did you convert to Islam”:

_There are a million ways that you could answer that question and a million ways in which you could be asked. So, when you sense, for whatever reason, that you’re not ‘onboard’ with what you perceive to be the reason behind the question then you can make what can be a harsh stand and say flat out ‘No’ and convey a message that ‘I reject your right to even ask me that question’. But in most cases, if I’m not comfortable with whatever their project or expectations are, I can give a vague sort of answer which doesn’t satisfy them anyway. After that you can change the subject ‘So, what stop are you getting off at? What’s for lunch?’” “And I’ll tell you, there was a time when I felt an obligation to tell the whole story in all of its details to anyone who asked. I no longer feel that obligation, whatsoever. (Carmen)_

Silvia got excited when I told her about the scope of my research and the questions I’ve been asking about ‘performing the epiphany narrative’. She told me a story of being invited to a women’s college in the United States, invited to talk about her experience as a Muslim women, her conversion and her own scholarship. She recalled completely subverting their expectations. She talked about her favorite music at the time, what books she was reading, what inspired her in her conversion; rejecting any discussion of the ‘divine inspiration’ story that the audiences’ questions were probing for. Ignoring the tension in the audience, and fully aware that “they were getting frustrated”, she then went on to discuss conversion speaking in the tone of an Islamic
The last time that Silvia had given an interview it had not been a positive experience. The interviewer had focused on the fact that she was of Jewish decent, born to a Christian mother and Jewish father, and “self-identified as a Jew”. The selling point for this interview was not so much the conversion and her reasons for converting to Islam and remaining a Muslim, but “that a Jewish woman converted to Islam.” As a result of the interviewer’s focus on her Jewish-ness, he neglected to even ask about her status as an Islamic scholar, her activism or even any questions about her practice as a Muslim. This process frustrated Silvia, as she felt that her conversion was being sensationalized and simultaneously, her identity as a Muslim was being repressed. In the end, the essence of the article, published in an online magazine, was the conversion of a Jewish woman to Islam.

How does the refusal to perform by taking refuge in silence, avoiding the question, vocalizing displeasure, or refuting the question entirely serve to undermine the power of society to form and shape a subject? In what ways does this refusal allow the subject to undermine the mediation of social norms, linguistic frameworks, “anthropocentric dispositions and cultural frames” which control that act of “recognition”? (Butler 2005, 29) Regardless of my interlocutors’ attempts to avoid ‘the call’ through silence, in the end, Butler argues that these societal frameworks will inevitably form what is the “I”. In this case, perhaps refuting the question is simply a rejection of the others’ ‘violence’, but it cannot be a refutation of that relationship between the subject and her society or the subject and herself. We are left to understand that these relationships have been and are being enacted even before the question was asked.
8. Returning to Leila’s Disappointment and Laura’s Performance

In the French film “Gender Trouble”, directed by Paule Zajdermann, Judith Butler explained her thoughts on modes of identity and belonging; “Yes, I’m lesbian, I’m gay, but do I subscribe to everything the Lesbian/Gay movement says? Do I always come out as a lesbian/gay person first, before say, I am a woman, or a Jew, or an American, or a citizen, or a philosopher? No. You know it is not the only identity. There are certain communities in which one belongs and one does not belong. And it seems to me we travel, I travel.” This scene elucidates Butler’s notion of performativity and her agreement with Nietzsche’s assertion; “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything”. As such, Butler asserts, there exists no eternal or core ‘gender identity’, or indeed any mode of identity, that lies behind the “expression” of that identity; “that is performatively constituted by the very “expressions that are said to be its results”. (Butler 1999, 34)

I return now to the opening story of Laura’s stay at my apartment, and consider the change in our conversation when Leila stopped by for a visit. Our drastic turn in the conversation, when Leila came on the scene, was to be expected. Laura and I are close friends, and Leila, previously a stranger to Laura, is my warm acquaintance. Leila, in her black hijab and loose fitting housedress, appeared to Laura as a conservative Muslim woman. However, that we changed the course of our talk, and began to evoke religious speech, causes me to reflect on Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’, the various spaces we inhabit, and roles we play. Just as

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18 This quote is taken from the French documentary “Judith Butler: Philosophe en Tout Genre”. It can be found on Utube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q50nQUGil3s
Butler lives her life with various modes of being and belonging and travels within the performance of various identities (gay, Jewish, citizen, philosopher, etc.), so do we all possess multiple roles which we play in our lives. How we perform piety (or not) and the religious speech we evoke (or not), is determined by the particular spaces we inhabit and the certain times in which we inhabit them. As such, the conversion narratives which my interlocutors share, or refuse to share, predominantly depend on their audience, their audience’s expectations, and my interlocutors’ willingness to perform or desire to disrupt their expectations. Through rejecting the audience’s assumptions, either by refusing their right to ask the question, or by taking refuge in silence, my interlocutors attempt to disrupt the structures of “institution incitement” imposed on them. (Foucault 1978, 18)
Late at night in January of 2011, I began to compile the conversion stories of my interlocutors. I looked upon their narratives within a new light, considering the questions and conversations which led to the way in which they told me their narratives; indeed, the performative aspect of their ‘telling’. Reviewing the questions I had asked in order to receive these stories, I realized that much like any other ‘questioner’, I had called upon my interlocutors to narrate their account. I was another person who asks; Why/How did you convert? Please, tell me the story.

It was Silvia whose words fully encapsulated my attention and understanding of the ‘storytelling’ aspect of my interlocutors’ conversions.

*Intellectually, I may know that these stories that I tell, making sense of hard times and creating a good meaning from bad memories, I may know that this is imaginative association. I think now, that it is just the grace of God that allows me to look back on bad memories and remember them in a frame that makes sense. I know that it is a story I’m telling myself, but everyone tells themselves stories, you know? You’ve got to pick a story, pick a story that works. (Silvia)*

Silvia was speaking here of the difficult progression she had a few years after her conversion, and marrying a man, a convert himself, whose psychologically abusive treatment colored the first number of years after her conversion at the age of twenty-five. Eventually she found the strength to leave him, but the tale of her conversion remains intertwined with negative memories.
Thus, her ‘story’ is one she admits to being one she has fashioned and interpreted from past event to “suit the person” she “wants to be”.

1. *Therapy: Her Own Conversion Narrative*

Silvia characterizes her conversion story as a “breakdown narrative”; a story that explains her passage of being one who was lost, “damaged”, and “disabled”, to the “happier human being” she is today. Conversion, was for her, a long ethical path; one which has no ending. She began by telling the story of her teenage years and early twenties, suffering depression and searching for an ethical path.

*At that time I was reading Hannah Arendt and I asked the same questions that I was reading in her work: how do you act ethically in a totalitarian world? How do you participate without contributing to the ugliness? (Silvia)*

Silvia converted to Islam when she was twenty-five. In the first few years after she converted to Islam, Silvia distanced herself from these questions. She went through a phase of time which she characterized as “the psycho period”, wherein she ‘lost’ ‘the core’ of herself and the questions she used to ask. In the years which followed, even up until the present day, she has struggled to regain that ‘sense of herself’ which she felt she had lost. Years after her conversion, Silvia began to see her commitment to Islam as a therapy process; a contract to participate in a healing process which keeps her committed to an ethical path.
It’s intense right? When you do this, when you make a commitment to a religion, or any ethical path, you are entering into a whirl pool. It’s like going into therapy and you’re serious about going into therapy. When you open that door and you are really committed to dealing with the shit. A lot of people go into therapy and just go through the motions. But if you’re committed, then you open it all up, and then you have to deal with it, you’ve got to look at it, and it is a long drawn out process, there is no going back. (Silvia)

Silvia thinks of her conversion as similar to the “breakdown narrative of therapy”; as a “stripping down of oneself to the bear bones” in order to build oneself back up again. The following quote, also an excerpt from our conversation in the ritzy downtown café, followed Silvia’s explanation her conversion in terms of a ‘breakdown’ and going into therapy. She cautioned, however, that it was not simply an ethical path leading to illumination;

I think that self denial is a big part of conversion. You have to drop so much of your identity that doesn’t fit and many times you can find yourself denying who you are. You drop these essential things and try to fill that space up, but you can’t and so you’re lost. (Silvia)

Silvia has also discussed how, when she initially converted, she felt inhibited and unable to challenge what she was being taught by various Sufi sheikhs. She believes that the source of this inhibition was derived from what she perceived as her ‘white feminist taint’. As she explained to me the ‘psycho period’ (found in chapter one), she considered the factors which led to white female converts feeling they had to “reach a level of piety that no one else was expected to reach.” Silvia expressed that many of the conservative sheikhs and white male converts, of whom her husband was one, pressured her to “submit to their authority and constantly criticized
her “rebellious behavior”. Other women, Silvia explained, have shared similar experiences with her. Since this time, Silvia has found methods and tactics to distance herself from this difficult beginning, re-discover her own “root of herself” and follow her religious/ethical path. It is sticking to that ethical path and rediscovering the ‘essence’ of oneself, wherein the conversion begins to work for Silvia as an ethical choice.

This is a sort of therapy, a way of living it and acting like the healthy person. What does a healthy person look like? And how do you interpret your own history to make sense of your life today and the choices you are making. So in this way religion is good. It’s good because I can take the remnants and pull them all together and make sense of it all. You have to find that narrative that works. You can see this in teenagers as they try on different personalities and ways of acting. They adjust their stories, who they are, deciding what works and what doesn’t work. (Silvia)

Foucault’s genealogy of the Christian model of self-disclosure, renunciation, and destruction of oneself resonates within Silvia’s account of self-denial and ‘extreme’ pious behavior. (Foucault, 1988, 43) The recognition of personal attributes and value systems, deemed unfit within her life as a new Muslim, and subsequent ‘drop’ of those ‘things’, is done so with the intention to ‘break’ from one life and begin a new pious self. She states that during this time she broke off or curbed relations with certain people and abandoned certain practices from her pre-conversion life, causing disturbances in personal relationships with her family and friends. Foucault states that in the Christian tradition, the importance of self-care and the potential of a positive “emergence of the self” has been supplanted or at least obscured by self-knowledge through “the sacrifice of the self”. (Foucault 1993, 222) He explains that “penance is the affect
of change, of rupture with self, past, and world” and serves to “mark the refusal of the self, the
breaking away from the self: ego non sum, ego. This formula is at the heart of publicatio sui. It
represents a break with one’s past identity”. (Foucault 1988, 43) In Silvia’s case the “rupture
with self, past and world” may be seen not necessarily as a vocal renunciation, nor particularly as
a formal penance, but rather as a recognition that the ‘former’ life is one ‘tainted’ and should
therefore be renounced. The ‘former’ self becomes something which must be renounced or
rejected in order to discover the truth.

That which Foucault’s discussion in Technologies of the Self does not account for (and
that to which he alludes in Hermeneutics of the Self with the call for an “emergence of the self”
and abandoning the “sacrifice of the self”) is the ‘lost’ portion of Silvia’s ‘breaking away from
the self’. The loss of ‘oneself’ in this case occurs after one has dropped ‘essential’ parts of
oneself. Silvia explained how in the beginning of her conversion process she was very willing to
adhere to the dictates of conservative Sufi Sheikhs; “I spent time convincing myself that they
were right and I was wrong, because they were Sufis and they were beautiful, and they said such
beautiful things, and I wanted to be to be Sufi”. As a result, she was asked by different people;
her (ex) husband, fellow converts and Sheikhs she followed, to denounce so much of herself.
Although she did not explain a particular process of verbalizing her self-renunciation, Silvia’s
practice of obeying the dictates of her sheikh, and the other sheikhs who she was listening to at
the time, can helpful be placed in relation to Foucault’s discussion of exagoresis. In this act of
“permanently verbalizing your thoughts and permanently obeying the master, you are renouncing
your will and yourself”. (Foucault 1993, 221) It may also be significant to consider here that this
‘verbalization’ and ‘renunciation of will and self’ was considered to be a means toward the
‘rupture’ from the former life and toward the new life within the law of God; “a way for the
conversion”. In this construction, the way “for the conversion to develop itself and to take effect” is through a “renunciation to oneself.” (Foucault 1993, 220)

2. Pregnancy: A Great Change

School was pressing in late November and when Carmen sent me a SMS message, inviting me to come over for tea and a chat. Walking into her warm porch, I smelled delicious spicy food smells. I offered her the raspberry and caramel popcorn I had bought from down the street, and we munched away as she made our sweet milky tea. Both cuisine and conversation proved to be delectable. We chatted about school and while Carmen completed her dinner preparation, and then settled down in the living room, leaving the stew to stew. I took out my tape recorder and we settled down to business, discussing topics ranging from conversion to pregnancy to dhikr. That evening, I once again marveled at my friend-turned-interlocutor’s articulate musing and reflections on her life. A more eloquent weaver of words I have never met.

Born into an inter-racial marriage, Carmen grew up a devoted Catholic. Her father was black from Detroit, Michigan, and her mother, white from a small Northern Ontario town. She grew up moving in-between these two places, the city of Toronto and another Ontario city on the border of the United States. Holding both American and Canadian passports, growing up in an inter-racial marriage and never quite settling in any one geographical location for very long,

\[19\text{ Dhikr is an invocation of God, typically involving the use of repetitive, rhythmic chanting in order to remember God (though this remembrance may also take place in silence). Dhikr is sometimes done individually, but in some Sufi orders maintain it is as a ceremonial activity.}\]
Carmen considers herself as living in a state of ‘in-between-ness’. She had always considered herself a religious person, but loss her “strong connection” to God when her sister passed away when Carmen was seventeen years old. She met and then married her husband at the age of nineteen. He was an Arab Muslim who had recently immigrated to Canada. She told me that she didn’t convert for her husband or her children but for her own faith and spirituality.

As you know, I married very young, and in the act of marriage itself there was no expectation about religion, but it was agreed that the child would follow that religion. I myself had been deeply Catholic growing up. I had been deeply religious, deeply attached to it, and had a crisis of faith when my sister died. It was very difficult. You know that there are things that happen, it’s true, but for my eighteen year old self, it was very hard, very hard. So, ah, I wasn’t on good terms with God. (Carmen)

Becoming Muslim was a “healing process” for the pain which she had felt after the death of her sister and her subsequent crisis of faith. However, she assured me that she was not “enraptured with Islam right away”. She began to read about Islam only after becoming pregnant with her first child, in order to gain a better understanding of the religion, and the fashion in which she and her husband had agreed to raise their children. It was during that time that she entered a period of deep reflection, discovering a reconnection with her own spirituality.

Carmen: It was definitely a progression which occurred when I was pregnant with my first child, Khalid.

Emily: So, how did that progression happen?

Carmen: Come on! We must have already talked about this before.
Emily: Yes, but I’d like you to tell me again. While I have this obnoxious recorder here…better than trusting my hazy memory.

Carmen took a deep breath and began to tell me the story. She began with a prelude, explaining the evolution of her narrative;

Ok, but I must preface this with the fact that I am now 41 years old, and the reason that I am a Muslim in the first place is not necessarily the reason I remain a Muslim. So I think that that matters, and there are a million different things that go on in there, passages, in your life and through your existence. So the story of how a nineteen year old girl came to be a Muslim is not the reason I am now a Muslim. (Carmen)

As we sat on her plush red couch, Carmen shared a narrative that I had heard a few times before. She spoke of being engaged with her faith through an “intellectual response”. She explained that she feels the most connected and ‘moved’ by “sitting quietly and reading the Quran or the works of great thinkers”. Her soul is “absolutely nourished in the intellectual endeavor.” However, that evening, Carmen provided me with a narrative of her conversion she had not told me before. She went on to explain how her pregnancy with her first child, Khalid, had compelled her to embark on this spiritual and intellectual journey.

Pregnancy changes you. It is a transformative experience. You become a more emotional being and I think this was my way of becoming closer to God. So while I was pregnant I was reading about Islam and considering how we would raise our children in an Islamic way. I thought that if this is going to be part of my child’s life then I should understand it. In the course of reading during my
pregnancy a lot of different things happened. There was an intellectual journey I
took through the reading, there was a metaphysical journey I took in terms of
being pregnant and feeling a reconnection with the divine, in a whole new way,
very different from the way I had previously experienced it. And all of these things
came together to influence that, re-establishing my relationship with God. And
Islam was a good structure in which to do so. (Carmen)

3. The Intellectual Response

Reviewing the recording of our conversation and her statement, “Come on! we must have
already talked about this before”, I was reminded of the first time Carmen and I had spoken on
the topic of her conversion. In the winter of 2007, shortly after I had met Carmen, I was invited
to a dinner at her Italian-Sudanese, colleague Antonio’s apartment. Carmen, Antonio, another
colleague, and I, spent the evening after a delicious meal, sipping on grappa, and chatting. It was
when the topic turned to religion, and a discussion of her and Antonio’s respective experiences
with researching their faith, that I first heard about Carmen’s conversion. Antonio, who had been
raised in Italy with his Italian non-Muslim mother, spoke of learning about Islam later in life. He
joked about an experience working in Afghanistan, being put in the awkward situation of being
invited to lead prayer and not knowing how to go about it. Carmen, then, shared the process by
which she had learned about Islam; discussing the intellectual journey that she had embarked
upon when first considering the faith. She described it as a time of intense intellectual rigor and
reflection. She joked that many people are confused when she speaks of Islam, or indeed any
faith, in associate with an “intellectual response”. She re-iterated this narrative when I visited
her that night in late November, as we chatted over tea and popcorn.
When I think of my connection to Islam I think of an intellectual response to faith, which I know sounds odd, but my soul is nourished by the intellectual practice. I know that any un-informed person might think of Osama Bin Laden or whatever, or that incredibly passionate response of someone engulfed in a faith, so incredibly irrational. But ironically Islam appeals to me for the intellectual rigor that’s so rational. I see it as very very human and balanced...it’s just very human. There is no expectation of perfection; it’s a journey, plain and simple. Put one foot in front of the other and think about it. (Carmen)

Ellen and Laura also highlight the intellectual process of their conversion in the narration of their conversion stories. Ellen, who at the age of twenty-two and in her third year of university, was studying Arabic at the time when she began to ‘investigate’ and research Islam. She began a long process of reading the Quran in translation, attempting to engage with both the Arabic text and the English translation. Although she professed to have learned a great deal from her Muslim friends, it was through two online courses that she learned about developing practice. Laura also undertook reading the entire Quran, switching back and forth between translations. She laughed with me about how her ‘spiritual quest’ became, “like everything else” in her life, a “rigorous academic endeavor”.

I started to consider if this would be a good choice for me. I read a lot of material and various religious literature on Islam and also read the entire Quran and lots of history and lots of books on Muslim doctrine by Muslim scholars and non-

20 The courses Ellen took online were both found on “SunnīPath: The Online Islamic Academy”. The first was entitled “The Absolute Essentials of Islamic Belief”, and the second, “The Absolute Essentials of Islam” which followed the Hanafi school. SunnīPath, which is soon changing its name to Quibla: For the Islamic Studies, offers online distance education courses in several subject areas, including; Arabic, foundational Islamic sciences, and Islamic history. The courses are provided free to those who have recently converted to Islam. Ellen took her two courses without a fee. Sunnīpath was established in 2003 as a source of Islamic information and continues to offer information on featured topics, like; Istikhara (the guidance prayer), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Islamic marriage, etc. It is funded by the revenues of the classes and private donors. http://www.sunnipath.com/
Muslim scholars. It was mostly an intellectual process which is kind of strange when you are dealing with faith, but that’s one part of what attracted me to Islam in the first place…the priority on a rational process or logical understanding. I wouldn’t tell anybody about this ‘rational’ path right away, just that Islam was a path that worked for me.” (Laura)

4. Search for Roots

For Judy, her decision to become Muslim was framed as “a search for roots” in an “ethical and spiritual framework”. She grew up in the south of Germany in the 1980s, and was raised in community in close proximity to three American military bases. Her father, who was a businessman who traveled around Europe, Turkey and India, and her mother wished to raise the children in a Christian environment and also wanted them exposed to English. They joined an American military Baptist church which was attended predominantly by American families. The ultra conservative sensibilities of the church community never “sat well” with Judy. She remembers once, when she was eleven or twelve, sitting at a church social event fighting with a male member of the congregation about an aspect of the preacher’s ceremony. Others in the congregation heard this argument and flashed disapproving looks.

Judy told me that she believed that her initial fascination with and investigation into Islam derived from feelings of rootless-ness she experienced, feeling like an immigrant her whole life. Judy’s family had left their native Hungary during the Second World War, and moved to Germany. Although she grew up in Germany, Judy constantly felt like an outsider. As her family lived in Southern Germany among a community of Americans, they were “isolated and marginalized in a sense from both the German population and the American others”. For Judy, these feelings of isolation were further exacerbated with her growing disillusionment with
the church, compounding her spiritual confusion. After moving to the United States, at the age of sixteen in the mid 1990s, she felt further isolated. Judy “moved away completely” from her church, though her mother was still a practicing Baptist at the time. She started reading about Islam and ended up converting during her first year of university. Judy credits her experience as an immigrant and “feelings of rootless-ness”, combined with her disenchantment with the church as the biggest factors for investigating Islam and attempting to find another spiritual path. Although her parents chosen practice of Christianity did not fulfill her “spiritual needs”, she was driven to find “a spiritual and doctrinal framework within which to situate” her life.

5. The (un)Romantic Intro

I was pretty closed about it. I felt that it was oppressive to women. I thought it was weird to have to take off your shoes. I honestly felt it was stupid to take off your shoes to go into the building. And you have to remember that I had no exposure to anything like this before. It was the late eighties and there were only a couple of mosques in Toronto that existed, that I know of. And one was in this rundown church that was all new immigrants. The first time I went I lost my shoes. I was two blocks down the street when I noticed that my shoes were too big and I went back and they were gone. The mosque was run down, the women were separated, there was just nothing pulling me towards this. (Carmen)

Carmen was not intrigued with, charmed by, or even vaguely interested in the idea of converting to Islam after marrying her husband. Rather, the opposite was more accurate. She was entirely disenchanted with her first introduction to a Toronto mosque. She felt that women were marginalized and taking off one’s shoes was a ‘stupid’ idea.
Laura and Silvia also had un-romantic introductions to their first mosques. Laura, who first attended her Southern Ontario city’s local mosque in order to participate in a Muslim women’s group, was completely “disappointed and bored” with the “mundane and uninteresting conversations” that were part of the khutba (lecture or sermon). They talked about “very basic things” like the importance of praying five times daily, how long one’s sleeves need to be and the form of a ‘proper’ hijab. Silvia was also completely disenchanted the “boring conversations” and gender segregation at the various conservative mosques she visited in her West coast US city, before she converted. She also told me a story of a trip she and her boyfriend took to Spain when they were in their early twenties and a Sufi gathering they attended there.  

So what happens is they separate us, and I am taken to the women’s section. So I’m sitting there with all the women and they are gossiping, talking about gossip and nonsense. And in the other room, there is this insane, wonderful dhikr happening. And I can hear it. So I’m sitting here in this room filled with farting babies and gossiping women, and I’m getting more and more pissed off. (Silvia)

This experience countered and challenged Silvia’s initial response to Islam, which was a “response to beauty”. As a result of being so enamored with the beauty she saw, in various Sufi practices, (dhikr, prayer, etc.), she ignored “the core” of herself and her “true ethics”. She lamented that she ignored, and in essence, ‘buried’, her “deeply personal response” to the sexism that she witnessed in the years leading to up to her conversion, and those few years after. The

21 Her boyfriend converted shortly after this trip and she married him shortly after she converted.
22 Please see previous footnote on dhikr (footnote 19).
Muslim scholars she was around at this time told her “straight out that women don’t deserve the same as men.” She found herself listening. “To this day”, she exclaimed, “I don’t understand; why I didn’t stay mad, at gender segregation, at discriminatory practice?”

Silvia’s story of the “farting babies and gossiping women”, Laura’s description of the boring masjid, and Carmen’s disenchantment with “the whole idea” of Islam tell an anti-epiphany narrative. These stories effectively disrupt the expectations that my interlocutors’ audiences have about the kind of narrative they should provide. By telling an un-romantic or ‘anti-epiphany’ story, my interlocutors subvert expectations; complicating the relationship between a convert and her ‘transformation’. They have each examined the messiness of the conversion, and will tell stories that include feelings of doubt, disenchantment or even fear. Significantly, they will narrate these stories in concert with their other ‘rupture’ narratives; which tend to be conform more to the ‘incitement to discourse’ and more reminiscent of the ‘epiphany’ narrative.

6. Sorting out Pre-Conversion Influences

In mid-September 2010, Laura finished her comprehensive exams, successfully becoming a PhD candidate within her program of International Relations. After receiving the great news, she called me, overjoyed. It had been a long haul; months of studying and then an intense forty-eight hour period of essay writing. That night our conversation was scattered. Although our conversations are often random, sweeping a variety of different topics, news, and emotions of the day, our talk that evening was particularly distracted and haphazard. Turning the conversation away from the excitement of passing this significant academic milestone, the impending celebratory trip with a three of her colleagues to Miami, and the appalling state of her
overflowing laundry hamper, she asked me about my thesis proposal and ethics review. Though I didn’t want to bother her with my ‘work’ at this moment of her triumph, we ended up talking about the structure of my ethics proposal and then, the list of questions I was intending to submit with my ethics review. At her request, I started reading down the list of my preliminary questions.

1) *What is your religious background?*

2) *How did you first learn about Islam? How did your knowledge of Islam evolve?*

3) *Who in your life, at that time, was Muslim? In what way did they inform your understanding of Islam or your choice to convert?*

She stopped my listing at the third question. “That one is an interesting question”, she said, “and difficult to answer.” I hastily opened a new document on Microsoft word to start hastily typing notes on our conversation.23 Laura spoke of how she wished for her conversion to be considered as separate from her decision to marry a Muslim man. “Not for what others would think, but rather for myself.” She expressed how hard it was to “separate yourself from the moment in time and space” to consider how things actually unfolded. “You know,” she explained, “I wouldn’t like to credit him as being formative in my decision to convert but he obviously played a role.” She pondered out loud, “If I hadn’t met him or married him, would I have eventually found Islam? Would I have considered it even if we hadn’t gotten married?” She also noted that,

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23 Over the next few months, there were few occasions wherein we had a ‘normal’ phone conversation. Whenever Laura and I talked and the conversation strayed to anything regarding my project, I would start frantically scribbling or typing our comments and thoughts. Laura, always the patient ‘informant’, would attentively and good-naturedly repeat any comments and would clarify her points when I reviewed my hastily jotted down notes at a later time.
while she and Jafer were still married, she would be sure to tell the majority of people who asked her how she became Muslim that she had converted before she had gotten married.

*It seems like he should be included in this story. I don’t know now for sure, but it seems rational that, although he didn’t really encourage me, he was a part of it. I always said, when anybody asked me if he was the reason, that he played no role, but everyone in your life plays some kind of a role. (Laura)*

Ironically, though Laura does not want to consider herself as having converted for marriage, she surprised me during another late night conversation by characterizing Carmen’s conversion as being predominately for marriage. This, of course, was not Carmen’s account of her own conversion. When I questioned Laura about this characterization at a later date, she pointed out that perhaps this was just an easier way of summing up how the change occurred; that meeting a Muslim man and falling in love was just one step in the process and the story could simply be boiled down to that. “But of course that is not accurate, there is so much more going on in these cases, it’s just easier to say; she converted for so and so.”

Carmen does not attribute her choice of Islam to her Muslim husband she married when she was eighteen years old. “He didn’t ask” and she “did not offer”. Yet, she does not completely rule out his influence, recognizing the important role he played in her initial introduction to Islam and the family network she lived in for so many years afterward. She told me that “In the beginning, I agreed that if we had children that the children would be raised in that religion, I didn’t really care one way or another. That was his religion, and that was important to him and I was fine with that. I went to the mosque a couple of times with him.” Decisively, she asserts, that regardless of the influences, “Islam has always been a deeply personal choice for me.” So, though she recognizes the effects and influences of others in her
choice to become Muslim, she maintains that her final choice and relationship with her faith and God, is all her own.

Carmen’s Egyptian/Sudanese husband and his family, most of whom had immigrated to Canada in the 1980s, never pressured her to convert. Indeed, when they were first married and even when she was considering conversion, they gave her “a great deal of space”. There was never any overt pressure for her to convert; “only occasional talk about how beautiful Islam was. What a wonderful religion.” Laura also never faced any pressures from her in-laws to convert. Indeed, in some cases she even felt as though her more secular in-laws, notably Jafer’s two sisters, were deterring her from converting. She explained that they would say things like “You know, you don’t have to convert. You are allowed to keep your religion.”

My boyfriend at the time and his family were sort of supportive, but not really in other ways. He told me not to convert because he didn’t want me to feel pressured. But I think they were quite pleased in the end. Carmen and Brandy were definitely supportive but they didn’t want me to feel pressured so we really only talked about it when I wanted to. But they were the ones who came to the mosque when I said the shahada. (Laura)

Jafer’s sisters became very excited when she told them she was going to convert. They surprised her in their excitement since they had been “so lukewarm” about the subject before. She quickly

\[24\] The shahada is the Muslim proclamation (literally meaning ‘witnessing’) of faith in God and his prophet. In order to convert to Islam, one must say the shahada three times in front of two or more Muslim witnesses. It said in the ritual of daily prayer.
found out that the largest source of their excitement was that they might have the opportunity to help Laura choose a new Muslim name; something she had no intention of doing.

Judy credits her father with being the first person to bring another spiritual and societal perspective to her life. As a result of his travelling, he would bring home many different gifts from other parts of the world. Consequently, Judy associates her first introduction to the “Muslim world’ with her father and his openness to other practices and ways of life. She explained that he was “was really influential in bringing the world and the ‘other’ to me. He brought us back ‘traditional’ clothes from Turkey and India. He even let us wear them to church.” From her initial conversion when she was an undergrad and until this day, Judy’s father has completely accepted her conversion and just hopes that it will help her in her life. She explained to me that her father finds what she is studying ‘exciting’, “though he doesn’t understand a lot of it. The most important thing for him in the end is that I am happy and I get a good academic job somewhere.” Judy also credits the friends she made in the United States upon moving from Germany at the age of sixteen who were Muslim from Saudi and Syria. Throughout high school and in the first years of her undergraduate degree, she used to speak with them endlessly about Islam and religion in general.

For Ellen, her friends in Vancouver were very helpful as they allowed her to learn about Islam through answering her questions “to the best of their ability”, but also encouraging her to do her own reading and exploration. She never felt as though someone had tried to hold her hand when she was considering conversion; she narrates it as a very independent process. “They gave me a lot of my own space. Not one of them told me what to do or how to do things or how…unless I specifically asked them things.” Her friends were “so supportive” and “behind” all of her choices, even those which differed from their own practices. She told me about a
deeply religious friend who she believed might be the type to criticize, but ended up not doing so. Her time in Vancouver and the relationships she formed resonates in her life and has helped inform the kind of Muslim she is today. The women who were in her life as she learned about Islam formed a transient but strong community. She explained, that the feeling this created was something she couldn’t really “put her finger on”: “something about a ‘sisterhood’” which was “really powerful there”. She told me that she remembers “being really amazed by how the common religion played a role with the relations between myself and my Muslim friends in a different way than other friendships that I’ve seen.” She then explained her group of friends, their disparate ages and backgrounds, upbringings, and yet, their commonalities and how well they meshed together.

7. The Messy Process

7.1. Shahada and the Transitionary Period

For some reason I decided I wanted to go and say the shahada aloud, to make it official. Because at the time it was kind of unclear as to whether I was Muslim or not. I seemed as though I believed and I was fasting for Ramadan, but I hadn’t said, surely I want to be Muslim or not. So I decided to do it. Would I do it again, I don’t know…but I chose to do it with friends and in public at that time.

(Laura)

I was surprised when Laura told me how she had given her shahada, the Muslim declaration and witnessing of faith. She and her Muslim friends at the time and their families, including Carmen and her sister Brandy, who is also a convert, went to the local mosque one afternoon. Though it didn’t shock me that Carmen and Brandy had been in attendance, I asked her why her other friends had invited extended family to watch.
Emily: Where did you say the *shahada*?

Laura: I went to one of the mosques in my city with Carmen, Remy, Ghada and a bunch of their close family.

Emily: Oh...why did you decide to do say it in a public setting, with so many people around?

Laura: I think it’s fine to do it public, it was nice for the friends I was with because I believe it was edifying for them. I invited friends and their close family to come because it was something they had expressed interest in; to watch someone choose Islam as their path rather than being born and raised Muslim was something inspiring to watch for many in attendance. Through watching someone convert to Islam, there is a reinforcement of one’s own faith. My friend’s sister was there with her teenaged son. I guess she wanted him to see that, ‘look, Islam is really relevant in many different people’s lives’.

Silvia didn’t feel as though she needed to make her conversion public. Indeed, for two years after her conversion, few friends or family knew about her becoming Muslim. She does, however, remember saying the *shahada* as ‘a moment’. She described to me a scene, at once tense and anticlimactic, in which she said her first *shahada* on a plane going through horrible turbulence;

*I thought to myself on a plane ride, ok it’s time. There was turbulence and everybody was scared and I said, ok I need to do this. So I called on God to give me the Jinn witnesses and I said the *shahada* and then, bam, Muslim! (Silvia)*
The moment of “Bam, Muslim!” reflected her initial rush of fearing for her life in a plane the 30,000 feet above sea level. Upon her return to the ground, the ‘rush’ quickly dissipated and she found herself feeling ambivalent about her conversion. “I didn’t feel that I had converted,” she explained, “and for two years I didn’t tell anybody. I stopped drinking, but I had to stop anyway because I was starting graduate school.” For Silvia, becoming Muslim “could never be characterized as a moment”, it was a process, a “becoming”. The first couple of years after saying the *shahada*, however, she felt uncomfortable telling people about her conversion. It had not yet become part of her identity; the way she saw herself and the way she wished others to perceive her.

Like Silvia, Judy’s *shahada* moment also became anti-climatic. The event was characterized by Judy as being unimportant; even an enforced formality performed with little ceremony or meaning. In our first conversation, though I did ask the questions; “How did you convert? When do you feel you became Muslim?”, her responses included no mention of the *shahada*. Indeed, in a later conversation she qualified just how insignificant the ‘moment’ of *shahada* was, in terms of her transition into a practicing Muslim.

*Emily:* OK, one would really assume that I would have taken this down, since my project is about conversions! But we spent so much time talking about the "epiphany narrative" and people's reaction to the *hijab/khimar*, I forgot about the brass tacks. When did you say your *shahada*? When was it that you feel you ‘officially’ became Muslim?

*Judy:* (She laughs) We didn’t talk about it because there was no highlight! I decided I was Muslim over the period of several weeks in my first year of my undergrad, but couldn't stand the MSA (Muslim Student Association) people. I didn't know two Muslim guys whom I liked. I walked by the MSA stand often to talk to people, but the official *da’wa*
(those who preach the way of Islam) converts were too scary for me. Then, one muhajiba made me say it to her in the car, on the way to a mosque one day. (we both laugh) But there never was "a shahada". It goes with the anti-climactic story, doesn't it? In a sense, I just started practicing Islam.

It is significant to me that I should have insisted on questioning my interlocutors about their shahada, though the act itself fits within the ‘epiphany moment’ that Muslims like Ellen and Laura attempt to deconstruct. Indeed it surprised me when Laura, with whom I had never before discussed the shahada, had chosen to proclaim her faith in such a public setting; something with which she has often expressed disinterest or dislike. Ellen was especially vehement about her disinterest in performing the shahada publicly; stating that she had “never felt the need” to do so. One of the reasons that she has avoided acting out this witnessing of faith is her resistance to the notion of a public “moment” of faith. This “moment”, wherein one feels a great change within oneself and has miraculously become part of a faith group, fits into Ellen’s notion of an epiphany narrative. Performing the shahada for others effaces any and all “flip flopping, confusion or doubt”. “I never said the shahada publicly”, she told me; “I didn’t think that that should be the moment. It wasn’t just a moment of becoming Muslim; it was a process, something that evolved. I didn’t feel right about doing it that way.”

It is important to Ellen that the process and evolution of her “becoming” Muslim is not glossed over into a “sky-opening-up story of redemption, salvation, inspiration.” She highlights the “messy process of a conversion” and contemplates why many converts might skip over the narration of confusing, complicated times. Considering the reasons, Ellen highlighted embarrassment as a possible factor. However, the pressure for a good performance of an inspirational story was her main hypothesis for neglecting to tell a “messy story”;
In telling a more fast paced action adventure version of your conversion story; expanding, exaggerating and highlighting the ‘facts’, it is if you are legitimizing your conversion in the eyes of your ‘audience’. You are giving them what they want to hear. (Ellen)

Through this process, both the story-teller and the audience feel satisfied. The audience’s expectations have been met and through the telling and subsequent approval, the convert’s conversion has been legitimized. In this method of storytelling, Ellen explained, you are avoiding telling the audience “about a struggle, deliberating, a long process of learning, reading, doubting, and flip flopping.” This ‘messy process’ is how Ellen characterizes her own conversion. She explained to me that she “was on the fence for some time” but continued learning all the rituals of prayer and fasting while making her decision. She had deliberated for almost two years and before making her decision.

8. The Real Story Here

On many occasions during my fieldwork, I had to remind myself that I was not searching for the ‘real’ story. My theoretical framework of Butler; ‘the call’ to narrate oneself and the performativity of our identities, and Foucault’s ‘incitement to discourse’ which considered the notion of an “institutional incitement” which exerts controls over a multiplication of discourses, assured me that indeed, there is no such thing as a singular, ‘real’ story. Just as the ‘epiphany’ narratives my interlocutors attempt to reject, or may be tempted to narrate, are ‘performatative’ narratives; so too are the ‘rupture’ narratives chosen by my interlocutors to explain those messy and complicated periods in their lives. Silvia’s statement, “you’ve got to pick a story, pick a story that works”, resonates within each of my interlocutor’s narratives.
Conclusion

1. *Is That Depressing? The End of the Interview*

    I have a bad habit of cramming too many events and visits into one weekend. As is my custom, I took the two hour bus ride to Laura’s city, thinking that my twenty-four hour trip would yield enough time for quality ‘catching up’ time with my friend, writing my response paper, and a time slot for a first ‘official’ interview. The evening I arrived, we made dinner together and then sat on her balcony, smoking shisha, laughing, chatting and avoiding the topic of work altogether. We stayed up, too late, until our smoke filled lungs could take no more. The next morning we were in a rush. I knew we would have to cram in the interview immediately, as we were heading to her office where we would disturb her colleagues with our talk. Laura hastily made us a cup of coffee and we plopped down on her couch, both with the general feeling that we must get this formality ‘out of the way’. With my obnoxious tape recorder between us, we embarked on the most awkward conversation we’ve ever had. Worst of all, I had forgotten my coffee in the kitchen to become cold. We finished the interview and I left on the Greyhound about five hours later, a Tim Horton’s coffee in hand. On the way home I listened to the conversation. Every question I asked, and every response she gave, possessed the content of
other conversations we’d had over the past few years; but with a stiff and formulaic glaze to our exchanges.

The most interesting aspect of our forty minute interview was the final moments of packing up our untouched books from the night before and getting our boots on to head our the door. “OK…that wraps it up! I thank you for your time Ms!” I said, ending the interview, facetiously formal. “I think we had better get to your office,” I suggested, “we still have a few precious hours to work.” “That’s it?”, she said, and the disappointment in her voice surprised me. “You can ask me more questions if you want”. “I know”, I told her, “but there is lots of time for that, I still have months ahead of me”. “Besides”, I joked, “you told me that I could make up everything that I didn’t know.” But Laura was serious; “I don’t know if I’m giving you good answers”, she said (and papers rustled and books thumped in the background of the recording). “You are giving me fine answers, you’re answers are great.” I countered. “They are a little depressing…” she said quietly. “Hmmm, what?” I said loudly. “They are depressing.” she said again bluntly. “Well, what do you mean by depressing?” I responded, “Like they should be inspirational?” I began to say that she should have no reason to give me one of those ‘divine inspiration’ stories, when she cut me off;

“I’ve become so… practical, pragmatic. I’ve become less… involved in religion, I guess. So the answers I give you, they are based on my reflections on memories, how I think I felt. I say things like ‘this person influenced me’ because it seems rational to me, although, when I think about it, am I sure? I feel like if you had asked me before, I would have had more religious explanations, to give you about the feelings I’ve had, although I’ve never had the Damascus road experience. That’s what kept me away from converting for so long, because I felt as though I really needed to be enthusiastic about my religion…But, I realized that this is
what I believe and, if I believe it, if this is the right path for me, then that’s the way that I have to go. (Laura)

Laura’s admission at the end of the interview, and the stilted nature of our exchanges throughout the interview, summarized the notion of ‘the call to give an account’. To begin with, in the above situation, Laura was placed in an unusual position of forming a new relationship to me. During this ‘formal’ interview, I was not only her friend; I became a questioner/ethnographer, calling her to give an account of herself. Returning to Butler’s analysis, Laura was pressed to formulate what her “relation to the other ought to be”; negotiating with a friend, turned anthropologist, what kind of narrative she needed to give. (Butler 2005, 30) Within this circumstance, Butler’s argument that there is no way to “think of the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other”, rings true. (Butler 2005, 83) Laura attempted to formulate answers to my queries regarding her conversion, which would fit into what she perceived as my expectations. At the end of the interview, she felt as though she had failed to ‘narrate fully’ for me the account of her conversion. (Butler 2005, 64) The doubt and disappointment Laura professed about her own answers may well have been the response to the pressures of my project, the ‘formal’ interview, and its initial call for her account.

Butler’s questions; “what am I calling her to be? And how does she take up the call?” resonate within this construction. (Butler 2005, 55) Within the first couple months of conversations and interviews with all my interlocutors, many of the questions I asked (‘who inspired you before your conversion?’, “was the ‘liminal period a productive or fruitful time in your life?’ etc.) indeed, called upon my interlocutors to provide a certain type of narrative. Though I was not searching for that story of ‘spiritual awakening’ or a ‘Damascus Road story’, so many of the questions I asked dealt with themes of change and inspiration. Those questions I
asked placed expectations on my interlocutors to perform narratives that responded accordingly; answering my questions with the ‘expected’ response or challenging the whole construction of my questioning process; refusing “the relation that the enquirer presupposed”. (Butler 2005, 12) Later in the conversations and interviews, my interlocutors’ responses to my queries challenged the questions that I was asking. Their analytic and self reflective responses to the varying questions I posed pushed the parameters of my own perceptions of conversion.

“I realized that this is what I believe and, if I believe it, if this is the right path for me, then that’s the way that I have to go.” (Laura)

Laura’s final comment on her conversion, at the end of our interview, encapsulated that very negotiation of ‘identity’ formation each of my interlocutors has spoken about. Their choices in worship, activism, academic work, the relationships they form, and the stories they tell; shape and frame the way they present themselves as Muslims and the approach they take to their own Muslim-ness. Laura’s comment resonates with Silvia’s sentiment from the introduction, the cold afternoon in the Pape subway station, when she asserted she has ‘gotten to the point’ where “even if I didn’t want to be Muslim, it’s too late. It’s become so apart of my identity that I couldn’t un-become, even if I wanted to.” For each of these women, becoming Muslim began when they decided ‘that’s the way I have to go’. In what could never be characterized as a depressing response, Laura’s comment served to inspire and challenge my conception of my interlocutors’ and their ongoing struggle to walk their ‘path’, navigating the ‘discursive’, societal and institutional forces along the way. Theirs are conscious choices; modes of being and a dedication to an ethical path which requires constant attention, ongoing performances and continuous commitment to their faith.
Bibliography


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