The Curation of Difference, Diasporas in Archive: 
A Living Document Breathing Through Memory

by

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Abstract

This document is a dialogue of questions in the erasure of racialized Muslimah from the state-sanctioned institution, the Aga Khan Museum, settling on colonial Canada. Its framework is founded in an understanding of memory as having physical qualities, and material implications in its moment of recollection, museumization, and visualization. In juxtaposition to the critique of the Museum, and the colonial visual landscape of Canada more broadly, a public memoir through a collection of artwork, and a dialogue to follow. In it, three Muslimah-Canadian artists: Faduma Mohamed, Nasim Asgari, and Hiba Abdallah, which not only illuminate the variances of (mis)representation which claim a cultural production of knowledge in Canada, but also speak and curate themselves into existence, and thus enact resistance. This thesis is written to be a document of doing; an active public space which divests of whiteness, and the colonial inclination to erase, commodify, and barter bodies of difference in its presence.

Keywords: art, Canada, colonialism, memory, museum, Muslimah
Acknowledgments

In what has felt like years of roaring seas, of anchors bound in doubt and anxiety, and of countless moonless nights, there are a community of humans who have my heart.

Mama and Baba, Mer and Ing. Who would I be without you? Where would I be without you? Questions I can never imagine answering.

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In love, to my communities; my constellation of stars, even when clouds cover the moon, my night-skies will always be bright. I acknowledge you.
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Breaking the Silence: An Introduction

If this document is to be considered anything at all, may it be one of light. May it be a pause, and a pedestal. I hope this document to be a document of action, of memoir, and collection; a document of the undocumented. Before you, a public piece holding streams of thought which have been weaving and winding over the span of two years. In this arduous, and yet mentally prosperous journey, I have engaged with questions of home, memory, language, and identity, and through each thought the weaving parallels of power and sovereignty, complicating the binaries which actively curate bodies of difference.

This thesis will engage in a textual dialogue of the Aga Khan Museum as a host and arbiter of a selective hospitality, and thus a participant in politics of conditionality through the nonrepresentation of Muslimah bodies and identities. As a state-sanctioned institution in the business of producing a selective cultural knowledge, the following dialogue will actively witness the Museum erase dissenting voices which seemingly cannot co-exist within the colonial landscape of Canada. In a conversation around methods of producing knowledge and the mechanics of settler colonialism, I will conclude that without the inclusion of personal narratives and storytelling—often regarding instances of pain and violence—there can be no disruption to the coloniality in Canada. With that being said, in companionship to our consideration of the Museum, this thesis documents and pedestals the artworks of three Muslimah-Canadian artists, Faduma Mohamed, Nasim Asgari, and Hiba Abdallah, which illuminates a healing process of self-determination. This junction also addresses the constructions of Muslim bodies:

1 The Arabic term ‘Muslimah’ which translates to ‘Muslim womxn,’ is used with intention throughout this thesis. For the purpose of this thesis, the use of the word ‘Muslimah’ is a historico-political, cultural, spiritual, and feminist decision to racialize and feminize Islam and those faithful to it, while actively exposing, and restructuring the misremembering and erasing of Muslim womxn in the Canadian visual landscape.
raced, gendered, sexed, and classed identities as our subject of study. In the combined physical and immaterial presence of the Aga Khan Museum, and the art analyses, this document will work to consider narratives which are hidden, streamlined, considered dangerous, and thus erased, while also bearing witness to the vulnerability of language, the powers of storytelling, and a revolutionary body of memory. Particularly in the memorializing of Muslimah narratives, engaging in its peaks and valleys, sharing in pain and joy, it is my hope that the sovereignty of Muslimah histories and complex identities can be validated. Certainly, I have found myself embodying a refusal of both erasure, and of misrepresentation, while ensuring that Muslimah stories do not become currency to be desired, monetized, and exchanged by the greed of settler colonial endeavors.

The Museum itself is a body—a living text—which is fixed, yet always becoming in its whiteness, believing itself to be white (Coates 2015). In juxtaposition to this, as audience to this document, we act as witnesses to racialized Muslimah artists, as masters in preservation; each narration protective salt to the memories of their ancestries, and the continued stories of inheritance found in their bloodlines. These works are not easy to digest, nor are palatable to a tongue illegible to difference. However, it is in their memorializing, and in the collective documentation of resistance through their memory, we are able to conceive modalities of thought which stand as threat to the contours of colonial violence. It is the hope that throughout this process we are witnesses to their becoming into complexities, into wholeness.

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2 The pronoun we is used with intention here, and elsewhere throughout this dialogue, to recognize and connote my acknowledgement to an active audience of this work, and to the collective witnessing of each text with fluidity and change. The purposeful usage of we also envelops the idea that each text, reader, and the writer of this text do not stand as islands, but in fact are interconnected, constantly shifting and navigating through varying lenses and identities.
This research is rooted in a deep curiosity of what we (those involved in Canadian identity formations, narratives, and representations, both as historical and geographical entities) have come to perceive as neutral knowledge—modalities of western thought of that which we rarely dissect. Further, this thesis will seek to shed light on the process of (self)-curation as a particular and intentional construction of what is remembered, and what is purposefully forgotten, and the modes of resistance which pedestal memory to power. Although understandably exhausting, communal responsibility lies in the hands of terrorized communities to problematize, deconstruct, and reinvent ways of being and knowing, rooted in our own Indigenous and ancestral roots, lest communities subjected to hierarchal violence replicate the very systems which subjugate us. A definition of resistance is incomplete without a nuance of love and difference, amongst and with(in)-group. Any resistance which does not account and embrace a complexity and often contradiction within peoples is bound to regurgitate and in fact, uphold the superiority of a proximity to whiteness, those who persist in the lure of power.

The following (re)collections of thought work also as (re)imaginations of language and the visual language adopted in the act of remembering, as a powerful avenue of identity formation and community (re)building for racialized Muslimah in Canada. While alternatively particular and selective (re)collections and (re)imaginations of language work powerfully as an agent of colonial violence, rewriting history in an effort to not only gentrify Muslimah bodies presently, but to erase bodies of difference from the Canadian national optical imagining altogether. In engaging with articulations of

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3 I intentionally deploy the term Indigenous here, in a more international context, while also signifying generational teaching, and to perhaps consider precolonial wisdom. I recognize that in the North American context (and specifically in Canada) the term often is confined to Aboriginal peoples in Canada, or First Nations peoples. However, this study uses the term to refer to and address diasporic, transnational, and Indigenous Muslimah wisdoms, communities, formations, and histories (unless otherwise noted).
Muslimah art, and the museumification of Islamic civilizations more generally, I hope to create here a reservoir of reflections on the current backdrop on which colonial Canada intervenes in the representation of a multiplicity of identities, while also engaging with definitions of memory and language to stand as mirror to racialized Canadian-Muslimah dedicated to the process of self-determination.

While wading through spaces, peoples, and memories, and in preparation to embark on the journey documented below, I have come to the same conclusion Audre Lorde has come to repeatedly in her work, and poetry. The language of our fears, desires—the tongues of our foremothers, and of our histories, they must be spoken. In her piece, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, Lorde (1984) resolves:

> We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken (44).

May memory then, and the collection of memories moving in tandem below, be a space of storytelling, and in it, a reclamation of voices; as a manifesto to that which is remembered, and an ode to what is simultaneously forgotten. With this declaration at the forefront of my mind, I have defined each of the following case studies, as texts. Documents of memory; both a living and active body of stories, while fixed by physical space and identity. A home to a letter written to its visitors, a letter littered with symbolism and narrative, with wisdom, and most notably with non-places—spaces of absence. In the spirit of breaking the silence, forward.
Methodology

The primary section of this study and dialogue has been framed within the method of an ethnographic case study done on the Aga Khan Museum. The study has undergone a two-pronged approach to retrieve its primary data, including (1) a discourse analysis of the cultural materiality of the Aga Khan Museum—considering the Museum and its contents as a particular narrative which must be read and deconstructed; items of culture and their curation treated as discourse, and (2) engaging in participant observation, as a common method used within museum studies, where I have been consistently physically present in the Museum space between October 2015–June 2017, to analyze the kind of social relations, and material recreations of power that take place within a space laced with authority and intention (Hall 4). This research has undergone an ethnographic approach to produce grounded knowledge claims on the social relations taking place within the Museum and how each relation takes part in the meaning and knowledge making of the space. This includes but is not limited to: who are the visitors within the Museum, how are the observers channeled, who works in the space, how do they negotiate their own identities within the space, what is the overall narrative being written within the Museum.

To follow, and in juxtaposition to the case study of the Aga Khan Museum, I have participated in three smaller art analyses of Muslimah artists living in Canada: Faduma Mohamed (through performance poetry and theatre), Nasim Asgari (in performance poetry), and Hiba Abdallah (through collaborative visual and linguistic art endeavors and activism), articulating stories and curated memories through three varying mediums and community spaces. The visceral creative process of engaging with the following body of
memories, work as the methodology for this section of study. Approaching this thesis through an anti-racist feminist lens, I have prioritized the process of positioning, not primarily in relation to power, but to oneself, questioning what exactly constitutes legitimate knowledge, while also understanding knowledge as wisdom (Collins 1990). In it, I have put a particular emphasis on storytelling, the process of recollection, and memory as a framework of resistance to colonial narration, rather than an empirical view of each case data.

Here, I utilize an anti-colonial discursive framework (Dei and Asgharzadeh 298), rooted in a propagative decolonial praxis which prioritizes the wisdoms and perspectives of the most subordinated identities, recognizing colonial power as the weight which impresses vulnerability and marginality upon racialized Muslimah bodies. In the juxtaposition of Muslimah artists, following the case study of the Museum, it is my intention and scope to pedestal, to shed light, and provide platform for artists: Mohamed, Asgari, and Abdallah, in a journey to consider and perhaps document in action, the art of personal memory as resistant practice to state-sanctioned institutional frameworks of narration and identity-formation. As you will witness, particularly through Chapter Four of this thesis, my analysis is illuminated in its proximity to my assessment of the Museum, in a way which purposefully does not engage in a traditional scholarly framework, critique, nor in a process of theorizing memories and wisdoms for academic theory.

George Dei in his, “Decolonizing the University: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Education” (2016), considers a (re)imagining of academic curricula, in order to re-envision and decolonize the academy, in a more multicentric and accessible light.
Dei stems this work largely from a proverb of the Akan peoples in Ghana which reads: “if you want to know how heavy a bag of salt is ask the one carrying it” (26), which affirms that only the bearer of knowledge is the knower of knowledge. This assertion problematizes the academic assumption that knowledge can be acquired through observation or through scientific procedure, while also troubling the presumed power that accompanies the collection of knowledge on another/other. Dei frames his commitments in relationship to those who share spaces in academia, educators and scholars of social justice. He implores academics to (re)align our praxis to begin first self-reflexively—considering our own complicity to colonial (re)imaginations, and to the making and stratifying of knowledge based on the knower within the academy: “knowledge comes from and can only be voiced by one, the one who bears the felt and lived experience of this knowledge” (26).

In practice to this line of study, an anti-colonial discursive framework engages in the naming of a colonial instinct to credentialize knowledge, which does not and cannot belong to the academy. In this, alternative spaces of knowledge and culture production must be curated, by communities for communities. In accompaniment to this framework, this document moves to thrive within the generative realm of refusal, highlighting their work, “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014) write: “…analytic practices of refusal provide ways to negotiation how we as social science researchers can learn from the experiences of dispossessed peoples–often painful, but also wise, full of desire and dissent–without serving up pain stories on a silver platter for the colonial academy, which hungers so ravenously for them” (812). In short, the authors are all interested in interrogating the
violent obsession of *documenting damage*, in order to examine subaltern groups within academe. It is of utmost importance in this line of thinking to enact a kind of limiting to the production of knowledge, particularly in regards to oppressed peoples. Instead, we must (re)direct attention and critique to the mechanics of power (read: articulations of whiteness) which place value to bodies of *difference*, to ultimately interrupt the monolithic narratives of pain which it incessantly curates. Engaging in the dialogical process of resistance, while exposing the contours of domination and the varied mechanisms of colonial narrative, this forces us to confront the colonial logic abided by within in the academy—to *know* is to be powerful; to *credentialize* is to embody worth.

Tuck and Yang (2014) carefully frame the terrorizing ambitions of settler colonialism in centralizing white supremacist ideologies, and nurturing modalities of domination which not only justify the strangling of Indigeneity, but also ensures the erasing of dissenting bodies for its profit. In their work, the Tuck and Yang plead with academics and researchers of social justice education, to (re)consider and interrogate the “*code beneath the code*” (811); and in it, expose the colonial nature of academia to define, theorize, and claim to ‘know’ the pain of *others*. This point of interrogation and resistance is crucial to the methods of this study, as I consider alternative modes of self-curation and identity formation for racialized Muslimah living in Canada, and the opportunity for self-determination and expression outside of the academy. In this way, I highlight the intimacy in research, while also intensely interrogating the exploit of another/*others* pain narrative in the name of academia and scholarly clout.

Critical distance of the self is vital within this deeply personal study, as I am intensely invested in the perceptions and representations of bodies and identities from *the*
East. As an Egyptian-African immigrant daughter, and settler on sacred and stolen Indigenous lands, I am actively complicit in the settler colonial imagination excavating Turtle Island and, in it am reaffirmed in my responsibilities to re-Indigenize knowledge as such. Tuck deploys hooks in her understanding of *author as authority*, and alludes to the research and (re)telling of a collective condition of pain and oppression as *intellectual gentrification*. As scholars of social justice education, and students often persuaded to undergo research of subaltern groups, in our unfixed positions of power, while also as members of over-exploited groups, we hold responsibilities to acknowledge privileges to which the Institution seemingly affords us. That is, an access/excess to knowledges which are not our own. Congruently Simpson (2007) writes, “No situation such as the one we all inherit and live within is ‘innocent’ of a violence of form, if not content, in narrating a history or a present for ourselves” (69). Simpson compels us to be mindful of our “proximal relationships to difference” (69) and the *core* to which that difference is made—an unquestioned and unmoved center which delegates favour to those closest to it. I am aware of the limitations of this study, insofar as my own personal interests and biases in the findings of research will surely taint my line of observation, coding of data, and in my interpretations of research (Hammersley 90). Deconstructing the process of characterization does not occur outside of my personal understandings of identity and social location—much of this then is my own interpretation of a detailed search for
answers. With a particular anti-racist anti-oppressive feminist self-positioning, I recognize and approach with caution speaking on behalf of, or in representation of any one individual or group (Alcoff 6) and will pursue instead, a kind of co-construction of thought, a fluid dialogue. Positions of the observer and the observed are far from stoic (Smith 5), the relationship is fluid and changing. I acknowledge the caveats of an observational and analytical approach to research in this way, and recognize my implicit involvement in the production of knowledge through a narrow and small lens, my own.

These observational studies are an extension of particular realities that shall not be taken as empirical evidence concluded within the coding of this study. Both encounters, in multiple ways, are not only laced with power but also with perception, environment, surveillance formation and continued effected variables. Admittedly then, this research cannot claim finality or completion. But rather, a complex means of bridging the gap between modes of knowledge production and the self as always already encoded with relations of power, social location and conditions of identity.

In the recognizing of self-location and a constant awareness of personal positioning, we are better able to work dissentingly to colonial violence in the cultural production of knowledge. Junior scholars often come to know ourselves by that which we are not. In claiming to know and theorize the pain of others (Tuck and Yang 811), we seemingly become the moral authority, and thus are no longer implicated in a violent process of domination; we assume scholastic impunity. Recognition of this does not relinquish the violence that such writing and scholarship impress. With this consideration, this research has no intention of remaining within the realm of theory and
question—its tangibility of action is at the crux of its purpose for visibility, for voice, and is what I know to be at the heart of a lifelong commitment to liberatory praxis through the arts.

Despite the mentioned limits of the study, this analysis will begin to bridge the gap in theory, and as an entry point to representation of not only the dialectics of power, but the tension between the institutionalized memory of Muslim identities in Canada, and bodies seen visibly from the East, and the much more personal, art-directed, (self)-curated process of storytelling through Muslimah voice and tongue. In its end, this document will propose connections, or lack thereof, in the representation of diasporic bodies within museums and other Canadian institutions of the cultural production of knowledge, and alternative means of understanding self-agency. I hope for this research to not only pinpoint potential trajectories of power, and thus enacted violence; but also, at its point of power, conceiving opportunities for avenues of resistance. Ultimately the value of such study is found in this opportunity for an archival of dissenting narratives and posits of alternative realities, and for the pedestaling of stories which are otherwise hidden in plain sight.

These modalities of study, are collaborated, informed, and cemented together through Muslim feminist thought, which as a framework of resistance is inherently decolonial. Illuminated by the artworks of racialized Muslimah included in this text, I deploy Chandra Mohanty (2003) and her understanding of Third World Women and thought, which is grounded in a praxis described as “transnational feminist anti-capitalist critique, decolonizing knowledge, and theorizing agency, identity, and resistance in the context of feminist solidarity” (Mohanty 13). Further, I employ the resistant and
generative work of Shahrzad Mojab and Nancy Taber (2015) in their work, *Memoir Pedagogy*, to engage in a politics of healing driven by the documenting of memories, by the pedestaling of a complexity of identities, and in the communal remembering of histories, bodies, and wisdoms written out of the Museum, and Canada’s national landscape more generally. The cementing and executing of this kind of framework, is pivotal to the practicality of this thesis. That is, one made with purpose beyond academic and scholarly study. Mohanty writes, “...decolonizing feminism involves a careful critique of the ethics and politics of Eurocentrism, and a corresponding analysis of the difficulties and joys of cross cultural, national, racial, and class boundaries in the search for feminist communities anchored in justice and equality” (11). Rather than simply deconstructing colonial modes of knowledge production within the context of the Museum, this document will work to open outward to possibilities of constructing new resiliencies, materializing ways of being and knowing.

This document is intended to be a continuous dialogue speaking back to itself. Its unorthodox nature is not meant to be considered careless in form; instead, this work is deeply moved by producing a document of *doing* (Ahmed 591). My abstract and often poetic approach to writing and synthesizing meaning is unconventional, and may be seen as nonacademic. However, here this work embraces risk to deploy an alternative consideration of theory, and writing. In this particular (re)imagining of memory as a framework of resistance, I am engaged in a personal and yet publically political conversation, giving priority to ancestral wisdoms, histories of generational teachings, and modes of memory in storytelling. In this way, determined to push through Lorde’s resolve to *transform silence into language and action* (40).
Chapter One: Cultural Memory, Collective Erasure, and a Curation of Colonial Intellect
An Initial Glance of the Aga Khan Museum and its National Roots

The forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), Between the World and Me

The visual landscape of the Aga Khan Museum is one of intention and purpose. Laced with cultural memory of select Islamic civilizations, retrieved artifacts and the beauty of historical relics, the Museum exists in a particular time and space of its own, actively curating its own story painted through exclusive memories and identities. The period spent constructing this analytical critique of the Aga Khan Museum as it relates to the continued colonial project, and its investment in powerful social relations and thus sources of knowledge production, has instigated far more questions than answers. As a result, this discussion is framed by questions of memory and storytelling, visibility/invisibility, (re)membering as decolonial praxis, and the curation of collective identities. Having now visited the Museum bimonthly spanning over two years, I have been told a story, each visit adding a layer to its plot, every moment making more evident the intention, and narration, of the Museum. This primary chapter will endeavour to investigate this purpose, in the museumization and thus the valorization of Islam in Toronto, Canada, and its ever-changing purpose in relation to our current socio-historical moment. It is not within the scope of this particular discussion to delve into what an Islamic museum ought to hold, or alternative ways in which the curation of Islamic history should look. Instead, this dialogue on the cultural production of the Museum will work as a particular entry point, and commentary on the intangible and tangible effects of
such a structure, on not only the humans in which it claims to represent, but beyond this, in anyone who engages with its content at all.

It is only right to begin this documented investigative study where I first began my observation. Allow this initial anecdote to paint a story, and act as a mirror to our study as I delve into its peaks and valleys. “I am a simple Muslim man, I am a very simple Muslim man…” It was upon my first visit to the Aga Khan Museum, in the Autumn of 2015, that moments within entering the space, I encountered these words from a security guard monitoring the Aga Khan’s private and Permanent Collection glassed on display. Immediately upon admittance: the space is vast, spanning the entry of the room—a map of the world seamlessly plastered onto the wall. It is here the story of the Museum begins. With micro-lights strategically placed locating what is titled as the Islamic Empire globally, my colleague and I assuredly viewed the wall in bewilderment. It would be a violent understatement to say more than just a few lights were missing from the image on the wall. According to the map, Islam primarily had roots only in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and specifically of course, Toronto, Canada. The aforementioned security guard, assumingly intrigued by our visual tension and question, for the missing peoples and places on such a claim, introduced himself, “I am a simple Muslim man…” as though his words birthed an alternative and quite contrary narrative to the limiting story of Islam, as told by the coordinates located on the Museum’s Islamic globe. With a sense of urgency and determination in his voice, the security guard took an opportunity to share, to insert, to ensure—to shed a layer of weight from his chest; as though to warn of what was (not) to come. “I’m a simple Muslim man… Not like this.” Pointing to the walls, “I’m a simple Muslim man.” The guard repeated himself, as if his echoed words
would leave his remains on the walls of the Museum, as though saying it repeatedly would bring him *alive* in the space. There is something politically poignant that happened in this instant, where the agency of that whom is supposedly represented within the Museum was stripped in his (mis/non)representation. Upon immediate arrival, we could not have imagined the story the Museum walls would narrate, the same walls on which his protest would resound. It is here we can begin to uncover what sits beneath the skin of the Museum.

The gallery space of the Aga Khan Museum is constructed in two floors which are included in the general admission cost of $20 per individual adult entry. The second floor, which will be highlighted further along in this discussion is a spacious gallery space which displays ever-changing artists that engage with ideas in relation to Islam, the dynamics of identity and community for peoples from *the East*, often political, and resistant in nature. However, this chapter and analysis is primarily concerned with the first and main floor of the Museum which houses the Permanent Collection owned by the current Aga Khan himself. In it, the span of histories the artifacts found within the Permanent Collection are undoubtedly vast; historical relics as witnesses to the homes, communities, and lives of Islamic civilizations cross-space and time dating back as far as the 8th Century. As way of a swift highlight into the Permanent Collection as sectioned by the Museums’ website, the main floor of the Museum includes: architectural decoration, calligraphy and illumination, ceramics, luxury objects, metalwork, painted manuscripts, Qur’ans, and science and learning. At first glance, the collection is expansive. Its beauty is immeasurable, as viewers behold the intricacy of design, specificity, colour, and architecture. With aesthetics of tranquility, the Permanent Collection grasps viewers’
attention with such intensity, that its ephemeral curation is quite easily glossed over. It is clearly marked that no photography of any kind is allowed, however, the space littered with surveillance cameras. Its vastness creates a hyper-visible space, creating a space where the movement, speech, and demeanor of each visitor almost seamlessly engages with its contents. Within the Permanent Collection of the Museum, there is not a single image of a visible or veiled Muslimah of colour. Each painting clung to the wall matched its environment: masculine, wealthy, and visibly white passing. The visual display of whiteness, masculinity, and wealth overwhelms the space, erasing whole peoples not just of representation, but of visibility, of histories and of identities. Not only does this visual erasure participate in the pushing of racialized Muslimah to the margins, but actively participates in a colonial (read: whitewashed) miseducation of Muslim peoples locally and globally.

The Founder and Chairman of the Board of the Aga Khan Museum is revered as *His Highness the Aga Khan*, a British man born in Switzerland, multimillionaire, spiritual leader and self-proclaimed philanthropist. Quite notably, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, in 2010 Karim Aga Khan IV was bestowed an honorary Canadian citizenship, sitting amongst only six distinguished individuals with the likes of Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai. As a reflection of himself, the Museum emulates the masculine white wealthy colonial mind, which imagines himself at the core of existence. The Museum is his ultimate form of self-representation. It is at this point we should begin to imagine the political landscape of the Museum. *His Highness the Aga Khan’s* own intersections of class, race and gender, are so starkly overrepresented within the Permanent Collection of

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4 The irony, as well as the dialectics of power existent in such a decision of distinction will be considered in detail through the following subsection.
the Museum, and in doing so, actively thwarts complex intersections of Muslimah bodies. Although the Museum is a project meant to be much larger than himself, there is an air of self-congratulation, a space of confrontation where each voyeur is constantly reminded of their privilege and access/excess to power. As result, an elitist class privilege enlightens a fragmented (non)representation of bodies that do not fall on that same spectrum of whiteness and wealth. Rather than a haven for a multiplicity of Muslimah wisdom and ancestry to thrive, the Permanent Collection of the Museum, and its benignly scarce curation actively and wholly silences dialogue, dissent and varying narratives that seemingly cannot co-exist with the colonial imagination.

**Geography Bounded in a Genocide of Hospitality: The Canadian Dream**

It is important here to take a moment in the framing of this discussion to map the geographical landscape on which our conversation resides, in both its physical and immaterial qualities. Situated on colonial Canada, we must first recognize both the implicit and explicit connotations of a nation-states’ identity, and the corresponding relations of a state-sanctioned quintessentially Canadian space. Perhaps it is exactly here we are able to understand the extension of the Museum’s narrative far beyond the confines of its walls. In framing the analytics of a host country, we must engage in the conditions of hospitality, which at a microcosmic level are housed so eloquently within the Museum. The kind of Canadian-ness, or multiculturalist ideology, which embraces

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5 Reference the aim of the Museum, as per His Highness, plastered on its website: “…to offer unique insights and new perspectives into Islamic civilizations and the cultural threads that weave through history binding us all together…a centre of education and of learning, and that it will act as a catalyst for mutual understanding and tolerance.”

6 Those who claim a multiculturalist stance, can be reminded here that the impetus of such an inclusive policy was to coerce an end to Quebec’s separatist movement in 1971, rather than an engagement and true recognition and welcome of diversity work (Heller 5).
and calls the Aga Khan his own, is driven within the laws of hospitality. The angle here relies strongly on the work of Derrida (2000) in his, *Hospitality*, his writings on the conditions of hospitality, and works which have been written as a reflection and response of it thereafter. We consider here, as Derrida does, colonial Canada as bounded land which embodies home, and the state as its host. To be clear here, to label a host, is then also to relationally connote a foreigner, or at its base, a guest, to complete this dialectic. Derrida writes, “At bottom, before even beginning, we could end our reflections here in the formalization of a law of hospitality which violently imposes a contradiction on the very concept of hospitality in fixing a limit to it, in de-termining it: hospitality is certainly, necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation, the greeting of the foreign other…” (4). At its core, much of Canada’s presumed multiculturalist policy rests on this greeting. Canada has nurtured a national identity by that which it is not (read: its stance seemingly admirable and benevolent juxtaposed alongside America). Excavating bodies for cultural relevance, while engaging in a cultural politeness which is not critical, much less aware, of its cultural footprint and its impeding violence. In the welcome of weaving so-called difference into a single mosaic, colonial Canada prides itself in its reputation of openness, of safety, of an unadulterated immigrant dream. However, a nuanced dialogue surrounding multiculturalism must include also thereafter, the multiplicity of identities which simply cannot be sewn into the visual landscape of such a dream. Derrida writes, “…law of the household <where it is precisely the patron of the house–he who receives, who is master in his house, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains master in his house–who defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome; where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional
passage through the door” (Derrida 4). A function of hospitality then, is a mandatory exclusion of identities; the host inherently determines that which deserves hospice. Indeed, no one can find shelter without paying a price. Often then this analogy finds its truth outside of monetary exchange; a body seeking domestic refuge, is a body that, falling within the logic of hospitality, must be tamed. Bodies which hold a multiplicity of selves, identities often imagined and presented as ungraspable, and radical even, are peoples which are perceived to be too layered to elicit understanding, and thus representation. Bodies of peoples which must surrender to the host. “The host, the non-guest, the one who accepts, the one who offers hospitality, the one who welcomes, is the owner of a home and therefore is the master of the home” (Yeğenoğlu on Derrida 2003).

The Museum imparts a language of ownership, a type of permissive discourse that claims totality, and thus fatality, on Muslimah bodies which simply cannot fit. In acting as a space of hospitality, it simultaneously therefore enacts as a master of citizenship. Within the jurisdiction of the Museum, this kind of personal and political national identity is in constant flux. In its remembering (and imminent forgetting) of a complexity of Muslimah identities and histories. Again, to rely on Derrida here and his understanding of the inseparable dialectics of inclusion/exclusion, and the defining of hospitality, contrarily as a law of conditionality. The implementation of such defining modes of hospitality are imperative in understanding the question of sovereignty for a foreign other to be welcomed, sheltered, represented even, within a national-cultural landscape whose ideologies cannot sustain them. Sovereignty of self is then deducted to abstractions of ideas of self, so as to mimic a cultural mosaic which reads as inclusive, but is woven through that which is not seen—that which is, and must, be excluded. A redacted Museum
is not at a museum at all, it is a ploy–it is cultural fascism. Yeğenoğlu writes in reference to Derrida here:

Far from laying the grounds for an interruption of sovereign identity of the self, multiculturalist respect and tolerance implies the conditional welcoming of the guest within the prescribed limits of the law and hence implies a reassertion of mastery over the national space as it enables the subject to appropriate a place for itself–an empty and universal and therefore sovereign place–from which the other is welcomed (Yeğenoğlu 2003).

The contradictory nature of colonial Canada, and its national-multicultural stance is stark here. In the practice (read: profitable business) of celebrating streamlined, partial, and fragmented identities within Islam, the Museum produces a cultural precedence in the illegalizing of other particular bodies; thereafter, Muslimah which are heavily screened, policed, and constructed into the binary of victim/terror. As the arbiter of hospitality, the Museum, resting on colonial Canada, not only becomes the master of narrative, but in it acquires sovereign power to filter identities seemingly too complex, far outstanding the colonial imagination of this country. In their, “Sustaining the Nation: The Making and Moving of Language and Nation” Heller, et al. (2016) write: “Now, Canada’s mode of regulating diversity simply echoes the predominant mode of political regulation of diversity in states and supranational organizations around the world: diversity is best managed by reducing it to a set of homogeneous units, whose articulation can then be regulated” (5-6). In it, Muslimah identities are bodies in the collateral damage of colonial imagination; starved of representation, erased from the production of knowledge on Islam, and are made to be obsolete in the beauty of a Canadian Islam.
An Invisible Spectacle of Difference

The Aga Khan Museum is the ultimate postmodern structure. It is a copy of an imagined colonial fantasy, which in fullness does not exist as it stands, and yet enacts a kind of reality for those it engages. The Museum, participating in what we have come to understand as *hospitality*, and thus conditionality, interjects a highly rational space that claims neutrality, with magnificent artifacts; however, curated by brief and hollow descriptors lacking historical context, translation and relevance. Much of the Permanent Collection of the Museum is filled with objects—a collection of bowls, candlesticks, decanters and the like—that would be used domestically, not necessarily specific to Islam, but rather tools that would be used by all peoples with financial clout. Heightening an instinctual colonial desire to categorize and bound the *Exotic Eastern World*. The ephemerality of its curation engages in a spectacle of *foreignness*, producing a miseducation with has violent homogenizing undertones.

The weight of this highly political space rests on its claim to represent and celebrate Muslim peoples, and yet the Museum is curated by that which has been forgotten. Rather than a nuanced and complex recount of histories, engaging with Muslim identities cross varying personhoods; we are met with a representation of fractioned truths and partial memories, fabricated by that which would appease its viewers simply by aesthetic distraction. This account of the Aga Khan Museum does not primarily rest on that which it includes, although there is much to be said of in its overrepresentation of white masculine imagery, a particular emphasis given to European and Ottoman Empires, and the strict bias towards the aesthetic of selective kingships of the past. However, its true colonial power stems from what it forces to forget. Amnesia of the inherent
compound and political identities of Islam, which neutralizes difference in the most violent way—the epistemological and cultural death of all those it chooses as not valuable enough to display. The Aga Khan Museum is a postmodern cultural product of Islamophobia rooted in a function of white supremacy which numbs a pedagogy of difference, and silences dissenting identities in its presence. In its monumentality, the Museum takes both a physical and psychological hold on its viewership, creating an impossible environment for grievances regarding visibility. The benevolence of the Museum rests on its creation of the other as relatable, similar to the white Christian world (read: they do not look different than us therefore we should not fear them). Not only is this a fear of difference, but an intentional neglect of that which could alter hierarchal positioning of power and control—a structure that is fragile, vulnerable and dependent on the othering, demonizing and neutralizing of threat. Beyond this, in the creation of a strictly overwhelming elitist, masculine, and white space, the Museum works to enhance the difference of those who do not see themselves reflected. The Museum in its curation distinguishes and detaches ways of being Muslim; cementing versions of Islam which can claim close proximity to colonial whiteness, and in doing so ensures its distance from Muslim identities which are vowed as undesirable. Notably, central to the isolation of particular Muslim identities over others, are social hierarchies embedded in class relations—a wealth of means amongst colonized peoples which allow for particular Muslims to become beneficiaries of capitalist exploitation, that is, the very same system which subjugates the complexities of Islam in Canada. Layered to this dialectic, the role of economic hierarchy, and the pursuit of corporate capital, are intrinsic to the coloniality of Canada, and complicate our defining of differing Muslim representations as such.
There is an intentional production and valorization of difference insofar as differences are hardly visualized. The implicitness of difference rests in the unseen, that which is not found worthy of display. Encoded in the very curation of such a space exists staleness—a non-place where no one resides. Cultural production always already holds political weight, and in the claim of an apolitical agenda, the Aga Khan Museum exists as a hold on the colonized mind, to consider that which is different as the same. Merging difference, not through acceptance, but through erasure; a vigorous and murderous assimilation that does far more damage than seen. As we have discussed, this particular cultural production must be considered through the power which allows it to thrive. Not only is difference capitalized on, but particularly through the erasure of that difference. The seeming altruism of a carefully engineered structure which only gives way to that which can be easily swallowed by the white masculine palette. In this way, the accompaniment of Islamic (mis)representation subdues complaint. It refuses rebuttal, and silences grievances.

Upon my second encounter with the same security guard, our conversation, or lack thereof, looked drastically different. We recognized each other, and for a brief moment, both viewed the Museum similarly: in a manner that was strange, an uncanny space void of true knowingness. However, in my approach he quickly prefaced his inability to share, or speak his mind. He voiced his duties as a security guard and refused to insert his own opinions onto the space, claiming an ignorance to that which surrounded him. Although this rests on an internal assumption, I witnessed in that moment an intentional and visceral silencing and removing of identity. In our first encounter, he felt,
although hesitantly as first, he could secure his identity in that which was not found there, and yet in his physical presence, he too became subsumed by the Museum.

The Aga Khan Museum works as a militarized force over invisible Muslimah bodies, terrorized for their own supposed terror. The space requires a militant imagination, one structured similarly to its white, monumental structure. Although visually capturing, the architecture itself manifests its mantra: whiteness, flatness and hugeness, welcoming yet overwhelmingly capturing. The Museum is in the trade of constructing a reality in which non-Muslims can feel comfortable, safe even, satisfied with their progressiveness and acceptance. The hyper-visibility of the space captures the attention of the attendee in such a way that distracts from its shallowness. In their purposeful emancipation from its political and multifaceted mother, the Aga Khan Museum exists as a colonial space of liminality, one that demands your own erasure of difference in order to exist with and through its curation. Again, enacting as a copy of an imagined memory—without any original. In its unsuspecting nature, the Museum exudes confidence as a reflection of Islam and those who are faithful to it, but instead, the Museum and its founding within colonial Canada, claims Muslimah bodies for its taking, ensuring invisibility. The nature of the Museum subsumes the unsuspecting eye to not question whose historical consciousness is shared, or whose memory is worth recounting. That is, what and who is forgotten.

The spatiality of it all manifests a kind of elitist and well-doing aura, an air of virtue for creating a space for Islam and its history to be well-represented, which on the surface, viscously conflicts with that we see on mainstream news. However, in its very existence, the Museum regulates and makes impossible, differentiation in identities. The
locale of intersectional identities is forgotten in this space, catering to a fear of difference. It is important here to consider the Museum as a memoir of a particular story, one that is inherently violent. At its core, the aim of the Museum is not to “foster dialogue and promote tolerance and mutual understanding” as claimed within its mandate; instead, the Aga Khan Museum holds a particular job, to nurture and embed fear in non-Muslim bodies to only tolerate the beauty of their own reality.

In a violent re-distribution of Muslim bodies, the Museum forces a kind of passive genocide, one that psychologically forgets that which has not been shown. In this way, passive viewers are constantly becoming a complicit part of the Museum. However, not in a connected manner or one of solidarity, but in a way which progresses the colonial project at hand, clouding the lines between culture and creation, visibility and invisibility. The binaries on which the Aga Khan Museum rests elicit an intimate co-curation of a space void of context. This space becomes an affirmation for white masculine bodies to exist, unbothered and untouched, while forcing its voyeurs to become, not simply complacent to the space, but also complicit to the violence they cannot see.

In this way, even with timelines of history included, viewers are entranced by the continuous aesthetic, rather than the production of knowledge it supports. The passive voyeur becomes something more toxic, into a co-curator of the space also. Perhaps we can consider this in light of Schroer’s, “Visual Culture and the Fight for Visibility,” in that the Aga Khan Museum is the ultimate postmodern structure that besieges its visitors into an extreme form of public self-display, constantly seeking ourselves in it; however, only for those it can represent or intrigue. If we consider the artifacts consistent within the Museum as simply images, images that fit onto a spectrum void of political weight,
how then can those images reflect those who feel welcome in the space—white wealthy able-bodied men? Is the Museum not the ultimate colonial self-reflection? An identity, which only exists in the erasure of another; an existence curated almost entirely by what it is not. An omnipresent existence of that which is not shown is the machine which churns out a streamlined discourse of knowledge. Schroer writes, “Today, most people are both producers and consumers of images—image prosumers, if you will—who act as sender as well as receiver of images” (Schroer 2, emphasis in original). Although Schroer has a more literal and direct thought process regarding this production of images, perhaps we can stretch our imagination to consider this very process in constant change within the Museum. That is, in accompaniment with the historical moment—a surge of a politics of fear and Islamophobia—the curation of purely aesthetic artifacts corroborates in the Museum’s meaning and purpose. The imagery of particular identities then completes the voyeurs’ purpose, a satisfied knowingness of difference of that which has been defined as ‘terror’ elsewhere, by being made benignly attractive.

The exclusion of bodies that are also reflected within Islam are then made into the very commodity. In the act of forceful forgetting, Muslimah bodies deemed valueless of representation are economically exploited. Perhaps we should consider this act of exclusion the true political economy of postmodernity—in the absence of difference and depth, only that which is deemed valuable cultural production is constructed. Several questions should arise then, exposing the ways in which power is maintained by way of “deliberately generating invisibility” (Schroer 8): Are the visual (mis)representations of images held within the Museum strictly supporting the colonial project? Does the Aga Khan Museum allow for alternative exposure to difference, which is demonized and
alienated on a national scale? Can this kind of absent and yet ever-present visual assist or support those it claims to represent? Or, is it inherently destructive to the minds of those who consume it? In the answering of these questions I have found myself to be ethically confused—desiring representation for racialized Muslimah, and yet finding it nearly impossible to deliver a nuanced and just representation when translated into colonial tongue and practice.

The production of images in the Museum are particularly emblematic of a colonial history, as well as a contemporary relationship to the colonial project which stems almost entirely from a nexus between power, (in)visibility and control. We cannot dismiss the particular and intentional racial formation that takes place then in the storyline of the Museum, as a means of (de)valueing bodies and creating a particular paradigm of power. There is also a particular historicism that takes place when a faith existing so strongly today is curated to exist within a particular and fixed memory of the past. A space laden with political narratives and bound in history, made singular, ephemeral and relatable to the white masculine colonial mind. This is the insurgence of the particular colonial instinct to erase, reestablish, and commodify. Perhaps the presence of a momentous Christmas tree captivating the very center of the Museum (created to be a space of prayer and serenity), witnessed during a visit in December of 2015, can best explain this. The visual at first glance is inherently confused, in that the decision to include a tremendously large decorated Christmas tree at the core of an Islamic museum somehow seems exceedingly incongruent. Reflexively, and for the purposes of this particular dialogue, perhaps this imagery can stand as the backdrop to which we grasp the Museum and its aim altogether. In that in its seeming neutrality, in its claim to represent
and celebrate Islam, its peoples and histories, it is actively a sight of colonial violence, one that surveils all who enter as its own; one that mirrors a particular imperial, profitable, identity.

It is important to establish regimes of racial power, which both economically and politically fund our social relations. The mechanics of such a space are twofold: its success rests on the racialized and hierarchal structures in which always already encode our everyday life, and in its naturalization, the content of the Museum insistently maintain those structures of oppression. Through their work, “Rethinking Racial Formation Theory,” Feagin and Elias describe the ways in which systemic racism hold material consequences on those it deems less than. They write, “[systemic racism includes] …the maintenance of major material and other resource inequalities by white-controlled and well institutionalized social reproduction mechanisms; and the many racial prejudices, stereotypes, images, emotions, interpretations and narratives of the dominant ‘white racial frame’ designed to rationalize and implement persisting racial oppression” (Feagin and Elias 7). Although in the case of the Museum, depictions of racial hierarchy are communicated in a forthright manner, the inception and curation of the Museum rest in the hands of an emboldened whiteness which actively pathologizes and mythologizes histories in which rarely, if ever, represent the intricacies of Muslim peoples globally.

As mentioned, the visual imagery masking the walls of the Museum are almost entirely masculine, with the inclusion of a single image of one Iranian princess, painted extremely fare. The Aga Khan Museum insists that the racialized Muslimah, unbounded, other is unimaginable. Feagin and Elias write,
The dominant white frame is materially and ideationally embodied and was created to rationalize and buttress the oppressive hierarchy and related societal structures of systemic racism. The white frame is socially constructed, a meta-structure shaping and pervading not only the ‘state’ but also the ‘economy’ and ‘civil society’ (7).

The ‘white frame’ that captures the imagination of the institution shapes and protects a particular racial and gendered hierarchy, which upholds whiteness and elite dynasties of kingships and masculine royal lineage, while synonymously debasing difference and the complexities that exist within those faithful to Islam. This works to “obscure whites’ directive and ongoing role in the above practices and structures” (Feagin and Elias 8).

The narrative of the Museum may seem in opposition to the mainstream broadcasted Islamophobia that streamlines evening news, but instead, it is the backbone of that which supports a hegemonic discourse of erasure, forced forgetfulness and textual genocide. Normalizing the white colonial European Muslim involves a mainstream discussion, and maintains our notions of power and control. In that our social relations are always already rooted in unequal power, representation and destruction. These binaric relationships relish in the normalizing of difference, so as to remove its value altogether. The racial hierarchy is upheld by centralizing whiteness and masculinity, while erasing any memory of racialized Muslimah, amongst many other existing and thriving intersections of identities. In the exclusion of the most vulnerable bodies, the Museum claims ownership over them.

The walls of the Museum are haloed by all its glory; ghosted by the bodies its robbed. The Museum, imagine, villages once filled with the bustle of difference, pillaged by the confines of a colonial gentrified Islam. An eerie, and yet permanent disruption. Notably, we must also consider the ease here associated with the erasure of racialized Muslimah, and yet the seeming permanence of bodies (read: white wealthy men) who are
rarely erased, those who remain always already at the center. The Museum in its universalist quality shape-shifts all those who engage in its space. Forcing an impenetrable mold where its visitors must skin their bodies to fit. My violent language here is done mindfully. A skinning of self that in many ways, bleaches our experiences away. Indeed, this space does not reveal truth and knowledge, but conceals them. An education through censorship; a fascist engagement.

The museumization of the colonized body forces her to exist strictly within her (non)curation so as when seen in different light, or her complexities are brought forth, her difference becomes unbearable, threatening even. It becomes that which must be saved, a script to her single story. The womxn’s body as an invisible war ground, never shown but ever present. The Permanent Collection of the Aga Khan Museum claims to be a platform for a transnational diaspora of bodies and memories. Yet, its reality does not value the bodies in which it claims to engage; but instead, the economic value found in their erasure.

**A Second Floor of Resistance and A Mirror to Power**

The second floor of the Museum is drastically different from that of the first. It brings about colour and life to the visual landscape of the Museum; however, we cannot consider this a simple coincidence of planning. It is important to remember, in the most oppressive spaces, resistance is always already present. The second floor, although ever changing and unpredictable, over the course of my study, has held multiple installations expressing grief over global conflict, the continued colonial project in Palestine, issues of (im)migration in North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the personal and intimate effects of the war on terror. Politically poignant and tremendous Muslim artists of colour
including the likes of Mona Hatoum, Raafat Ishak, Khaled Jarrar, and Farhad Moshiri, the upper floor of the Museum undoubtedly has become a space of relevance and political expression, often a mirror to turmoil, and a voice for those whose voices have been muted. Indeed, the floor exists in direct opposition to the Permanent Collection below. However, we must not forget that in its nature of resistance, the installations masking the walls of the second floor are almost entirely independent from the artifacts seen prior; the narratives of pain masking the walls of the second floor have breath because of the violence below. There is a direct disconnect in the curation of the Museum as a single entity in that the subjects of both the main floor and the top floor are presented as two distinctly different exhibitions. The irony of the two existing in one home curates a kind of duality to the spectacle of violence and erasure. In fact, perhaps the Aga Khan Museum can be categorized as inherently Canadian in this way. In its ever-conflicting admittance of a colonial history, the denial of a continued relationship to the colonial empire is the foundation on which the Museum stands and flourishes. Schroer writes, “The terminological pairs attention/inattention and visibility/invisibility can be used synonymously and in analogy to one another” (2). There is a particular preservation in the museumization of identities within history that renders its subject naked, vulnerable and yet almost totally void of political depth–archived resistance that is maintained and sustained by the very power it opposes. It is not the installations which uphold colonial power, but instead their representation in the Museum, translated in colonial tongue.

Embodying peaks of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the Aga Khan Museum is almost entirely a space cultivated for white wealthy men. What the claim to pluralism and nuanced discourse implicitly does is remove the subject from her own
positioning. The depth of difference is found only in her absence or in her pain, to obscure the inherent value found in human life. There is something deeply and profoundly heartbreaking found in the emptiness of such an illuminating space. Perhaps a space recognizing and curating difference should in fact be one of hostility and friction. One that does not manage difference, but instead allows it to fluidly exist and be considered however it may. However, the existing structure erects a very select set of voices, a fraction of a canon of study that goes unaddressed and hidden; an unconscious divestment in understanding the multiplicity of Muslimah bodies, incurring a kind of hostility with all those who engage with it.

Allow us then to conclude this particular section, where we first began. The Museum in this initial analysis, arises a series of questions: Can the security guard preserve his identity, while simultaneously preserving the narrative of the space? Can both beings move and exist in tandem? If an identity must constantly be renegotiated within a space claiming to represent it, can the space be considered complete? His identity in the space only exists insofar as it is put in constant question, in constant debate. He must insist his becoming; he must exist vocally, in order to be seen. How is he (re)negotiating his position in the Museum? You may consider why an individual would choose to securitize a space which diminishes his story, and to this question, I cannot answer. However, the fact that his physical labour and livelihood exists in the literal protecting and securitizing of a space that is void of his own representation, can not only speak to our own internalized colonial ideal, but also our reliance on such a system for sustenance, for survival. We must recognize that a monolithic understanding of oppressor, also therefore translates as a singular, falsified understanding of the oppressed
(Mohanty 19). It is in this particular engagement, one as seemingly colloquial as this one, where we are able to distinguish the dichotomy of visibility/invisibility, in the clash between an access/excess of capital frozen-still in glass cases, and his existence and faith in relation to such a representation. It is at this point of resistance, no matter its size, we are able to see colonial power at work. As seen by the security guard, dissenting bodies are constantly forced to (re)negotiate their positioning within the Museum, reconciling questions regarding whose cultural memory is being visualized, and who, if anyone, 

*belongs* here at all?

We must continue to problematize spaces which claim particular narratives for their own economic gain, and the violence of erasure in which it demands. In the act of always becoming a critical witness to cultural production, and thus sites of knowledge making, we can engage in a conversation of difference, privilege, and visibility which does not require another’s invisibility. This should open possibilities for a more radical, and just pedagogical space— one that is never finished, but always seeking its end in solidarity.
Chapter Two: The Militarism of Space and Identity

The Political Geography of the Aga Khan Museum and the Cultural Landscape of Canada

Nayyirah Waheed (2015), Salt.

As we have witnessed thus far, the Aga Khan Museum, a space which claims to enact as a vessel for pluralism and mutual cross-cultural understanding, plays a pivotal role in the cultural imagination of terrorism and has physical manifestations locally and abroad. Established in the first section of this thesis, curatorial work of the Aga Khan Museum exists within the realm of a single story, exclusive memories which advance a particular narrative of whiteness, masculinity and wealth. This argument has been framed as a reflection of the current His Highness the Aga Khan, himself—British-white, middle aged, billionaire—to which the Permanent Collection of the Museum belongs. In access/excess to power, the institution’s claims to plurality are far removed from narratives of multiplicity and intersection, and in doing so, building a monumental postmodern structure of apolitical aesthetic beauty. Rather than discussing the (re)negotiating of Muslimah identities within the space, this section has aims to extend the conversation, expanding on the role of the State, and the accolades of the Museum’s increasing role in Canada’s cultural landscape, as a political schema of war.

The scope of this chapter is specific to a continued analysis extended from broader claims on representation, the self-curation of racialized Muslimah, and (im)migrant womxn from the East, as well as the contemporary state-sanctioned

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7 Harper gave His Highness the Aga Khan an honorary Canadian citizenship. The irony of this is immeasurable, with the current onslaught of Islamophobia surrounding Muslim refugees, and their awaiting citizenship.
relationship with the (in)visibility of particular subjectivities in Canada. In continuation from the former section, I will work weave within the gaps, synthesizing connections between a saving of racialized Muslimah and sustained Islamophobia to account for a continued war on terror.

Rather than synthesizing the coloniality of the Museum internally, this chapter will work to address the exterior consequences of a space sanctioned within the skyline of cultural pluralism and inherent Canadian multiculturalism. By way of this disclaimer, I recognize that this kind of sectional argument is a timely fraction of a longitudinal study, which is open to fluidity and change. It is also worth noting that this analysis not only flows through my own biases and presumptions, but also exists within a particular timeframe, constructing a larger argument stemming from one particular space, and instances in time (Hammersley 90). The conclusions then exist only as an alternative doorway to synthesizing larger claims not only to the spatiality of the Museum, but for that and those to which it claims to represent.

**The Aga Khan Museum as Legislature: A War in Writing**

In a claim to pluralism and a multiculturalist approach to nation building, one can justify the submission/omission of differing subjectivities. Particularly within the arts, and the institutionalized nature of museums, in their curation, the space is always already manipulated to exist within a locale of particular histories and dialectics of power. The Aga Khan Museum is the first, and only museum of its kind in North America, which claims to represent, discuss, educate, celebrate, and contribute to the history and contemporary life of Islam, as well as Islam’s current role in the cultural landscape of Canada. Phillips (2011) writes,
Museums can…help to strengthen communities by supporting the work of recovering traditions of expressive culture that have been silenced by official policies of assimilationism and marginalization. It is important to stress, however, that such outcomes are a potential, rather than a given, of collaborative work: Althusser […] wrote that institutions such as museums ‘may be not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle’ (Phillips 157).

This clarification not only demonstrates the grave socio-cultural power the Museum embodies as a site of knowledge production and (mis)education. But also, recognizes that both the contents and space which inform its pluralistic nature, are the traits which reinforce a very particular neoliberal, colonial disposition to assimilate, erase and silence. The same attributes of the space which fortify it in accordance to a colonial imagination of Islam, are the attributes which make the space desirable to the eyes and hands of white, non-Muslim peoples; that is, which make it not only aesthetically pleasing, but easing even—a space that can be claimed for their own sense of tranquility. This excerpt also speaks to the strength of the Museum in the cultural landscape as Canada, and its power to persuade and inform particular understandings of Islam and those faithful to it.

Perhaps then it is important we consider the Museum itself as a piece of legislature which sanctions particular bodies for its taking. As Foucault (1972) explains, “The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations” (7). Considering the Museum as a document of memory recognizes its imperial strength within the cultural landscape of colonial Canada to construct a particular narrative. Its text calls for an intentional remembering of partial identities, while masking the violence behind Canada’s long history of hierarchal identities, and colonial conquest. Standing in a geographical location amongst the highest proportion of
lower-income Muslims in Canada (Kassamali 2016), the Museum reifies the survival of a
singular, white-patriarchal Islam. As Lather notes: “It is not a matter of looking harder or
more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and
incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge” (675). Claiming to self-represent
the identities of a community of particular, often invisible and demonized, group of
bodies is a tumultuous endeavor—particularly when considering the tremendous power
relations laced in the act of making visible (Said 5). Diasporic identities must renegotiate
their own understandings of self in a space curated and profited by the redistribution and
erasure of their very bodies. The Museum is a memorialized standstill of Canada’s oath
to multiculturalism, evading the very bodies which surround it.

A Space of War and Peace: A Violent Mediation

With a viewership of almost entirely white elderly voyeurs, the Museum houses a
kind of dialectical relationship. While existing within a space of tranquility, white and
non-Muslim visitors feel a sense of safety in engaging with the cultural materiality of the
Museum—despite distinct signs to not touch the artifacts—while also nurturing a space of
silence. In it, the Museum works to pacify its viewers—not to be confused as pacifists, but
in trueness, the opposite. To become silent bystanders to a war waged under the sheet to
an Islam exorcised (Mamdani 767) of its multiplicity. The Museum, in its Permanent
Collection alone, which houses well over “one thousand artifacts and artworks that spans
over one thousand years of history” (Aga Khan Development Network) includes, in its
curatorial work only, to reiterate for emphasis, a single image of a womxn, an Iranian
princess painted extremely fair, curated next to her prince. However, this grave
(non)representation of racialized Muslimah is completely overlooked by the beauty of
memorialized relics. In this 300-million-dollar development, the Museum not only erases racialized Muslimah from entire civilizations, but also in doing so, profits off their absence—curating a *new Islam*, one that in its foundation is *Canadian*. A white, masculinity, drenched in an air of wealth, fills the space while the cultural landscape of the Museum collapses vital distinctions and intersections of identity, and in doing so, becomes a vessel for violence, and ultimately a tool of war.

Forward, this argument works as an extension of a produced understanding of militarism and uniformity in which the identities of racialized Muslimah are constructed and informed, without visibility or consent. In a kind of conscription, each visitor is forced into a uniformed silence where questions and dissenting voices are not welcomed. This is not to say there must not be representation of whiteness, masculinity, and even patriarchy within a space that claims Islam. Much the opposite—with a profound recognition of intersecting and often contrasting identities, which do not fit evenly in dual selves, a space which claims *pluralism*, must in fact include a multiplicity of voices and narratives.

Not only does the Museum posit a homogenous whiteness to the visual imagination of western Islam, but in it, corroborates with a continued colonial imagination of homogeneity—the colonial instinct to assimilate, erase and (re)envision a space without *difference*. We can deduct here that this kind of domestic and localized violence has a particular political agenda abroad in a wish to dominate and conquer in the name of *peace* and *international aid*. Mohanty (2003) writes, “Besides being normed on a white, Western (read: progressive/modern) or non-Western (read: backward/traditional)
hierarchy, these analyses freeze Third World women\(^8\) in time, space, and history” (48). In a commodification of oppositional identities, and a colonial representation of Islam, the Museum works to both mollify dissenting voices, and surveil bodies within the space, and beyond it. Mohanty posits, “Since the relationships of women of colour to white men are usually mediated by state institutions, they can never define feminist politics without accounting for this mediation” (54). An account of this mediation is crucial in the identity formation for racialized Muslimah in Canada. Indeed, much of claimed archived visibility/resistance then enacts as a fallacy to true liberatory praxis, as it can somehow still exist and breathe within the colonial imagination: “while discursive categories are clearly central sites of political contestation, they must be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles for survival of poor people–those written out of history” (Mohanty 53). The Museum has most recently won Canada’s 2016 Ontario Association of Architect’s Design Excellence Award, which stands to exemplify outstanding practice in creativity, context, sustainability, good design, good business and legacy. The proxies of the space relish in the accomplishments acclaimed by the state architecturally, but also in their discriminatory approach to pluralism, as well as what the Museum sanctions as true Islam, and what is not, with impunity. In its long-lasting legacy, the Museum ensures the positioning of Muslimah, out of sight–soliciting a position within Canada’s cultural landscape without incriminating the inherent violent contradiction.

\(^8\) Mohanty describes Third World women, “designate to geographical location and sociohistorical conjunctures…thus incorporating so-called minority peoples or people of colour” (44).
The Canadian Cultural Landscape: *Stephen Harper and a New Canadian Islam*

The predecessor of our current Prime Minister, Stephen Harper stood as the keynote speaker at the inaugural opening of the Museum, in September 2014. There is much to say of this decision in itself, which is concurrently magnified in his chosen words. Excerpts from the transcript of his speech read: “…His Highness [the Aga Khan] has greatly contributed to *demystifying* Islam, throughout the world, by stressing its social traditions of peace, of tolerance and of pluralism. This is a vision of Islam of which all Canadians can be proud especially when a contrary and violent distortion of that vision so regularly dominates the news” (Harper 2014). In this portion, Harper highlights the motivations of the Museum in efforts of *tolerance* and *pluralism*, validating its particular approach. In this sense, Harper deems the Museum inherently Canadian, as he works to disassociate the Museum’s version of Islam with the *violent distortion* of Islam in the mainstream. Although at first glance this distinction seems honourable, its mechanics are quite the violent. Using his own morale to distinguish and filter between *good Muslims* versus *bad Muslims* (Mamdani 766), Harper immobilizes a particular analysis of that which he will and will not allow within the cultural landscape of Canada. While fostering allegiances with only a particular fragment⁹ of a much larger, much more complex community is in actuality, Harper nurtures an ally of fear—a kind of moral compass which is driven by only that which fits within a colonial imagination. In a similar vein, it is while visiting the Museum its viewers are forced into an ethical question of allegiance, to that which has been memorialized, and those who have not. Indeed, it begs the question,

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⁹ *His Highness the Aga Khan* is the current spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community—the investors to the building and maintaining of the Museum. Ismailis are among some of the most financially wealthy citizens in Canada (Kassamali 2016).
in what ways are attendees, in passiveness to both the ephemeral curatorial work, and the purposeful exclusion of undesirable subjectivities, accomplices to power?

Harper continues, “Indeed, the decision to establish this significant initiative in Canada reflects the deep and longstanding partnership between the Imamat and Canada...stems from our shared commitment to pluralism, to civil society, human dignity, peace and understanding...Confederation was, in fact, an early political application of the sense of pluralism which still guides today” (Harper 2014). This portion of the speech is perhaps the most tender to the colonial schema of the Museum where, with celebratory mention of Confederation, there is a complete ignorance of the terrorizing history of Indigenous genocide, that has resulted in the legacy of inter-generational trauma that is: residential schooling, the sixties scoop, the increasing number of missing and murdered Indigenous womxn, and the increasing number of contemporary social issues facing Indigenous communities nationally, actively pushed to the margins, virtually invisible in any national conversation. There is absolutely no discretion or recognition of Indigenous peoples, whose land was, and continues to be, not only excavated and stolen, but whose bodies, cultures, languages and values are rampaged, raped and deemed inhuman, as savage; whose children were taken in the name of assimilation (read: to civilize), only to be stripped, to eradicate any trace of their Indigeneity. Indeed, Confederation was a sense of pluralism only insofar as Indigenous peoples, and the racialized peoples to come, were not apart. The Museum holds the same values at its heart--indeed, the museumization of Islam, without Islam. Here, an explicit collaboration between wealthy and prominent classes, to which white and racialized men can be a part, informing the taxonomy of postcolonial elitism. Harper continues, the
Museum “…contributed to keeping these fundamental values at the heart of our national identity” (Harper 2014). In making the cultural landscape of the Museum inherently Canadian, one of Confederation, Harper succinctly highlights the very coloniality of the space, and its embodiment of conquer and obtain through theft and war. Further, in a later portion of his speech, Harper quotes a speech by the Aga Khan referring to Islamic countries as ‘countries of crisis’ whereby spaces like the Museum can transform them into ‘countries of opportunity’ where Mamdani (2002) explains, “[Islam] seems to have petrified into a lifeless custom…the implication is that their salvation lies, as always, in philanthropy, in being saved from the outside” (767). On a mission to civilize understandings of Islam, the Museum enacts in a binaric understanding of identities of oppressed/oppressor, which not only simplifies a shared condition of colonialism, but also disallows a multiplicity of selves within one body. In fact, the identities projected within the space are only able to exist in the erasure of others. In a seeming drought of historical depth, political complexity, and a range of identities, Islam in the Museum is that of assimilation: a pasteurized, monolithic image that in its access/excess speaks only to those who see themselves in it (read: white middle-class able-bodied men). “Terrorism is not born of the residue of a premodern culture in modern politics. Rather, terrorism is a modern construction” (Mamdani 767). The Museum enacts this political logic and scheme.

As quoted from both the mission statement of the Museum, and His Highness the Aga Khan, “The aim of the Aga Khan Museum will be to offer unique insights and new perspectives into Islamic civilizations and the cultural threads that weave through history binding us all together. My hope is that the Museum will also be a centre of education
and of learning, and that it will act as a catalyst for mutual understanding and tolerance” (Aga Khan Museum). Although it of course is not the implication of the statement, it indeed is one of grave irony. “The cultural threads that weave through history binding us all together” is that of a collective condition of colonial invasion, neoliberalization and appropriation of cultural materials, and the physical and psychological erasure of whole peoples. The tolerance aimed within this excerpt, is one of schism, division and in an effort to define desirable subjectivities within Islam, to work in the colouring of Canada’s cultural mosaic. The Aga Khan Museum plays a role in the formation of a white supremacist extremism which claims and defines Canadian Islam for its taking. There is an intensely practical aspect of such colonial modes of thought. In the cultivation of hegemonic understandings of a particular Canadian Islam, there is a radical and extremist view of a need to wipe out and to erase all, which cannot seemingly co-exist. My diction here is intentional, that is to highlight the parallels of the continued marginalizing, demonizing and villainous language used to describe those faithful to Islam. In an adaptation of Islam, which succumbs and submits to the nation-state, its celebration sprouts only that which can advance the national-colonial project.

The product of such production then is stripped of its, what Foucault, et al. (1975) has termed the historico-political discourse, which puts its ‘ultimate truth’ into constant question. The institution does not give way for question, nor dissent. In this claim to truth, what is presented must be taken as such. Although the institution claims to engage in a didactic space open to pedagogy, its inability to do so is immense. “[The Aga Khan Museum] …deployed as part of the multicultural project’s purported aims to facilitate inter-cultural understanding—works to render the object unrecognizable to those whose
culture has undergone that labour of its production, tipping the balance of the benefit of its presentation in favour of those whose self-affirmation is supportive of the institution’s own aims” (Abou 14). Comprised of internal dialectics of power, the institution claims Islamic representation at their own expense. As a display of strategic planning, the Museum reifies a singular Canadian-Islamic identity.

**Internal Dialectics of Power: A Second Colonization and ‘Airing Dirty Laundry’**

In memorializing Islamic artifacts of the wealthy, without context or translation, the space claims neutrality in the masking of political warfare—a battle which defines terror, culture, acceptance, by that which it is not; defining what is appropriately Canadian. Mamdani (2002) writes, “Rather than seeing contemporary Islamic politics as the outcome of an archaic culture, I suggest we see neither culture not politics as archaic, but both as very contemporary outcomes of equally contemporary conditions, relations and conflicts” (767). Moreover, it is critical here to recognize that in the tracing of diasporic bodies, one must account for the afterlife of the colonial project. As understood by Edward Said (1989), the claim to represent is complexly political and deeply problematic, with both tangible/intangible effects on not only those it claims to represent, but all those who engage (206). This caution is particularly vital, as I consider not only what is deemed worthy of display, but its effects hereafter within its audience in a more mindful, immaterial colonial endeavour (Nandy 170). Forward, Nandy (1997) writes, “In the [colonial] process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds” (170). The colonial mind requires a historicizing of a post-colonial landscape, that not only skews the
contemporary breadth of the colonial project, but in doing so, works to capture thoughts and imaginations of voyeurs—existing as an invisible force; a weight that is not required to be physically present in order to thrive, and to be powerful. Indeed, the longevity of the colonial project exists in its ability to make its prey one of its own. The contemporary colonial endeavour needs no aggressor, instead colonial thought is internalized and alienates the colonized body, in surveilling her own mind.

Yaqoob (2008) highlights, “It strengthens the hands of those who argue for greater state intrusion, restriction and regulation of our lives. It creates a climate of self-censorship at the very time when Muslim voices, and the voices of Muslim women in particular, need to be heard in all our diversity” (155). Although Yaqoob is speaking to the direct government action to wage war *for the saving of Muslim women*, it is clear to see then how in the cultural visual landscape of Canada, having not only been state-sanctioned, but celebrated and revered by what then was the Prime Minister of Canada, the Aga Khan corroborates with a very particular psychological agenda. Yaqoob continues,

Muslim women have specific and well-documented problems of patriarchal oppressions to overcome, more often disguised with a pseudo-religious gloss. These challenges however have been made immeasurably more difficult by the war on terror. Muslim communities now feel demonized, under constant attack and ridiculed to an unprecedented degree. In this climate the instinctive reaction is to adopt a defensive stance and emphasize only positive aspects of Muslim faith and culture. Space for self-criticism is restricted for the fear that washing one’s dirty laundry in public will give succor to those already fueling Islamophobic hostility (Yaqoob 151).

The Museum falls into this categorical logic, as it works to appease the grievances of invisibility and misrepresentation by alleging *peace*, in the name of celebration and respect—allowing the state to define that which Islamic identities are accepted/excepted in Canada. Indeed, the invisibility of veiled womxn and visible Muslimah identities is one
of intention. Veiled Muslimah stand as a threat to the constant surveillance of the state, the colonial instinct to know and conquer. Because she cannot be seen, both the literal and figurative unveiling of Muslimah, stands as violence justified by their victimization. The highly securitized, militancy of the space arises from the absence of bodies which would disrupt the visual imagination of serenity in Canada. Yeğenoğlu writes, “With modernity comes a new form of institutional power which is based on visibility and transparency and which refuses to tolerate areas of darkness” (40). Indeed, settler colonialism is an eye that can see without being seen. However, in the invisibility/visibility of veiled Muslimah, we can (re)imagine a kind of resistance to this institutional power. We can nurture visions which invert the panoptic structure. Likewise, we should not only tolerate, but also welcome, areas of darkness.

Perhaps then the Aga Khan Museum can be imagined as an apparatus of fear, the staging of war on unseen racialized Muslimah bodies. That in order for Muslimah of colour to self-determine, they must always already be in alignment with their colonial visual ideal, existing within a binaric liminal space of victimhood. Nandy’s consideration of the second colonization is particularly mirrored in this explanation, writing: “This is primarily the story of the second colonization and resistances to it: after all, we are concerned with a colonialism which survives the demise of empires. At one time, the second colonization legitimized the first. Now, it is independent of its roots” (Nandy 170). This not only legitimizes the continued assimilationist project, but silences anything which may oppose it. In it, we must become weary of a claim to representation and plurality, held by the bounds of its opposition, one that attempts to dismantle a project, with the very tools that construct it (Lorde 123).
Beneath the silence, the Museum itself symbolizes a violent death. A war is waged over the bodies of racialized Muslimah in a (re)imagination of a sect of Islam which parades voyeurism, whilst evading the vast complexities, differences, intersections, and the existence of hierarchal identities in-group. Indeed, state-sanctioned subjectivities which claim objectivities. In the legitimization of particular aspects of Islam, or that which is allowed admittance within Canada, there is an implicit *illegalization* of bodies. The latter then becomes a war body, as a site used not only to justify state-sanctioned violence in the invisibility of racialized Muslimah, but in doing so, thrives off the backs on which the *pluralistic* nature of Canada’s cultural landscape relies.
Chapter Three: A Defining of Memory
The Glue Holding a Theory of Resistance

It is important for the nature of this dialogue to engage in a short chapter on definitions, an interlude to transition. This study, including both the narration of the Museum, and the following section hereafter, is concerned with the living qualities of (dis)remembering, the storytelling of memory, and the visualization of memory as a means of collective knowledge-making, memoir, and perhaps, healing. The root of the working definition of memory, as it pertains to this particular dialogue, begins simply. That is, the mindful recollection of an instance in time prior to the moment of remembering. However, as we journey through the following stories, the theory of memory, and its definition will transform into a physical, and weighty body. The function of memory as we have known it thus far, has been in its selective remembering, in the priority of memories over others, in the investment in forgetting that which cannot be reconciled in an imperial story. In order to understand the Museum as a text written by memory, it is important to consider memory, and the visualization of memory itself as a tool for oppression/repression. This understands memories as active, the ways in which speaking into the past, can alter the present, and future. While also considering the ways in which memories of particular bodies are hyper-surveilled, and often in this way, hyper-constructed. The function of memory as this conversation transitions, will be considered as a body of performance, and its changing nature over time and space. In the following art pieces, we shall consider memory as Christopher Bollas (1987) has understood the “unthought known” and the thoughtfulness that accompanies the apparent unthought. He writes, “...disclosures of subjected states process much that is still the unthought known, and one’s intelligence here is an invaluable asset in articulating the unthought known.”
The analysand understands that the psychoanalyst’s relation to the unthought known is thoughtful, even though the core of significance has yet to be discovered” (Bollas 232). Our definition of memory here rests in the identity of the unthought, and that in its recollection, it comes to life often unknowingly to its person, speaking to the power of verbal, and in some ways physical, language. Marita Sturken (1997), in her piece Tangled Memories, takes on the binaric relationship between remembering and disremembering, provides insight into the often (in)voluntary political schema in the act of remembering, writing: “The ‘culture of amnesia’ actually involves the generation of memory in new forms, a process often misinterpreted as forgetting. Indeed, memory and forgetting are co-constitutive processes; each is essential to the other’s existence” (Sturken 2). Sturken presses this definition to examine the power of remembering as a dangerous, and yet invariably important process. Further, her emphasis here allows us to consider then the relationship between personal memory and cultural memory, which works to nuance my understanding of memory as performance, as resistance language. “All memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting; to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed by memory. Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory. Yet the forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized and strategic” (Sturken 7). Memory in this sense is not an individualizing discourse as often misunderstood. We can see that in action in the case of the Museum, insofar as in its curation of memory, there becomes an intellectual homelessness—a collective institutional memory—with an intent of erasure, with jurisdiction to claim another narrative as its own.

Behind the mind of this section, questions: how do pieces of memory-work recreate not only the past, but the present? How does memory-making also work as image-
making? Can the visualization of memory enact also as a language of resistance? Of sovereignty? Of self-determination? Each Muslimah artist included in this memoir of sorts, are a part of an assembly of memories which breathe life into the memories of the communities in which they find themselves in. The vantage point of personal memory speaks to the particular and individualized aspect of recollection and intentionally recalls the way events have taken place in reference to the subject. In highlighting this important, albeit simple understanding of memory, we can come to the conclusion that an individual’s act of remembering works only as a fraction of a memory’s story. We channel memory through the only lens we can, our own. Having considered this then, it is important to set the geography surrounding the ways in which memory and the recollection of memory exist in particular time and space. The spatiality of memory speaks not only to the moment it is birthed, but then also each instance it is recalled thereafter. This leaves us to question where the memory in fact exists. Especially when coming to terms with its material reality. Does the personal memory lie in the moment of its inception, or rather each moment it is recalled thereafter? Regardless of the answer, its response is predicated on the belief that memory holds physical qualities—a body of thought predicated on experience, which exists not only in speech, but also viscerally in its imprint on the mind and body.

The construction of memory as a tangible body of thought is perhaps also subject to the individual person at hand. For an individual who feels momentary experience with feelings, both internal emotionality as well as physical touch, then to recall that memory is to feel its weight viscerally in our hands, feet, chest, rather than mentally with great detail and precision; an innate understanding of a memory, rather than a structure of
remembering. To concretize a memory as fact then is to re-sense or re-experience the infliction of feeling the inception of memory brought about. In applying this theory of memory onto bodies which have experienced social violence, we more clearly can identify the ways in which feeling obstruct the concrete nature of language, in a way that we cannot describe in essence. It is important to consider the bodies of those who do not outlive their memory. In many ways, the absence of the body speaks louder than that of the tangible body itself, which says something of the validity of cultural memory when embodying the history of a nation. Who has the opportunity to participate, not only in the nation building also the memory of it? We can see clearly how a tangible body of memory may enact both as an oppressive power on those disremembered, and a praxis resistance to the colonized means of memory-making through the nature of monuments; a collection of personal memory brought together in the curating of social consciousness and awareness. Sturken: “That cultural memory has been prominently produced in these contexts of pain testifies to memory’s importance as a healing device and a tool for redemption—and to the body’s importance to memory…. It is precisely the instability of memory that allows for renewal and redemption without letting the tension of the past in the present fade away” (16-17). Indeed, a recollection of not only citizenship but also humanity that has never been fully accessed. However, it is in the recounting of memory, in the name of those who cannot, where a reconfiguration of memory is formed as resistance.

Concluding here, perhaps a trauma is only made more violent when it is never spoken of–the unspoken memories that rot and spoil in our unconscious. Conceivably then the strength of remembering is in its embodied speech. The resistance work in
memory occurs when the subject reconciles that the things she has felt cannot be unfelt. Indeed, I am learning that our memories can be dark under the sun, but is always darker in the shadows. The remembering of history can bring her to the depths of her unfreedom, but also then to the sights of her freedom.
Chapter Four: Under the Eastern Sun
Bodies of Memory, Remembered in Performance

Place does not become a trap as it becomes an image, for memory has enough wit to root place firmly in place and to arrange trees in harmony with the tune of desire. Not because place is in us even when we are not in it, but because hope, the power of the weak, is difficult to barter. There is enough well-being in hope to travel the long distance from the vast non-place to the narrow place. Time, which we feel only when it is too late, is the trap waiting for us at the edge of the place where we arrive late, unable to dance on the threshold separating beginning from end!

Mahmoud Darwish (translated in 2011), In the Presence of Absence

As artists, we pursue our ends, from our memories, or as we will witness in the following section, through the stories of our foremothers, of those around us, of those we may never know—the embodying of narratives that may not be possessively our own, but intrinsically give meaning to our bloodlines. It is in this chapter that we will break the contract of biological connection to the rediscovering of archived stories; endeavoring to witness cultural memory transcend generation to generation, cross borders and lands. Artists’ work is always already a recreation of memory. More specifically, a telling of a collection of memories that have imposed space and intention in the mind and hearts of its home-body.\(^\text{10}\) To speak clearly, the intention of the following analysis is not to historicize these artists; my desire is not to make museums of their bodies; my intention is to not put their art and narratives into a glass jar to be frozen and left unnoticed, to be cemented into archaic mystical folklore. Quite contrary, in response to our conversation thus far considering a space of stoicism, of fixed concrete artifacts framing consistent and immovable narration, this portion is breathing, living, active, and changing.

As we sojourn through the stories of the following artists, we must recognize that the sharing of space, of geographical landscape is of great irony and importance. Each

\(^{10}\) Here the home-body connotes the individual physical body which first experienced a moment in time; the individual body which participated in the making of an initial event, and thus the first to house its memory.
artist currently inhabiting Ontario, Faduma Mohamed in West Toronto, Nasim Asgari in North Toronto, and Hiba Abdallah currently in Guelph, their physical proximity to the Museum illuminates the variance, the missing bodies, the incomplete nature of such a vast and monumental institution. Their ancestral memories and stories having travelled oceans to reach this land, and accumulated weight in the voyage, a richness of wisdom. However, the following conversation is not to be confused as a ticket of admittance, or even an entry point into a voyeuristic understanding of another/other. I will pursue to pedestal these artists, not as texts to be consumed–their work not to be considered scholarly study; rather, worthy in their own unmediated stance. I recognize to translate such work into this form of documented academic text is dangerous, and requires much diligence to work as an avenue of resistance, of representation, and of difference. The Western sun only shines on those whom it pleases. This dialogue is meant to be a light, a figure of sun if you will, to bodies lost in shadows.

Memoirs of a Warrior from Kismayo, Faduma Mohamed

Faduma Mohamed is a twenty-four year old Black Muslimah, living in Canada, multidisciplinary artist, master of words, diasporic poet, Somali storyteller, theatre performer, activist/(art)ivist, and warrior. It is in her piece, Memoirs of a Warrior from Kismayo,\(^\text{11}\) that I will voyage, endeavor, and seek to find the truths of the memory which fills her; a collective memory, a history of oral storytelling in her Somali bloodlines, which instills in her skin the very desire to speak stories into existence. It is in this profound and genealogically important piece, I will read and find the words that embody a memory of family, and of a war in heart and land–memories that last the testament of

\(^{11}\) Public access to Mohamed’s performance of Memoirs of a Warrior from Kismayo can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDjMUtHJzb4
generational shifts, of diasporas. This piece is an intersection, a fork in the road of beings, of identities becoming, of seemingly contradictory narratives manifested from a single voice. Mohamed prolifically shares her mother’s story, and in doing so, shares her own.

Nearing the end of 2015, Mohamed performed *Memoirs of a Warrior from Kismayo*, at a SpeakSudan Warriors and Storyteller magazine release, facilitated by the Toronto-based East African community organization, the SpeakSudan Collective. It is on this stage, Mohamed debuted her tremendous work, in a poignant and captivating tale of her growing immigrant Somali family through the lines of her mother’s tongue, her father’s eyes, and her brothers heart. Strung together with a search for home, and a longing to remember, Mohamed is able to embody memories which mask lifetimes. It is in this piece particularly, we are able to recognize the means in which the reclamation of space and history starts directly in the body (Coates 2015).

**Memory Adorned in Flesh: A Visual**

Perhaps when considering the visual imagery of such a piece, we must address the community of images the audience may see. This work is a study of the resisted body, this is Mohamed’s craft—an active consideration in the embodying of memory. A living witness to the travel of a memory from mind to limb, and the process of its navigation. Through jolt and jump, through gaze, theatre performance is active—it is fluid and changing, and unpredictable. A stark contrast to the concrete stoicism of the Museum we have navigated until this point, Mohamed’s decision to physically live in memory, the medium of theatre performance, has radical beginnings.

Consider with me, as we watch Mohamed embark on a journey unknown to even her at points; we are able to witness the memory of her mother. Having been given stories
through a kind of cultural inheritance, memory inhabits her body, and as a wealth knowledge, Mohamed begins to dip into a register of stories producing knowledge far beyond the stage. A spirit of memory resurrects in the embodiment of its afterlife; a spirit which possesses her mind and speaks another person’s story into a second heart, a second life. In our witness of this, we see what seems to be a seamless re-membering, storytelling (re)defined. Mohamed becomes a home, furnished with memories of those who have left their mark on her mind. Surely, we can see how a reclamation of space and history starts in the physical bodies we are all existing in. Her physical body becomes our sole teller, an extension of all those (re)membering; it reanimates her body into a tale of the past, and yet a listener of the present.

It is important to note here that when a spirit of memory, as we are defining, enters someone else’s body, a body separate from the host/home-body, it does not enter a void space, its spirit enters a body that has its own ideas of the world, a memory and story of its own. Its engagement does not negate, nor does it dilute its spirit, its preexisting ideas of the world, but instead complicates its narratives. The (re)collections of life, that is the Memoirs of a Warrior from Kismayo, have always already been storied. Laced with a newness in Mohamed’s body of performance, the work endeavors to reimagine, a call to understand tales of fullness, without exploit or reduction, or as Coates has narrated: “acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness” (29).

Mohamed’s Black body shape-shifts as home, and in an effort to welcome her audience, she (re)furnishes a memory told and retold. Memories which have been forgotten and remembered, in some ways even Mohamed herself becomes a visitor of her own memory. As we are invited within the walls of a spirit of memory, we witness a
curation; a self-determined process of remembering which elsewhere has been hand-chosen to forget. Indeed, considering her embodiment of words as a direct and relevant response to a silencing of a continent of words/memories, of peoples which seemingly cannot co-exist within the colonial imagination, Mohamed dislodges stories of resistance from a landlocked idea of identity, and of home. Her work forces us to ask the question: Who has the Museum, washed his hands of?

Mohamed transforms into a character in writing, and rather than to be read as costume-esque, she adorns herself in a diraac and fota in an act of preparation to honour the stories of ancestors’ past, and present. Her body in dress, addresses an indictment on the colonial obsession to gaze, the impulse to surveil and quite literally see-through all those it masters. Mohamed is impenetrable, as she stands in her diraac, constructing a veil (read: shelter) of memories around her body. Through the piano introduction, we as the audience are given the time to absorb the visual before us, three minutes to behold a body adorned and equipped in active memory. This moment in her performance is perhaps also an opportunity for Mohamed herself to call onto an inheritance of cultural memory which she herself has been passed down, reminiscing as a means of connecting with her mother’s impression. Mohamed takes on her mother’s memories as a language to decipher a feeling, a collection of compasses which have directed her path to this culminating point. Onwards.

Mohamed engages in the political process of self-curation, not entirely dissimilar to the ways in which exhibits in a museum are curated. Mohamed performs her piece in and amongst the SpeakSudan Collective and their following, a series of stories for the

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12 Mohamed’s diraac and fota refer to her traditional Somali garb which adorns her body for the duration of her performance.
community, by the community. Mohamed is able to engage with a space which allows for risk (hooks 1994), which sews together a body that falls upon a bed of pillows, rather than a bed rocks. Assuming that a collection of East African identities remained present in the space, Mohamed is able to collaborate another person’s story, to envision multiple peoples at once. As we will witness through the textual dialogue in her piece, Mohamed herself looks inwards to a personal conviction of memory. The journey is both strikingly powerful, and strongly resolved. As though she was heralding to the moon, signaling to the stars to hear her, Mohamed engages all those who inhabited the space with her demand of language, her recalling a constellation of knowledge.

**A Conversation in Remembering**

The words strung together in her performance piece are felt on the skin of all those who witness its cry. Nurturing layers of words like clothes protecting skin, Mohamed is able to construct a national cry, a personal manifesto, and in an effort to avoid imposition or translation, this section will engage in a series of prompt responses, engaging in our own textual dialogue. Mohamed allows us to chew on her words like food to a story starving of depth. A singing chorus conducted into song, a reflection of the community before her, Mohamed speaks back to herself.

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Lower your gaze, lower your gaze.

In worthy beginnings.
Framing her story as one of Faith.
A sensual and intimate examination of her body.
Purity.
Sexuality.
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Romance.

Religiously painting the picture of two people connecting. 
Madina and Abdi.

Her mother as a body of reverence.

The urge to investigate her skin, 
to see if she felt as much as she looked like home.

Ideas of Home. 
Finding home in another.

Madina and Abdi.

Finding refuge and shelter in the freckles painted across Madina’s face. 
In her presence.

Home. 
To consider a memory as a place to rest her head.

An investigation, 
Where?

What is he running from? 
Where is Home?

When the Universe is disrupted, 
an unborn baby tries to kill its mother.

Their lives do not go on without strife. 
A life lost between them.

A trauma within their new Home.

Let go or be let go of.

A survival guide to a memory of trauma.

A mother enduring.

She discovered an Ancient Lesson: 
without her memory everything looked like anything, in the dark.

Who is she without her memory?
A trauma which describes a robbery of a bank of stories which directed her way.

Forgot that her womb had planted six seeds, and only three blossomed.

A mind/body at war.

Remembering a harvest, lost.

The things she has felt cannot be unfelt, cries heard, cannot be unheard.

It is undoubtable that no one grieves like a mother grieves.

Remembering here, a living of memory
Breaks the heart of her mouth.

He only speaks with his eyes, of course only when others choose to listen with their hearts.

Bilal, a mute son.

What is the language of the heart?

And as he grew, his autism grew.

Another way of going about breathing life into a body.

A different way to understand wisdom, knowledge, understanding.

Autism.

Abdi’s betrayal. A memory of him, tarnished.

She drove in the rain.
The clouds cried for her.
His own memory loss
of what was once.
His
Home.

Or would he stare upon those hills,
those hills
where the freckles once stood.
But the blotches of self-hate took over
because she’s tried one too many times to bleach
her golden brown skin
to light…
Would her skin still remind him of back home?
Where the sun lasts longer than the moon.

A story of excavating one’s body until void of its richness.
Can you bleach away memory?

Running from Blackness.
A skin which is Home.

A story of migration.
A story of exile.

How do I repay a woman who has invested her
bankrupt dreams into prayer mats?
How do we repay our mothers for going down
paths we could not even look upon?

A collective memory of
sacrifices endured.

A body of memory pawned,
for freedom.

An investment in her Faith.
Keeping her alive. Her family alive.
Nourishing her.

What kind of body war leaves behind?
What kind of life lives on in bodies of war?

To unravel a torment, you must begin somewhere.
What happens when we wish to heal,
but we do not wish to know?

**Hooyo,**
*Oh Hooyo.*
*I love you more than I tell You.*
*I love you more than I tell You.*
*I love You*
*More*
*Than*
*I*
*Tell You.*

With
crescendo.

With
Repetition.

*A visceral response.*
*A conviction.*

Replacing all the moments this truth went unsaid.

*I love you more than I tell You.*
*I love you more than I tell You.*
*I love you more than I tell You.*

A declaration.

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Mohamed masterfully curates questions of mental migration, a forced eviction from what is always found: *home.* Allow me to consider this voyage, an amnesia of sorts; forgetfulness as a form of survival, and yet remembering as a means of living. Mohamed forces her audience to question a concept of selective forgetfulness, which illuminates a courage to remember—a decision of bravery; however never cowardly to forget.
Mohamed is able to locate her own coordinates through this theorizing of memory. She finds home in a love for her mother that was always already beneath the surface of her skin. A love that will always bind them, indeed, a recollection of trauma which may tear people apart, but also draw family near.

In this piece, Mohamed is able to remind her viewers of a language we never remembered learning, but yet somehow are fluent in. A dialect of memories that move us forward, move us together, distinguish our identities, and yet create a collective tale of love. This story of light and darkness, of trial and tribulation, of plight and flight, has birthed a storyteller. This story of family, of love, a story of tragedies which illuminate triumphs. A story of (im)migration, of refuge, of all that is (un)conditional. Mohamed, in a physical display embodies a story of complexities, of alone-ness, and longing, of hunger, of (un)freedoms and yet of bountiful sustenance. A voice which so eloquently chronicles a series of contrasting stories; a bloodline enriched with collective memory; a DNA shared in the liberation of its telling.

**Breath of a Warrior, Nasim Asgari**

Nasim Asgari is a nineteen-year-old Iranian-Canadian Muslimah, immigrant, student, spoken word poet, writer, performer and community activist. Despite her youth, Asgari has been a source of wisdom in times of resistance, of mourning, of healing, and of vital community building, and is currently in the final stages of her first book. In February of 2015, at just seventeen-years-old, Asgari was requested to perform her poetically and politically powerful piece, *Breath of a Warrior*, at a candlelight vigil held

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13 Nasim Asgari’s piece, *Breath of a Warrior*, in this particular performance highlighted here can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0OJtSg7gM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0OJtSg7gM). An additional, more formal rendition can also be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3oP8vEhZeY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3oP8vEhZeY)
for the three victims of the Chapel Hill shooting, held on the streets of downtown Toronto.

For brief context, on February 15th, 2015, three young Muslim students, Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, 21, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19, were executed in their home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The act of terror was wrongfully and neglectfully written as simply a murderous conclusion to an ongoing parking dispute. However, clearly reconciled since then, white terrorist, Craig Stephen Hicks, has been identified as the terrorist, known online as a militant anti-Muslim, with clear xenophobic and racist motives.

Although performed in an array of differing places, and recorded at different moments over time and space, we will bear witness to this particular performance of Asgari’s piece. It is in this section we will explore the particular decision to include her words and presence in this exceptional communal demonstration, and as we travel through the language of Breath of a Warrior, in both its visual and audio qualities, we ultimately can decipher exactly why. It is in this clip, recorded organically by a fellow mourner and passerby, we witness Asgari approach her performance with sureness, with presence, and in solidarity; her work, especially in relation to the space in which she is witnessed and beheld, allows her to claim the community that is lost in the automation of stereotyped bodies, and the erasure of identities outside of colonial desire.

A Visual Vigil: A Space of Mourning and Healing

The vector of such manifesto rests partially in the space which it resounds. The spirits of memories which actively breathe life into the language of Asgari’s poetry is essential to the healing qualities of such a place. Asgari builds a home which serves a
relentless kind of love to those who crave hate. It is in the relinquishing of such hunger that Asgari is able to boldly reinstate a declaration of hope. It is imperative to engage in a dialogue surrounding space, and the visual landscape, for this particular performance, as Asgari is physically centered. Without stage, or prop, Asgari conducts a eulogy for those lost, and a declaration for those amongst her.

Asgari, as a young veiled Muslimah stands surrounded in a crowded Toronto street, filled with faces from all different paths of life. She stands central in a crowd of fellow Muslims, of allies, mourners, of peoples seeking healing, perhaps understanding, an explanation. Bodies seeking refuge and safety; taking up space, reclaiming their humanity. Asgari, central in this, paves a way for reclamation of her body, in all its intersections, and embodies her cultural memory to do so. It is with Asgari we are able to define courage, to understand boldness.

Imperial eyes, although on Asgari, his gaze does not penetrate her, in all her power. Asgari is able to build around her and her communities, a veil of impenetrability, as cloth to not only cleanse wounds, but to protect. This astounding visual is a manifestation of her own self-survival. Asgari primarily recognizes her own power; the strength which lies between her mind and her tongue, and the desire to speak the memories of those passed into existence. To witness this is to ratify a healing process, which begins individually and persists in community. Her approach in truth stands in direct response to the falsehood of the colonial dream. Asgari with her words embodied in poetic eulogy, is able to both address xenophobia and colonial micro-violences, and the State which sanctions them. Her poetic resistance as a process of the becoming self. An avenue which runs through the impassioned body, reinstates a collection of memories, languages, lands,
imaginations. She stands as a reactivation, and a rebirthing of a body of language which dialects stem cross-borders, and thrives in the in-betweens. This poetic process is revolutionary social movement. As we witness a form of colonial acceleration predicated on the erasure of Black and Brown bodies, Asgari proposes imagination outside of imperial thought; her words become an impetus for decolonial love. Asgari, and all the communities in which she resides, need no saving. In fact, it is exactly in their own collective survival of memory, and speech of life-giving words in response to such tragedy, which theorizes a resistant and disruptive narrative to that which we see so incessantly on the news.

Asgari recognizes that doses of her own survival are the remedy for her revival of love and community. That her singular and yet, intrinsically powerful voice serves as a language of words which feeds mourners a communal validation. Asgari stimulates a kindred condition of anger at the onslaught of Islamophobia which discolors our skies, and yet persists, onwards in community. Indeed, Asgari similarly invites love in–she invites us into her home to drink, to fill up, to overflow in love. In an effort for clarity, the aim here is not to excavate Asgari’s words for beauty or tranquility in a story of trauma. Instead, this dialogue is meant to simply uphold, and allow her words to move through our ears and bodies as potential memories of our own, of stories which may not be ours, but speak to shared spirits of memory.

Asgari turns her body inside, out; she pours a communal understanding and validation into the space, while also considers a future of difference, and in this way, participates in a language of symbols. Although Asgari does not explicitly address the three lives lost in Chapel Hill, she allows for a process of mourning which is so often
denied in communities deemed terror, by reimagining private memory in a public way. There is no conversation around saving Muslim brothers and sisters, or a foreign superior to be introduced as a sign of healing and hope. Asgari is clear, it is within, indeed, in the survival of young Muslimah, there is life beyond memories. In this way, Asgari does the violent work of remembering, which in itself is an act of (un)doing, of (un)violence.

Spatial Symbolic Logic and a Linguistic Realm of Resistance

Asgari recognizes the land on which she stands on, as not inherently colonial but instead as being made white, and that in its becoming has managed to genocidally exclude and erase whole peoples. Although the tragedy which spurred the vigil took place north of our border, in a place which is often relegated as our more violent, and intrinsically more dangerous neighbour, Asgari is able to recognize Canada’s colonial history of exclusion, genocide, and erasure of Indigenous peoples, first, and Black and Brown bodies to follow. To magnify the power of whiteness on this particular land (read: as white as the colours of the flag), is to recognize the culpability and our responsibility to highlight and recognize our own complicity in such an act of terror, while never to be defined as such. This recognition adds a layer of complexity to the Canadian landscape, riddled with identities in a forced dilution, only to appear as white as imperial intuition.

Asgari claims and exudes both tenderness and rage in a time of mourning. It is in her ability to dispel a multiplicity of selves in a single breath, which highlights her poetic instinct to translate trauma to praxis. In what is still a terrorizing episode cross-communities, and particularly to Muslim communities across the Continent, Asgari is able to embody both medicine and fire, a public conviction to the application of hate, a reclamation of tranquil space for healing.
“And, no. This is not another apology letter for crimes I have not committed. The world has simply looked past the me that is me, and the universe within. So let me begin by saying peace be upon you all, Salaam Alaikum. My name is Nasim Asgari. My first name means ‘breeze’ and my last name means ‘warrior.’ It pains me to have to translate my Iranian-Arabic name into an imperial colonial tongue for all of you to understand it, for it loses its poetic merit; its translation is so weak it can’t even be compared to its shadow…”

Asgari invites us to witness her linguistic home in such a way which pedestals her reverence of a cultural linguistic heritage. In doing so, Asgari is able to vividly, and so intentionally decentralize whiteness and magnify the complexities of her seemingly conflicting identities, reintroducing her truth. That is, a love that will always and with undying magnitude, outweigh hatred. In doing so, Asgari holds the State, and all those which robotically fall within its bounds accountable.

For Asgari, her physical and linguistic presence is enough to uphold citizenship, and it is in this demand for a multiplicity of selves, that truly disrupts such narratives of hate and ignorance. She is a traveler even within herself; she recognizes her body as home. Asgari’s identities voyeur through space and language, and relish in their atmospheric weight. Asgari, nor her communities, can be defined in binaric terms. Her words are not conditioned to the landscape of the State but of the landscape of ancestral poetry, and that in her breaths, indeed in the Breath of a Warrior, Asgari is able to nurture a space unknown to the coloniality of Canada.

With her work, Breath of a Warrior, Asgari is able to illuminate brokenness with a revolutionary love which navigates justified anger, to a radical recovery. Her narrative of daily violences only add layers to her plot, transforming stories of pain and anguish, into an ability to bestow ancestral wisdom and care for a family of the future. It is true that not all critical thinkers may consider this approach in response to the execution of three innocent Muslims, and in the face of rampant Islamophobia, appropriate. However, there
is something politically poignant in the decision to have a grayed duality of anger and
love, of consideration and reflection, and of retribution and forgiveness, in a time and
space of deep despair and mourning. However, it must be clear here that Asgari does not
call for the forgiveness of terror, in fact Asgari does not bother to address a response in
that way at all. Her impetus is instead in creating a home in love which does not engage
with the terror of white power, and its visceral and quite physical impact. A response of
equal or greater impact does not inherently connote that of the same means. In pressing to
unapologetically demonstrate willingness and a presence in love, a spirit of light is
uncovered; a spirit that is always already shining. This is not to say the terror which
occurred in Chapel Hill, nor any of the terrorizing violences inflicted upon Muslimah
bodies can or should be *redeemed*, I cannot believe it is Asgari’s intention to make
trauma, beautiful. Instead, Asgari casts light onto the magnitude of a cultural survival of
memory, and thus of resistance.

“So as a Muslim Iranian-Canadian teenage girl I have decided to unapologetically raise my voice, and
my pen, the most powerful weapons I own…”

A young teenage Muslimah choosing to shapeshift into a collection of informed
rage; a chronicle of anger that Asgari is able to translate into resolutions for her future
family. It is in the de-weaponizing of her body, and the (re)defining of art and
storytelling, Asgari is able to inform and guide a generation of spirits through trial and
trauma. Asgari is not concerned with the process of unseeing, or unfeeling that which has
been produced and inflicted upon her body. In fact, the opposite. She is occupied with the
poignant and incredibly violent personal process of unsettling and in doing so, becoming.
Through storytelling, Asgari is able to reimagine, and reinvent a way of living and being
which provides an opportunity for her audience to internalize more relevant, validating narratives.

“I will teach my son that some men are soldiers, but all women are warriors. I will teach my daughter to stand defiant especially when the tides are stronger than ever. But I will let her know that even if she can’t it’s okay because her survival in itself is an act of resilience and courage. I will teach them that words are more than just words, I want them to radiate warmth in this world that has turned so freezing cold. So, I will tell them both, that when hatred knocks at your door, greet it with a smile, but tell it love is already having tea inside.”

In a line recognizing her future lineage, Asgari (re)births a narrative conceived in another generation. A generation following such a collective memory of trauma, lives spent redrawing, that which has been state organized and erased. This line is hopeful, evidently for me the pinnacle of such a call to revolutionary love. This is Asgari’s craft—the means of her art is in the creating of space to imagine that which is currently under threat, that which cannot coexist in colonial violence. This kind of feminist visionary rhetoric is why, at least when inspecting such a dynamic space, Asgari’s words fit so well at its center.

Asgari stands as a resolution to such knocking—the knocking of imperials’ gaze, which so incessantly visits. Her poetry uncovers a redacted Islam—fractioned bodies/identities. It is in this moment Asgari is able to rebuild her own home, with all the love she houses. To reinstate such intellectual histories is to also reveal systems of knowledge nurtured in her bloodstreams. That is, memories closest to her conceptual birth. Asgari does not barter her body, but instead reveres her body as home. Asgari recognizes that healing in its most raw and honest form is far from linear. That to be free, or rather, to be in the pursuit of freedom, is to recognize that from moment to moment the function of memory can simultaneously restrain and liberate, it can wither and embolden; the spirit of memory, whether traumatic or fond, has the power to both fence in, and
break down borders. As a space which defies gravity in the non-places, in the in-between. It is with youthful and such revolutionary thought we move forward.

**Th’an, Hiba Abdallah**

Hiba Abdallah is an Arab-Canadian Muslimah, artist, student, and member of the artist collective, Broken City Lab. Abdallah, originally from Windsor, Ontario, is deeply invested in social practice and activism, and is currently a MFA candidate from the University of Guelph, displaying much of her thesis work in The Art Gallery of Guelph (AGG). In her relevant and ongoing public multidimensional exhibition titled, *Th’an*, and particularly within it: *Welcome to Guelph* (alongside, her *Contract of Hospitality*) and *Something Written to the White House*, Abdallah seems to be invariably concerned with the process of actively unsettling public and private spaces, through the weight and physicality of language. As curated by the AGG, “*Th’an* explores the Arabic language through the lens of art as social practice. Fusing interests in community engagement, design, and language, Abdallah employs tactics of public intervention to emphasize the marginalization of the Arabic culture” (Art Gallery of Guelph).

The word “th’an” in Arabic translation generally holds a dual meaning: to be both curious and certain, strange and familiar to something or someone. The exhibit is framed within a space relegated as a fictional community institution named, *The Arabic Consultants* (read: groups of peoples which shift within the balance of invisibility and hypervisibility). It is within this formation Abdallah is able to define and utilize the tangibility of Arabic script, both in public and private spaces, as a means of disruption, pause, and forced encounter. The impetus of this *encounter* is two-fold: to physically interrupt visual landscapes and oppressive preconceptions of the Arabic language and all
those who engage with it, as well as a more personal and unseen disturbance of spaces within that claim neutrality, that assert impartiality and acceptance, but are conditioned and relished with a colonial desire to know and understand; indeed, a personal conviction of fear within all those who must witness it.

Abdallah’s work in almost every aspect holds a nature of duality. Although the AGG currently houses her work in this particular project, its crux exists in its physicality and presence across the landscape of Guelph, and Canada more generally. The exhibit is multi-layered, much of which is predicated on community involvement and long-term commitment. Below, I will work to map out the dialectics of her work, and its colouring of the cultural Canadian landscape.

*Something Written to the White House*

Abdallah designed a logo printed onto black and white postcards reading: شيء مكتوب باللغة العربية. (read right to left) as translated into English, “Something written in the Arabic language,” however without translation on the postcard itself. On its back, each postcard has been made personal by community participants, as seen in the examples given below.
Abdallah then, with the involvement of Guelph locals and fellow artist participants, requested that they write a note to the current United States Administration, and President Donald Trump in particular. No specific direction, or scripted note was given beyond these simple instructions. Upon completing all the postcards, Abdallah individually mailed each personalized message to the US White House.

In the direct infiltration of Arabic script into the White House, Abdallah presents a poignant political conviction—an exposé of fear, an ability to disrupt the eyes, and

Figure 1: Three images above of customized postcards (front and back) completed by unnamed community members in Guelph, Canada (Hiba Abdallah, 2017)
ignorance of each postcard viewer. Arabic script has become the visual equivalent to terror. To mail something written in Arabic to the White House is to detonate a bomb of fear in colonial space. Abdallah’s work is an incendiary practice, sparking a fear and conviction of that fear simultaneously. The immensity of the phrase exists in its seeming neutrality. It is in the benign translation itself of Arabic which questions the public and State sanctioned fear of such loaded script. In this way, Abdallah magnifies the immense power dynamic language is able to hold within space, especially a visual of language which has been directly associated to fear of faith-based terrorism, or a threat to a white supremacist (read: white terrorist) state. This kind of infantile bigotry, and national domestic violence, is exposed and explored in her work.

Curated in the contemporary times of Trump’s America (read: a legalized fear and active, physical erasure of Muslimah identities), the current socio-political rationality to such a project is clear. Dialogue on inclusion, particularly in Canada as a comparative Continental citizen/neighbour to America, is at incredible frequency. As we’ve witnessed in earlier sections, Canada’s national identity is incessantly becoming in seeming contrast to America, by that which it is not. In this way, it is quite easy to relegate Abdallah’s work as a prosecution/condemnation particularly of America’s indomitable state towards Black and Brown bodies, and visible bodies from the East, alone. But when considered in depth, the pinnacle of Abdallah’s work does not lie in the effects of invading the White House, nor does it regard a dialogue surrounding any particular political response thereafter. The insidious nature of such political work lies in the process, the engagement of those who partake in the making of language as imposition. Abdallah’s artistry and curatorial work thrive in community involvement; the crux of her work is that in its
making, in its natural curation, she truly has little power over its final product and its impact, and therefore, its conviction is that much more impactful. The artist highlights that each moment we position Canada as in parts or in full safer than the US, we continuously contribute and corroborate in a colonial scheme of invisibility and visibility.

This project is not only interrogative/invasive in its physical sending to the current US Administration, but also more invasive the personal politic—in the participation of Guelph locals, inevitably being confronted with, and possibly taking accountability for, their own internalized ignorance. Although I recognize how this endeavour may seem to misplace full accountability and blame on America, a means of deflection; however, the impetus of this community project is not meant to be comparative. It is clear that although the final destination of such weighty postcards is the White House, they must first touch the eyes and hands of all those engaged in the process of sending them. We can further see Abdallah’s line of thinking in the co-existent project, which follows. The idea behind the infiltration of the White House through Arabic script—simply, something written in the Arabic language, is both tactical and brilliant.

Welcome to Guelph

The Welcome to Guelph initiative includes the creation of three-hundred black and white metal signs reading: مرحبا بكم في جيلف, written in traditional Arabic dialect and script (read from right to left), which translates, “Welcome to Guelph”—although again, with no English translation included on the sign itself. Alongside her signage, Abdallah has drafted her, Contracts of Hospitality, which are in essence, documents that outline terms on which the residents of Guelph (of those who choose to participate), must install the signage on visual display for a minimum of one year. By
doing so the *host participates in the aesthetics of hospitality*. This kind of collaboration of hospitality is an activism of doing. That is, not only does it participate in a disruption of the optical imagining of Guelph, but the signage itself clearly precedes a requisite of hospitality. Truly an immense medium of (art)ivism, Abdallah allows for community action, committed to an *unconditional refuge*, (which in a way, denies the concept of citizenship entirely).

**Figure 2**: Two images (above) of customized metal signs found in Guelph, Canada (Hiba Abdallah, 2017)
By signing a contract, this welcome becomes not just a symbolic act but a personally political one—a declaration of commitment to altering the visual display of hospitality, to oneself, and to the public. As a public document, a binding legal agreement, the contract works as a visible tactic of participant accountability. The deliberate nature of a contract means going beyond the façade of Canadian *politeness*. At face value, the work seems simple—to communicate in a language relevant to its target demographic. However, it is important to recognize the dynamism of such a sign which not only interrogates citizens of the land, while also indicating opportunities of refuge and safety, but thirdly, and arguably most poignantly, the signs themselves work as a disruption on a colonial landscape which has been harvested as benevolent, *multicultural*.
even. The recognition of language as a physical and weightful body, is imperative to the efficacy of Abdallah’s work. In her decision to welcome Arabic-speaking peoples to the city, without English translation to follow, begs the vital question: Who are these signs for? Without translation, these signs inform both locals and outsiders alike that there is a practicality of inclusion here, meanwhile, in its non-translation, challenging a contemporary and unquestioned colonial presence. In this way, Abdallah participates in a pedagogical space with the inhabitants of Guelph, in a way that confronts multiple viewership’s, interrogating personal privilege, structural racism and xenophobia visually.

This important project endeavors to redefine the spirit of citizenship. Although its visual effects may be confined to the context of Guelph, its work speaks volumes to the country’s complicity to a growing and more apparent Islamophobia, and the visual bodies ostensibly deemed as *terror*. Abdallah exposes the strategic and intentional exclusion of peoples displaced from their homelands, exiled from their housing communities, and bodies which have survived forced voyages across oceans. A direct response to the ephemerality and phoniness of the *multiculturalist* policies in Canada, and its implicit exclusion, thriving since Confederacy, Abdallah says,

مرحبا بكم في جيلف.

**Language as Visual Resistance**

It is in the inclusion, or rather the adaptation of space through Arabic script, Abdallah is able to utilize visual language to expose dynamics of power, which intervenes colonial space—physical and immaterial Indigenous land which has been imperially excavated for cultural and physical nutrition—in an effort to complicate its national narrative. Abdallah is able to emerge an ideology through physical language
which (re)imagines speech, as revolutionary—in both the physical and visual qualities of Arabic script, this work is a practical decolonial dialogue, and a reclamation of narrative.

Abdallah’s work is far more about embracing communities in the face of State sanctioned fear, than of herself. Abdallah, specifically in the pieces displayed below, considers her own identities differently than Mohamed and Asgari do. Abdallah’s craft is an active art which both physically and psychologically takes up, and in many ways, recaptures colonial space as a means of responding to its afterlife*(not to say colonialism is no longer). Indeed, her craft is in the communal doing of these works. Abdallah’s work is a call for submission, it is a call to community to not simply speak resistance, but visualize it into existence. It is through projects, as seemingly simple as this one, where artists are able to recognize land, and recapture space in a way which is able to decentralize whiteness, by evacuating space for dialogue, replacing a fear of Other with a welcome of another. Thus, Abdallah’s work transitions from a reactionary place, to a visionary space.
A Gallery of Conclusions: A Curation of Memories as Revolutionary Wisdom

In their piece, “Memoir Pedagogy: Gender Narratives of Violence and Survival” Shahrzad Mojab and Nancy Taber (2015) compose a sight for healing:

Community begins to be re-established when people are able to remember together, giving testimony to their experiences and having others bear witness to their experiences. Individuals and communities can form a sense of purpose by transforming the act of remembering and witnessing to a living document for social action. The living document can restore and renew the sense of collective struggle for common good (32).

Each Muslimah artist included in this dialogue has been in some form, navigating and mitigating histories of betrayal. In her own way, Mohamed, Asgari, and Abdallah have drawn identities which have no place in colonial narratives, into a landscape of becoming. Each have been integral at deconstructing, while also building. These Muslimah work to divest from whiteness, and settler colonial logic, and alternatively invest in pedestaling their own imagery.

It is with these three artists in mind, although not limited to their individual work and life, we are able to imagine such a living document. That is, to visualize memory in such a way which pacifies an individualistic framework of healing, to an active and fluid collection of stories which give life to those who have been made silent; that is, voices who are deemed voiceless, but are truly muffled by the power of whiteness. In these works, I have been able to consider sites for home, a visual for longing, and a possibility of refuge which stem from a dynamic understanding of memory. As a platform for space to rebirth identities erased from the landscape altogether, this thesis is a kind of geographical work and tree-planting—a pursuit of liberation that is truly decolonial. Borrowing from Mojab and Taber in their vocabulary surrounding a kind of ‘memoir pedagogy’ we are able to consider ways in which re-membering, and in the materializing
of memory, womxn cross-oppressive boundaries are able to be, where otherwise erased by dissent. The authors exude again, where there is oppression, there is resistance also: “…concepts of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy as power relations with continuous presence in the past and future—a social and historical presence that has also sparked the most imaginative forms of human resilience, resistance, and survival” (Mojab and Taber 37). These womxn are constantly in a process of resolution, which mounds to places of becoming, opening doors to safe(r) spaces, exposing the lengths of unfreedom, and the possibility for an unmediated being. It is in the nature of displacement, to which nothing can withstand their depth, the complexity of their multiple selves, their bodies too much to stand in a colonial landscape—so left with simply their silhouettes, like the Museum, in all its monetary glory, cannot expense the price of such bodies. The art of these Muslimah is that they exist in community but in doing so, speak back to themselves; holding a posture of endurance, and an approach to defining vulnerability. Muslimah artists in Canada like Mohamed, Asgari, and Abdallah are allowing for spaces of contradiction, of confusion; are ensuring and demanding a mastery over their own histories, identities, ideas, while constantly unlearning, and learning, unbecoming, and becoming. There is a kind of stagnancy about the contents of the Permanent Collection of the Aga Khan Museum—a cemented identity that is seemingly unchanging and stoic. This is a part of the power of colonial conceptions of identity. Identities which are forced into dimensions of an imperial quality, whole peoples in a reality where difference is demonized or forcefully forgotten altogether. These artists, with their own brush/body are able to birth narratives of difference; their own narratives of truth.
These artists break the contract of invested whiteness on this land, even just for a moment. The work of these Muslimah are in ways, a water-well. A register of ancestral wisdoms, of generational activism, of nights of despair and mornings of hope, afternoons in-between languages and borders. This is a story, in part, of bodies, that have gone through war, and are believed to be moving bodies of war-threat—when it artwork like these that give a vision of peace. It is here these womxn live outside pain (Tuck 2015), and although are informed by the wars of their foremothers, the wars of moving through each moment as other, these Muslimah create.

These memories are made in a fortress of its own, sheltering, covering, embodying, and embarking on whatever storms may come. Bodies of work which address matters of inheritance; that is, the constant process of (un)doing and (de)constructing legacies of violence and the serpentine nature of coloniality in Canada. Art from a place of exhaustion, but also creation from a place of celebration, of deliberation, of declaration and manifesto. Indeed, storytellers of diasporas. Of exclusion and movement, embodiment and love. Of fluid identities, of fluid gold. These artists inherently combat colonial fantasies, with fantasies of their own. Behold, an artist’s work that whispers: unfold me, and find what has been lost in the coils of my skin.

To close, this document has been a dialogue in place-finding, in language, and its spatial value. This collection is home to an archive of contradictions—of pursuits to wholeness—all the while amidst a nation built on, and celebrated for, partitioned identities, displaced selves. My hope is that this project allows us to consider a body-memory, a home for a collective understanding of stories which move and sway with human change. The sanitation of a radical identity, ferments the Museum’s foundation
deep into Canadian soil. Its growth directly stemming from roots of erasure, of whitewashing, of neglect, and passivity, the Museum participates in a repeated history of intellectual genocide; an investment in displacement, a divestment from difference. However, as we have sojourned through the following section of memoir, activism, and storytelling, we are witnesses to the optics of freedom, and to an abundance of beauty.

Here, I hope to have created an archived memoir. However, rather than participating in a fixed and unchanging, and thus oppressive archive, one that, as a collective memoir, speaks to the present, to the future. To the possibility of a future doused in the names of these Muslimah, seeking an intensity of identities, and of community space which allows for it. This juxtaposition is a disruption of forced softness, of hidden stories, of mouths muted in speech. Lorde in her, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, resolves: “As they become known and accepted to ourselves, our feelings, and the honest exploration of them, become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas, the house of difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action” (36). It is my hope that, in having engaged in a dialogue of these memories, we have been witnesses to a memory of resistance; an audience to Mohamed, Asgari, and Abdallah, speaking back to themselves. Pushing themselves into plain sight, painting their stories onto walls which despise them.

With hopes of extending this journey in the future, it is my desire, as it has remained a daydream throughout this process, to curate and open a physical gallery space dedicated to Muslimah artists like these, welcoming of complexity, surprise, intersection, fluidity, and change. A space which in its very presence allows for a body of diasporic memories, to exist in becoming, in transition to speak generational wisdoms
to life, to community building and, to survival; a space which is equal parts healing as it is growing. A small revolution. Finally, the words of Nayyirah Waheed (2015) in her seminal piece, *Salt*, which resound in the spirit of this work, and the hopes of its afterlife:

*the
diaspora is absolutely breathtaking.*
*and*
*the diaspora is in stunning pain.*
*we*
*are*
*a great many things. all at once.*

– myriad \ disconnect
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