The Activism of First Generation Somali Canadian Women Within a Neoliberal Multicultural State

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Department of Leadership, Higher Learning and Adult Education

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the activism of first generation Somali Canadian Women (FGSCWA). It specifically asks 1) how do Somali women activists engage, contest and modify existing social relations within their community and mainstream society to foster anti-racist, anti-Islamaphobic feminist spaces; 2) in what ways does their activism challenge the systematic racism and Islamaphobia that is explicitly and implicitly imbedded in Canadian institutions and social relations and; 3) how has their activism and advocacy challenged the normative discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism, while simultaneously contesting gender norms and cultural dogma within the Somali community. This study combines two theoretical approaches to understand issues of citizenship, boundaries of Blackness and Muslim identity, power, representation and knowledge production in relation to Somali women activists. Working within a post-colonial and Black feminist framework, this research paper utilizes the in-depth interviews I conducted with eight Somali women activists, narrating their personal histories, perspectives and lived experiences.

Keywords: Activism, Intersectionality, Neoliberal Multiculturalism, Diaspora identity, Anti-Blackness, Muslimness, Antiracist, Misogynoir, Somalinimo, Feminist space, Whiteness, Deserving, Undeserving, Visibility, Self-care
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Chapter One

Introduction and Purpose

When I started this research, my goals were two fold: I) examine the significant role Somali women play in the community, in particular their activism and advocacy; II) explore the ways in which the Somali community, with particular attention given to Somali women since they represent the largest segment of Somali immigrants -(Mohamed, 1994; Berns-McGown, 2013), have been marginalized from the moments that they entered Canada by the political and legal system and mainstream media. Since multiculturalism is a state sanctioned project, which carries its own organized ideologies about Canada, the concept of who is Canadian is racially crafted, legally articulated and materially realized. Somali women came to Canada at a time where state sponsored multiculturalism was the normative discourse in political discussions, public policy and mainstream culture, while racist Islamaphobia sentiments were implicitly condoned in news reports and reflected the legislative practices of the time. For instance, the public sentiments facing the Somali community in the 1990s combined economic discourse (they drain our resources and abuse Canada’s generosity), with racial profiling (citizens’ right are imperilled by Somali refugees fraudulent claims). It is from this juncture of systematic racism and social marginalization experienced by the Somali community that I am interested in critiquing, which is rooted in the activism of First generation Somali
Canadian women activists (FGSCW). As Himani Bannerji argues in ‘The Dark Side of
the Nation’,

Official multiculturalism represents its polity in cultural terms, setting apart the so-called
immigrants of colour from the Francophone and the Aboriginal peoples. This
organization brings into clearer focus the primary national imaginary of “Canada,” to
rests on posing “Canadian culture,” against “multicultures.” (Bannerji, 2000: page 19)

The activism of Somali women has been shaped under tremendous public scrutiny and
discriminatory legal practices that has both visibalized their Black and Muslim identity,
while attempting to de-politicize their socio-political agency. This thesis will both reflect
on the lived experiences of FGSCWA in the past twenty-five years and the ways in which
Canada’s neoliberal multiculturalism both influenced and constrained their activism and
shaped their diaspora Somali identity.

1.1 The Purpose and Research Questions

My research intends to examine the personal narratives of FGSCW regarding their
activism within a neoliberal multicultural paradigm, in order to gain insight into their
perspectives on the challenges they have faced due to their multiple identities as Muslim,
Black women in Canada. By conducting this qualitative research using a narrative
approach, I hope to contribute to the under theorized and under researched empirical
scholarship on the lived experiences of FGSCW. Furthermore, an enhanced
understanding of the primary factors that led to their activism will suggest strategies that
could potentially assist future researchers and community organizers in gaining a more
informed and diverse perspectives on FGSCW. My research is focused solely on Somali women who reside in Toronto, where the majority of the Somali community relocated. The following four questions will guide my thesis, to understand the lived experiences of first generation Somali women and their road to activism:

1. How have Somali women negotiated / challenged institutional racism and societal marginalization in a neoliberal multicultural state?

2. Do Somali women activists see themselves as activists? What role do they identify within the Somali community and the larger Canadian society?

3. How has their activism informed both their lived experiences and perception of self as Black Muslim women in Canada?

4. What are the different sites of resistance from which FGSCWA perform within the Somali community and the larger society?
Chapter Two

Theoretical Orientation

In this chapter, I will review activism theories from the Constructivism school of thought, to Adult education and Black feminism. Activism is a mode of visibility according to the Somali women activists that I interviewed for this research. The main objectives of their activism are to shift inequitable power relations, specifically those based on race, gender, class, and religion in Canada, in order to foster a more inclusive, social justice spaces in their society. By utilizing the antiracist feminist discourse and critical pedagogy, this thesis focuses on how Somali women activists perform social justice work in their everyday life. Specifically, I examine how the lived experiences of Somali women activists enable, constrain, and socially organize the work they conduct in the Somali community and larger society. Moreover, I analyze the everyday activism of eight Somali women in order to learn the ways in which they mobilize, contest and modify existing normative discourses and practices in their personal and professional life. In essence, this study describes how Somali women activism in different spaces involve negotiating two sets of relations of accountability, namely, formal accountability (to hierarchicalized social relations in public settings) and individual and community responsibility (to antiracism, feminism, anti-Islamaphobia and social justice principles).
The primary purpose of this study is to identify the socio-political objectives of Somali women activists as stated in the previous discussion, in order to map out a trajectory of systematic and societal changes from an antiracist feminist standpoint. The Somali community has been present in Canada for three decades. As such this study hopes to explore the ways Somali women activists have challenged systematic barriers and societal prejudices in their work and everyday interaction with communities. I hope to showcase how Somali women activists negotiate their commitment to antiracist feminist ideals through existing social relations within a Canadian context and how their activism can be understood as both responding to and shaping the exclusionary social processes in a multicultural state.

2.1 Activism in Theory and in Practice

There are different schools of thoughts in identifying and contextualizing what activism is and how it’s deployed politically, economically and socially. Political activism has been categorized as ‘modernization theories,’ as advanced by Daniel Bell, Ronald Inglehart and Russell Dalton, among others. It suggests common social trends such as rising standards of living, the growth of the service sector, and expanding educational opportunities have shaped post-industrial societies, which contribute towards a new model of citizen politics in Western democracies (Inglehart, 1997; Dalton, 1998; Bell, 1999). Another form of activism emphasizes what has been called ‘Agency theories,’ developed by Rosenstone and Hansen, which focuses on the traditional methods of mobilizing organizations in civic society, in particular, the way that political parties, trade
unions, and religious groups recruit, organize, and engage activists (Hansen and Rosenstone, 1993). Lastly, the ‘Civic Voluntarism model,’ forwarded by Scholzman, Brady and Verba, examine how citizens participate in the political process. They conducted interviews with individuals from a range of social, economic and ethnic backgrounds and found that some citizens are able to get their message across, while others are not (Scholzman, alt., 1995). This disparity was attributed to different factors, such as socioeconomic status or unequal access to vital resources, which ultimately influence whose political voices are heard. Schlozman and her colleagues surveyed a random national sample of 15,000 people, of which 2,500 were subsequently interviewed about their political, civic and religious activities, as well as their political knowledge. Using this data, the authors created the term "Civic Voluntarism Model" to demonstrate and explain the factors which foster participation: resources such as time, money and civic skills; psychological engagement with politics; and access to networks through which people are recruited for political life (Verba, alt., 1995).

On the other hand, Social Activism Theory is founded on the belief that “learning takes place in social environments where people are engaged in collaborative activities” (Tan, 2006: 4) Through these engagements, learners communicate, interact, and learn from each other, as a result, constructing their own world of knowledge” (Tan, 2006: 5). This theory is attributed to the constructivism school of thought, which is rooted in “Rationalist” philosophy (Smith & Ragan, 2005:19). There are three main scholars that have been instrumental in developing the theory of Social Activism and the Constructivism school of thought. First, John Dewey provided crucial insight into
Constructivism, stating “...since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (Matthews, 2003: 53). Dewey considered human development a natural process and that education should be viewed in the same context. He also believed that “…experience is a foundation for learning which would then be transformed into knowledge and skill” (Conole, Dyke, Oliver, & Seal, 2004: 20).

Secondly, another theorist, Jean Piaget had a significant influence on Constructivism in education theory, in particular, children’s curriculum. Piaget stated that “…there are three mechanisms for learning: assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium,” (Leonard, Noh & Orey, 2007). He studied the intellectual development of children by observing them, talking and listening to them while they worked on exercises he assigned. Piaget particular insight was the role of maturation and emotional/intellectual growth of children and the capacity to understand their world: they cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so (Satterly, 1987). Thirdly, Lev Vygotsky was another Constructivist scholar who considered knowledge a continued process and “…the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition” (Leonard, Noh, & Orey, 2007).

2.1.1 Adult Education and Activism

The field of adult education studies, which emphasizes lifelong learning in and outside of the classroom, including workplace learning, defines activism as learning through social
action, broadly referred to as ‘popular education.’ Popular education, also called community education is theorized as:

An educational approach that collectively and critically examines everyday experiences and raises consciousness for organizing and movement building, acting on injustices with a political vision in the interests of the most marginalized (Paulo Freire, 1974)

The evolution of popular education teaching methods is attributed to Latin America, specifically the translation of Paulo Freire’s seminal piece, ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed,’ in the 1970s. Nevertheless, some of the earlier work of popular education is rooted in the struggles of the working class in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Essentially, the working class' perception of the ruling class towards them, combined with the acceptable premise that allowing the working class to have full access to formal education beyond basic skills training would confuse and agitate them, became the cornerstone of popular education in Europe (Neuburg, 1971: page 3). Hence, the critical development about popular education in the past two centuries has focused on the analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression informed by an equally clear political purposes, which has less to do about helping the 'disadvantaged' or the management of poverty and more about the struggle for a just and egalitarian social order (Crowther, J., Martin, I. & Shaw, M., 1999).

Furthermore, learning through social action falls under four interrelated discussions: emancipatory learning, social purpose education, critical pedagogy, and radical adult education. Firstly, emancipatory learning is about developing the understanding and
knowledge about the nature and root causes of disfranchisement and disadvantaged circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them (Cranton, 1994; Inglis, 1997). This particular pedagogy intends to form solidarity and support with those least powerful in our society, in the hope of bringing greater equality and social justice (Huton, 1995; Martin, 2000). Accordingly, emancipatory learning can only take place in adulthood because, “it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it,” allowing the learner to transform (Mezirow, 1981: page 11). Such discourse developed out of the perspectives that public education has increasingly become instrumental in nature, designed to serve the “profit system”(Foley 1998, p. 139). Specifically the current structure of adult education has moved toward professionalization and establishment as a field in which “students are viewed as consumers and adult education as a commodity” (Barr, 1999: page 71).

Secondly, social purpose education simply means, “education which helps students to understand the society in which they live, and to change it in ways that seem desirable to them” (Raybould, S.G., 1949). Thirdly, critical pedagogy is associated with Brazilian educator and activist, Paulo Freire who uses the principles of Frankfurt school of critical theory (Aliakbari, Faraji, 2011: page 77). Here, critical pedagogy is about language teaching and learning, in the interest of transforming relations of power that are oppressive and lead to the oppression of others (Kincheloe, 2005). Critical pedagogy critiques the ways in which capitalist societies educate and school their citizens, allowing leading theorists like Freire to call on the transformation of oppressed people from being
objects of education to subjects of their own autonomy and emancipation (Aliakbari, ibid). Lastly, radical adult education is described as people, individually and collectively learning through direct engagement with community development activities, or by participation in social movements (Foley 1999; Horton & Freire 1990; Jesson & Newman 2004; Newman 1994, 2006).

Accordingly, since activism is theorized as purposeful learning, where individuals or collective group of people exercising their own agency challenge systematic barriers and discriminatory practices, the Somali women activists I interviewed for this research would fit into such paradigm. The activism of first generation Somali Canadian women strive to achieve a just society, where the Somali community have political, economic and cultural control over their lives.

2.1.2 Theories of Activism by Black Feminists

Antiracist feminist scholars have also theorized activism through the lived experiences of racialized women in both formal and informal settings. Since Sojourner powerful speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (Truth, 1851), feminists scholars of color, Black women in particular, have been calling for the inclusion of multiple identities and experiences when exploring identity formation, activism and identity politics by asking the question, “which women,” disputing the idea that all women lived experiences are the same (Shields, 2008: 300). This was a response to the well-documented history of racism in feminist and queer movements and sexism in the Civil Rights Movement. Many white
feminists who fought for women’s right to vote, access to reproductive choice and legal protection against gendered violence have attempted to erase the critical role Black women played in the movement, by employing racism to obtain those rights. To ensure white women won the right to vote, the Suffrage movement central political agenda was one of racism and exclusion of Black men and women from the movement (Simons, 1979; Guy-Sheftall, 1994; Newman, 1999; Ginzberg, 2009). On the other hand, second wave feminist movement used eugenics language to advocate for the legalization of birth control; stating birth control would help in slowing the birth rates of people of color (Guy-Sheftall, 1994; Roberts, 1997; Hortense Spillers, 2003).

Furthermore, within the Civil Rights Movement, Black women activists reported sexism in the assignment of ‘domestic’ tasks, such as cooking and cleaning and the denial of formal leadership roles, while also being the foot-soldiers that marched, organized and demonstrated (Standley, 1990; Height, 2001; Cole & Stewart, 1996; Dyson, 2001) as well as documented “ritualistic rape and intimidation” of black women by white opponent of the civil right movement (Greensite, 2003; McGuire, 2011). There were also incidents of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of male activists within these movements (Kelly, 2002; Chen, Dulani, & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011). In addition, queer people of color continue to address the erasure that is constantly present in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements (Han, 2007, Rasmussen, Nexica, Klinenberg, Matt Wray, 2001). The activism of Black women and that of non-white women in North America has strived to make the political personal and the personal political since the struggle against racial, sexual, heteronormative practices and class oppression impacts and shapes both
the public and private spheres. The activism of Black women is primarily focused on creating the space, thought process, and intellectual discourse connecting generations in dialogue about theories of social change and histories of activism (Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1994: 231). This was also demonstrated in my interviews with first generation Somali Canadian women activists about intergenerational dialogue on activism and socio-political change.

Since the inception of the Civil Rights, Feminist and Gay Rights movement, Black women were at the forefront, organizing communities, fighting for socio-political justice, shaping the legal process and managing grassroots organizations. However, despite such consistent involvement in improving the conditions of Black communities and mainstream society, Black women continued to encounter racism, sexism and homophobia from white activists and their Black male counterparts (Garvey, 1925; Chesimard, 1973; Crenshaw, 1989; White, 1990; Van Deburg, 1997; Kelly, 2002; Bambara, 2005; Cohen, 1999/2006; Davis, 2006).

2.2 Critical Race Discourse: Dialectic of Race, Racism and Power

Racial distinction is constituted in the way we think, the way we formulate policies and implement the law, and in turn it reproduces racial hierarchies (Backhouse, 2001). In fact, race is part and parcel of western modernity, which creates an environment where race permeates our way of life and knowledge production (Goldberg, 1993: 61). For instance, European colonialism and imperialism have historically categorized human societies on
the basis of biological features into certain hierarchies, where race became the basis of various forms of discrimination (Goldberg, ibid; Gilroy, 1994). Consequently, race became the most important organizing category of social understanding in Canada and it’s maintained simultaneously through interaction between government agencies and minority groups seeking social change, which employs race as central analytical category for understanding society and its racial and social formation (Omi and Winant, 1986). Critical race theorist, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have called this a “theory of racial formation,” since these categories of hierarchies come from established western scientific studies, which consequently introduces and affirms the same racial hierarchies the state and society claims to have overcome with time (Omi and Winant, 1986). Accordingly, ‘the dynamics of racial othering emerged in a range of mechanisms that variously subject non-white immigrants to whitening and blackening processes that indicate the degree of their closeness to or distance from the ideal white standards’ (Gosh, 2001). Authors such as Aihwa Ong have articulated that immigrants in North America are organized along the dominant racial dichotomies that tacitly assume that those who are categorized along such lines readily accept this process (Ong, 2009).

Racial knowledge then is about establishing hierarchies of distinction and categories that constrain how we think about race and racialization (Goldberg, 63). For instance, the language used when describing the Somali community since the 1990s is often at a crossroad between Orientalism and Africanism. Orientalism is an ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient/Muslim’ and the ‘Occident/West.’ The orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture, where accepting
the basic differences between the two is the starting point from which white society establishes theories, epics, literature, social description and political accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs, minds, destiny, etc., (Said, 1979). On the other hand, Africanism is about the materiality of Africa, its history, language, people and culture, which has been racially constructed by white supremacy since the Atlantic Slave Trade and western colonialism (Gilroy, 1994; Mbembe, 2001). Thus, western hegemony controls the production of knowledge and processes of validation and affirmation in North America. Accordingly, this community of “experts,” which is dominated by white men, has the power to define and give credibility to other forms of knowing, where marginalized people of color consistently encounter major obstacles in the advancement of their knowledge (Harraway, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Goldberg, 1993; Gilroy, 1994; Kelly, 2002; Kusow, 2006; Njoki, 2011).

In “Discourse, Knowledge, Materiality. Foucault and Discourse Analysis,” Derek Hook argues that training and awareness are not equipped to effectively address what he calls pre-discursive forms of racism. Rather, understanding racism as both a historical and social construct would provide a more nuanced and effective dialogue. “Racism is beyond one individual, it is a social and political dimension that converts into a set of internal psychological processes (Hook, 2001: 521).” In other words, regardless of the legal and political advancements we make, racism never loses its physical representation, which is embodied in the racialized body, in this case connecting non-white bodies with criminality. For instance, when a police officer stops a young Black professor driving in High Park, or when a young Muslim Canadian woman wearing the hijab is evicted from
court, stereotypes are not at play; rather subconscious racism. It is one that is realized in impulses, played out in aversion of, or reaction to, the racialized bodies. Therefore, racism and all its legal and political consequences should not be reduced to a social and linguistic phenomenon in need of rewriting, without addressing the underlying factors that allow teachers, policy writers, police officers, judges, and those in authority to dehumanize non-white Canadians and evict them from the law itself.

Moreover, since whiteness is the dominant structure in Canada, it’s beyond a fixed identity, able to escape oppressive markings, while determining the marking of its racial others (Walia, 2013). Race and racialization in Canada is then centered on the high cost of being a non-white subject, whether you are First Nation or Black Muslim. Some of the questions I intend to address in my thesis are: what are the material structures of the Western state that shapes laws and influences society, impacting Somali women settlement experience? What is the historical root of racism masquerading as liberating agenda and how does it impact Somali women activists?

2.3 Towards a Postcolonial and Transnational Feminist Framework

White feminist epistemology and governing structure have historically failed to acknowledge that racism and sexism are dual experience for racialized women (Black women in particular), which in turn have fostered discriminatory practices in academia, the law and employment sector (Crenshaw, 1989; Brand, 1991; Shadd, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Van Deburg, 1997). Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black
feminists scholar, coined the term Intersectionality, a theory where race, gender, class, and other social divisions intersect to construct systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989); in what Patricia Hill Collins has called a ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins, 2000: 246). Post-colonial and transnational feminists have agreed gender is an additive on race, where both constitute each other. Transnational feminists consider issues from a global perspective while taking into account the ways it intersects with black and brown women’s lived experiences in the West. It ultimately challenges the ways in which knowledge is produced, by deconstructing “the unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at the heart of western disciplines that are profoundly ignorant to the meanings, values and practices of other history and culture” (McEwan, 2001: 95).

The critical discourse of Black feminists scholars such as bell hooks and Marxist feminists scholars, such as Himani Bannerji have affirmed the significance of theorizing the lived experiences of racialized and working class women without distorting or mystifying the interlocking systems of oppression that comes with having multiple identities. For instance, Standpoint theory has demonstrated that all knowledge is partial because what we know is shaped by our reality and frame of reference (Collins, 2000: 43). Thus, theorizing lived experiences is about extracting what is being obscured in knowledge production, to reveal the Intersectionality within power and agency, which shapes racialized women social relation. Intersectionality is a normative and empirical research paradigm that can address a more inclusive scholarly research in the field of diverse women of color, to produce critical knowledge in various disciplines (Crenshaw, 1991; Bannerji, 1996; Hancock, 2007; Nayak, 2015). In addition, Standpoint feminism is
a postmodernist tool to think more broadly about the ways in which language and power both include and exclude women and their subsequent spaces of dialogue, and how the terms themselves create limitation on Black feminism and how it has been constructed (Collins, 2000). It stipulates that we articulate a multiplicity of experiences that encompasses Black womanhood, so that the ways in which Black women excavate terms used to describe their daily-lived experiences begin to take on palatable significance in the political and social worlds in which they live (Collins, 1996; Clarke, 2000; Deliovsky, 2002; Cohen, 2004).

First and second wave feminism have remained a universalized white discourse and continue to reflect on present day third wave feminism. This has led to Black and third world feminist critiques of these movements (Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 1996; Davis, 1998; Collins, 2000; Bannerji, 2002; Cohen, 2006; Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). Black feminists have theorized the ways in which gender and race are part of the other ‘relations of ruling,’ and ‘relation of oppression’ (Crenshaw, 1991; hook, 1994; Collins, 1996; Deliovsky, 2002). Consequently, when Black Feminist theories became too obvious to ignore, the rhetoric and language of inclusion was adopted while stripping away the Intersectionality of gender politics by generalizing and formulating a universal suffering of all women, and continuing the discourse and analysis of universal whiteness and white feminism as representation for all women (Collins, 1996; Deliovsky, 2002; Crawford, 2004; Hancock, 2007). This in turn led to the reproduction of pre-existing unequal social relations, where the lived experiences of women of color are often
dismissed if not limited to cultural normative discourse (Spelman, 1990; Bannerji, 2002; Spillers, 2003). These are the concepts, assumptions and terms I will use in this thesis.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This thesis represents an attempt to address existing gaps in the epistemology, methodology, and research paradigm of Black women activism, focusing on first generation Somali Canadian women activists. My research findings will demonstrate the need for developing a reflective and critical discourse that informs Black women lived experiences, one that is not at the margin of a racist, sexist, classist and Islamophobic thinking in mainstream academic scholarship and feminist literature. The thesis also presents series of questions crucial to theorizing the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women: In what ways does the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women disrupt and challenge what Spivak called the "epistemic violence" inflicted by western discourses of knowledge that dismisses and ‘others’ the histories, radical ideas, critical movements and lived experiences of non-white people, in this case Somali women? How has their activism informed both their lived experiences and perception of self as Black Muslim women in Canada? What are the different sites of resistance from which FGSCWA perform within the Somali community and the larger society? The process and rationale for how I went about addressing these questions will be outlined in the following sections.
3.1 Research Site: Toronto

In order to address these questions, I connected with my network within the Somali community in Toronto, to identify Somali women activists ranging between the ages of 27-60 years old, so that I can have access to both those who came here as adults with or without children, as well as those who were raised in Canada. I was particularly interested in Somali women that have worked within and outside of the Somali community, whose advocacy/activism seized opportunities to foster antiracist, anti-Islamophobia and feminist spaces. My intention for this research was two folds: to look back at the systematic racism and marginalization the Somali community experienced in the past 25 years through the perspectives of Somali women activists, while documenting the different ways their activism evolved to include a more nuanced analysis. I eventually interviewed eight Somali women activists with heterogeneous identity, conveying different but critical position about the Somali community, settlement experience, systematic racism, anti-Blackness, misogynoir and Islamophobia. The Somali women I was privileged to interview for my thesis were a bridge between two generation - all were born outside of Canada, three of the women were first generation parents that came during the early wave of Somali refugees in the 1990s, while the other five came with their family either as infants or in their teens. Some came from America, the Middle East, and Europe, while the rest came directly from Somali territories – Somaliland, Somalia, Puntland (Hodan, 2016: 88). All of the women that I have interviewed are considered first generation Somali Canadian, including 1.5 generation (those who came to Canada as children and adolescents). My data reflects a unique intergenerational analysis that speaks
to a diverse diaspora Somali perspectives that continue to challenge, negotiate and change the ways in which their lived experiences are narrated and theorized.

3.2 Role of the Researcher: Anti Colonial and Black Feminist Positionality

Writing this section of the thesis was the hardest part because it required that I personalize the factors that motivated me to embark on this research, but it was also the easiest since it allowed me the space to articulate the knowledge vacuum that exist in Canadian literature and academic scholarship about the history, activism and movements of Black diaspora communities; one that has been consistently minimized if not completely omitted. Narrating and documenting the activism of Black Canadian women has never been a priority for historians and feminists writers, neither was it included in the Toronto District School Board educational curricula my peers and I were provided with in primary, middle and high school. The only time we would encounter anything remotely reflective of our diverse heritage was Black History month, which was certainly depolitized and de-historicized. In fact, the first time I learned about the complex and rich history of Black Canadians, one that is over 300 years old was by taking few dispersed Black focused courses at the University of Toronto, in my undergraduate years. None of the Canadian history and political science courses at my university mention let along include anything pertaining to Indigenous or Black immigrants. Rather universalizing white supremacy as the central theme from which everyone else must be ‘accommodated’ reaffirms the white washing of a settler colonial nation. Himani Bannerji, in Geography Lessons, part of a collection of essays called The Dark Side of the Nation, theorizes
Canada and Canadian society as a colonial state, one that is defined and structured around ‘whiteness,’ while silencing and ‘othering’ the space non-whites occupy:

‘Canada’ then cannot be taken as a given. It is obviously a construction, a set of representations, embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations. These communities were themselves constructed in agreement with certain ideas regarding skin color, history, language (English/French) and other cultural signifiers—all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category “white”. A ‘Canada’ constructed on this basis contains certain notions of nation, state, formation, and economy. Europeanness as “whiteness” thus translates into ‘Canada’ and provides it with its “imagined community”. (2000: 64)

So then, what connects Canadians is the discourse of colonialism defined under the category of “whites” on the one hand, and the ‘non-white’ or as Bannerji calls them “visible minorities,” on the other. It is during such reflective thought process that I began to develop research inquiries about Positionality, reflexivity and the experiences of Black women; one that reflect the realities of the unsung sheroes of the Somali community—Somali women activists. This in turn provided me as a researcher, the opportunity to develop an alternative conceptualization about the positionality of Black women in Canada, which centers the agency and subjectivity of Somali women activists, often overlooked when speaking about Black Canadian women leadership and advocacy in education and public institutions. For instance, Black feminists and anti-colonial work have been crucial in deconstructing and decentralizing the ways we understand particular work of knowledge, one that often obscures the material investment white colonial and historians have made in their omission of non-white writings and political thought process (Bannerji, 2000; Bhabha, 1998; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978; Young, 1990).
Morrison (1992) in “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,” brilliantly critiques classic literary scripts by looking at what's placed at the center of the American literary imagination: the white hero and how much of the construction of the virtues of the American hero requires a subservient non-white other (Kindle: 17). The author politicizes the accepted mythology of the American ‘white’ hero, (and in the interest of this thesis, the Canadian ‘white pioneer’) which is presented by explicitly and implicitly including the assumed, albeit silenced ‘Other’ in the writing. Here the materiality of Africa and the African subject is purposefully diminished, where the concept of inequity and power of white over Black heavily influences the way that whites imagine their roles in the world, and that imagination is reflected in the knowledge produced, the history told and the literature written about America and Canada. Hence, the theoretical knowledge about African diaspora is constantly pushed to the margin, forcing Black Canadian activists and educators to both mobilize to define educational models and visualize the hidden histories. Therefore, when highlighting the history of Black women activism in Canada, it is important that we acknowledge the multiplicity of experiences and voices within such a large body of work, which aught to include Somali women activists, as one of the largest non-English speaking Black Muslim immigrants in North America, who are comparatively to other Black communities, a recent African diaspora.

Applying anti-colonial frameworks and Black feminist theory in my research allows me to theorize the activism of Somali women and document my understanding of their work within and outside of the community. Moreover, anti-colonialism and Intersectionality
are relevant to the Somali community as a method to analyze FGSCWA lived experiences, including how they employ collective healing and coming to terms with the brutalities of civil war, displacement, migration, systematic white supremacy, anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia.

3.3 Data Collection

Two principal methods – semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis were used to advance the perspectives, knowledge and lived experiences of FGSCWA and the different sites from which they contest anti-Blackness, misogynoir and Islamaphobia. Narrative method, life history approach was selected for this thesis. The rational for choosing this particular methodology was for both practical and theoretical reasons and it’s described in detail below.

3.3.1 Life History Approach

This thesis utilizes the life history qualitative method based on a semi-structured interviews that examines the lived experiences of eight first generation Somali Canadian women activists. After searching through various qualitative methodologies, I felt that life history approach would offer the best analytic and interpretative aspects in regard to FGSCWA. The life history approach allows researchers to listen to participants tell stories about their lived experiences, allowing the researcher to gain richer understanding of human behaviour (Atkinson, 1998). Atkinson defines life history as:
The story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants other to know of it, usually as a result of guided interview by another (Atkinson, 1998: 8).

The term ‘life history’ method in this thesis refers to the collection and interpretation of personal histories or oral testimonies, collected during an interview process, for the purpose of understanding “the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future” (Roberts, 2002: 1). The texts reviewed here, while in no way exhaustive, aim to explore the life history method in so far as it narrates the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women, their decision-making processes and the correlation between their activism, and to hopefully identify strategies and tools that are available to researchers that employ this unique qualitative methodology.

In the past three decades, life history research – the collection and interpretation of personal histories in the social sciences, became a method of choice for many researchers (Roberts 2002). The popularity of this particular approach suggests an increasing reluctance on the part of many researchers in the social science to apply statistical inference from quantitative studies, in particular survey-based studies. Some researchers have claimed the popularity of life history research reflects a shift from objectivity, one that privileges subjectivity and Positionality (Riessman, 2001); while others argue life history provides valuable source of data that enable researchers to explore the life course and to examine the relationships between cause and effect, and agency and structure (Ojermark, 2007: 2). This renewed interest in individual thoughts and processes reflects a
wider shift, and is associated with post-modernism (Paerregaard, 1998). Moreover, this shift, and the surge of interest in the life history method in social sciences has been attributed to a number of factors: A rejection of positivism – which is the idea that social sciences can only uncover empirical reality/truth through standardized methodologies; A growing interest in the life course; an increased concern with lived experience and how to best reveal it; And a rise in the popularity of qualitative research and disillusionment with static approaches to data collection (Roberts, 2002: 4-6).

Life history research, which has been historically utilized by sociologist, is presently used widely by range of disciplines such as feminist studies, literature, psychology, and history and cultural studies. Hence, I felt this particular methodology was uniquely suited to my research since it increasingly being utilized in a number of substantive areas, such as migration, family dynamics, immigrant experiences, social change and education, including but not limited to research method and political action on behalf of vulnerable groups (Ojermark, 2007; Slim and Thompson, 1993). By utilizing life history narrative, in this case the perspectives and lived experiences of FGSCWA, I was provided the opportunity despite my research focus on a small group of informed participants, to uncover a more holistic data analysis than what can be inferred by observation alone, or by using quantitative methodological tools, such as statistical survey. In addition, life history is relational and using such data to inform reader’s understanding about the Somali community in Canada, in particular exploring the nature of Somali women activism and the different sites from which they contest systematic racism and societal marginalization provides a more nuanced and complex findings. These interviews also
fostered the space for the participants to not only discuss themselves, and their lived experiences, but also reflect on the social, economic, and political spaces that they inhabit within the Somali community and mainstream society. This in turn enables the interviewee to communicate how systematic barriers and societal structure right along with agency intersect to produce the circumstances of their activism.

Lastly, by applying life history method, it allowed me to capture processes of intergenerational change between the eight Somali women activists I interviewed for my thesis. Narrating their stories enabled me to map each participant’s trajectory towards activism and the contributing factors that maintains it. Furthermore, using life history approach illuminates participants’ knowledge about activism and social justice work, which generates findings that can stimulate new areas of research. Haglund (2004) asserts that life history methods can help connect past experiences to present day behaviours, affirming the suitability of this method to this research—which seeks to retrospectively link first generation Somali women experiences with their activism. As well, Haglund reminds us that life history methods are grounded in the “recognition of the agency of each individual and the essential role of context in the living of a life” (p. 1309) again rendering them well suited to this research, which is similarly grounded in its continual recognition of participants’ agency. Throughout these interviews, I attempted to conceive of participants “as narrators and interview data as stories” (Sandelowski, 1991: 165) in order to help facilitate participants’ reminiscence.
3.3.2 Individual Interviews

The research interviews are modeled after a life history approach, which according to Creswell (2013) is well suited to research intended to yield “experiences that might shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (p. 70). This section will provide an overview background of the research participants and why I believe this particular qualitative method of questions were best suited for this thesis.

Recruitment

Shortly after my ethic review application was approved, I begin the recruitment process by circulating an introductory email (see Appendix C) to adult Somali women identified through my professional networks. After an initial email exchange, two Somali women trusted in the community (called “the gatekeeper,” by Creswell and others) connected me with potential activists that I can speak with and possibly interview for my research. I also directly identified potential research participants, who consented to be interviewed as long as their anonymity was guaranteed. All participants were provided with letter of informed consent prior to beginning the interview (see Appendix A – Informed Consent), and also agreed to the session being audio-taped. Each session lasted approximately two hours. These interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient for the participants, were most preferred to meet with me after work hours at OISE, between the months of May- June 2015. My objective as the researcher of this thesis was to have open-ended conversational style individual interviews, allowing the participants to speak
freely about their thoughts on various subjects pertaining to their activism. In order to utilize the life history approach, I conducted two-hour in-depth semi-structured interview with eight first generation Somali Canadian women activists. The interview questions (see Appendix B) were a framework from which to spark conversation as opposed to a rigid questionnaire. Once transcription and preliminary data analysis was complete, I eventually disseminate a 4-5 pages ‘white paper’ briefly summarizing my early findings to all interested research participants, inviting them to provide written feedback on my initial conclusions, implementing their feedback into my ultimate analysis and discussion.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews, often called ‘a conversation with a purpose,’ providing the opportunity to generate rich data and gain insight into participants perception and values (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Banfield, 2004; Cohen et al., 2007). Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that helps identify the areas to be explored, while allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Longhurst, 2009: 580-584). The interview format for this thesis, which was an open-ended questions provided participants with some guidance on what to talk about, which many found helpful. The flexibility of this approach, particularly compared to structured interviews, allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the researcher (Barriball and While, 1994; Galetta, 2013).
Before the interview began, I presented each participant’s an OISE confidentiality agreement letter to review and sign at their leisure that included detailed information about my research, type of questions I will be asking, including my supervisor and ethic review contacts. At the end of each interview, a copy of the signed letter was provided to participants for keepsake. Moreover, I conducted all of the interviews, but one in the thesis room at OISE, on the 7th floor, after work hours. The thesis room was organized in a classroom setting, all the tables and chairs rounded in a circle, my interviewee sat nearby, facing me, maintaining eye contact throughout the two hour interview. I used a tape recorder as my primary source of data gathering during each interview, accompanied with rough field notes. At the conclusion of each interview, I wrote a brief synopsis, addressing possible themes that emerged, questions to address in follow up interviews, and possible applications of the information to my narrative interview model. In addition to the synopsis, I transcribed the tapes and reviewed my notes in preparation for sharing with each interviewee their transcribed interview, to provide feedback and confirm its accuracy.

Furthermore, I divided my questions into three categories within the span of two-hour in-depth interviews: Background on participants, perspectives on the challenges facing Somali women in Canada and the factors that led to participants’ activism and advocacy. For each individual interview, I reviewed the transcripts at least three times. The first time that I read the transcripts, I checked for word accuracy and typographical errors. Then, I reread the transcripts looking for emerging general themes and statements that could be used for memos and coding. Finally, at the conclusion of the interview process, I
read the transcripts ones more and made any changes based on the interviewee feedbacks reflecting a more holistic perspectives about participant’s activism and the interview process as a whole. Reviewing the transcriptions immediately after each interview was helpful for numerous reasons. First, this process helped me organize my data and guided me during the next interview sessions with other participants. Also, the transcription process helped me discover emerging themes about FGSCWA, and gave me the opportunity to further explore deeper aspects of the participant’s life that did not develop during the interview sessions.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis of this thesis is theoretically oriented qualitative study; one where Madison (2005) calls a critical point of view (such as anti-colonial discourse or Black feminist theory) intended to develop an interpretive framework (Creswell, 2013: 181-82). In particular, narrative approach was selected for interpreting, analyzing and ultimately coding the data extrapolated from the interviews conducted with eight Somali Canadian women activists. The data collected in a narrative study, specifically life history is ultimately about story telling, one that “needs to be analyzed for the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events and turning points or epiphanies” (Creswell, 2013: 189). Moreover, the data collected from both the semi-structured interviews and the relevant documents were subjected to ‘thematic analysis,’ which is widely used method in narrative approach for “identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77-101). Riessman (2008) suggests a typology of four analytic
strategies that reflect diversity in composing stories (Creswell, 2013: 192). Thematic analysis is such strategy, where the researcher analyzes “what” is spoken or written during data collection (Creswell, ibid). Braun and Clarke have argued that despite thematic analysis being frequently used as method of analysis in qualitative research, it is rarely acknowledged as such:

Thematic analysis can be seen as a very poorly ‘branded’ method, in that it does not appear to exist as a ‘named’ analysis in the same way other methods do (e.g., narrative analysis, grounded theory). In this sense, it is often not explicitly claimed as the method of analysis, when, in actuality, we argue that a lot of analysis is essentially thematic – but is either claimed as something else (such as discourse analysis, or even content analysis) or not identified as any particular method at all – for example, data were ‘subjected to qualitative analysis for commonly recurring themes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79-80)

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide some practical steps to follow throughout the process of implementing thematic analysis in data collection, but also caution that such process should be seen as more “recursive” than “linear”, and that the researcher should be free to move back and forth throughout the different stages of analysis as needed (p 86).

Similarly, writing is considered central to the analysis, starting at phase one with the tentative drafting of ideas or coding schemes and aught to continue through to the completion of the finished product (p. 86).

Based on the literary guidance of various qualitative research experts, including the feedback provided by my thesis committee, all my interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim from these tape recordings. Close attention was given to identifying speakers, unraveling what was often overlapping speech, while taking into consideration the personality dynamics of the participants, including their level of engagement with the
Somali community and the nature of their activism. I also observed and recorded both verbal and non-verbal cues, such as the use of humour, laughter, Somali simile/metaphor and silence. I alone conducted the transcriptions and found it to be, an interpretive act whereby connections and meanings began to form as I intimately engaged with the data (Bird, 2005: 226-248). Following this practical but effective transcription exercise produced a detailed accurate record of what was said, which is an integral part of the qualitative research process.

Furthermore, prior to coding, all documents and final transcripts were read in their entirety to further familiarize myself with the data. Next, I began to manually code the data by assigning single words to represent significant phrases, paragraph or ideas in the text – I scribbled on the right hand margins of both the transcripts and documents, while simultaneously ‘memoing’ critical points of connection to the left side of the printed papers. I also utilized a qualitative computer program named ATLAS.ti to further analyze the data and identify emerging themes from the literature and transcribed interviews. After this initial coding, colour-coded sub-sections were extracted from the text and put together under preliminary themes. These themes extracted from the data were linked together to explain some phenomena emerging out of the data set, which continued to be revised and refined, until all relevant coded data were cemented around thematic map that made sense within the context of the research questions and purpose.
3.5 Ethics

This thesis received ethics approval from the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) through OISE – Leadership, Higher Learning and Adult Education department. All potential participants were Somali women activists, highly engaged in their community and ‘mainstream’ society from various professional background ranging from mental health, teaching, non-profit to photography and banking. Although the risks associated with this research was minimal, participants were assured they can withdraw at any time and need not answer any questions they are uncomfortable with or might trigger any form of trauma. As a principled investigator, I was sensitive to the privilege that I have as a researcher coming from University of Toronto/OISE. Through out the interview process, I continued to be sensitive and strived to reinforce these sentiments to the participants. Finally, all interviews were voluntary and took place outside of participants’ work hours on a neutral space of their choosing. Further, participants were not judged or evaluated and at no time were they at risk of harm. As such, I informed all eight participants that no value judgments would be placed on their responses to interview questions. Additionally, all participants’ identifiable information were anonymized and retained in a secure location.

In addition, I ensured participants did not experience or face the potential of physical, psychological, social and legal risks. Through out the research process, I was cognizant that as activists, they might be concerned over the privacy and confidentiality of their particular activism. Continuously, I reminded all participants that they can withdraw from
this research at any time and need not answer any questions they are uncomfortable to minimize these risks. Moreover, I consistently informed participants that they are under no obligation to answer a question that might emotionally trigger experience they do not want to speak about, and they will be given the option to proceed to the next set of questions. As such, participants’ names will not be used in any reports, publications, or presentations resulting from this study, unless they indicate that they prefer to retain their true identities (see “Consent Process” and “Confidentiality” sections for further detail). The default practice was to assign identity codes to participants in interview transcripts in order to ensure their confidentiality. Participants were reminded before and during the interviews to use their pseudonyms at all times.

3.7 Participants Profile: First Generation Somali Canadian Women Activists

All of the eight Somali women interviewed for this thesis are in many ways trailblazers, addressing critical issues within the community, while simultaneously challenging racism and Islamaphobia in Canada. One participants is in her late 20s, two of them are in their 30s, while the rest are in their 40s and 50s. Seven of the women I interviewed had their master’s degree in various field, but mostly in the public health and social services, while others had degrees in business and sciences. All but one had completed their undergraduate degree. Names given to participants are pseudonyms to protect their privacy, in accordance with the confidentiality agreement prior to interviewing them. Some of the Somali women activists I interviewed in the research wanted to disclose information about their activism during the interview that might identify them, while others wanted
complete anonymity. All the interviews were conducted in English, but there are few Somali words expressed by the participants while sharing their stories and perspectives. All the women speak more than one language, which includes: Arabic, English, Somali, Swahili, German and Italian.

I wanted to disclose that I am very cognisant of the fact that first generation Somali Canadian women activists in this research hold a place of privilege within the Somali community, because of the virtue of their education and ability to navigate a racist and Islamophobic system that marginalizes the Somali community. Some might even argue they are not a representative of the larger Somali community in Canada and among first generation Somali Canadian women activists due to class, but having a post-graduate degree and the ability to access resources within mainstream institutions does not place them outside of the Somali community on the virtue of education, class and income, at least according to the findings of my research. The following chapters will demonstrate first and second generations Somali Canadian women and men still experience socio-economic marginalization, despite their academic accomplishments.

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Activism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afgoye</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Master in Agriculture</td>
<td>Education/Policing/Criminal Justice System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosaaso</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Master of Finance</td>
<td>Somali Family/Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burco</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Bachelor of Finance / MSW</td>
<td>Education / Islamophobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baidabo</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Master of Finance/ Social</td>
<td>Mental Health / Family Court</td>
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1. Afgoye is a fifty-nine years old Somali woman who immigrated to Canada with her family after the collapse of the Somali government in the early 1990s. She is well known in the Somali community in Toronto and has been a strong advocate for parents and youth in the past twenty years. In fact, I was a tutor and a mentor for Somali children in the first afterschool homework club Afgoye organized for the Somali community in Dixon, in 1993, when I was in middle school. During my interview with her, I found out that Afgoye was a student activist and an educator in Somalia:

   My activism did not start and end in Canada. I was active back home in Somalia; I was active in high school. In high school, I remember your uncle was my principle. They were trying to find out a chair for the school and I became the chair of the school, this was some of the earliest task I took upon.

When the Somali language was officially written in 1973, Afgoye was one of the first students to teach women in rural Somalia how to read and write. She also spoke about the knowledge she gained from these nomadic communities:

   When Somali language was written and I was a teacher there, to teach the nomads how to write and read in Somali language, I found out the very interesting life of the nomads, the
way they heal their diseases. The trees and the herbs they use, that’s why I told my friends to have a diary where we write down what to do, if a snake bites you, we do what the nomads does.

Afgoye was educated in Germany and she lived there with her husband and children for thirteen years before returning back to East Africa and then immigrating to Canada during the Somali civil war:

So my activism really started early back home and then never stopped. I came to Germany, I went to university there and we had the African Student organization and I became the president and continued and never stopped. You know, my husband teases me and says even after you die and Allah brings you to heaven, it won’t take two weeks until you say: Oh, you know, we have to reorganize this.

In respect to her activism in Toronto, Afgoye spoke about the shift that occurred in the past twenty years, where she primarily focuses on addressing the barriers facing Somali youth, such as high unemployment rate and the gun violence experienced by second generation Somali boys. She was empathetic about her vision for the youth in Canada, one where the success of the Somali community should not be limited to few families. Afgoye emphasized the importance of rallying around systematic change and moving beyond reactive models in the interest of present and future generations. Her focus is about changing the mindset of the Somali community about effective ways to engage with governmental institutions to better serve their needs:

Originally when I came here first, when I was forty-something, I was just about preventing and reacting to issues that came up, like do homework club, sessions for parents to understand the language of the report card and what the teachers are telling them, take kids out to summer camps, to give the kids a break during the summer. So, it was just immediate services that I was very concerned about for families to get it. Now, after twenty years, I realized that it’s not enough. We really need to change the system. So, that’s where I am focusing now, systematic change and mindset change in our community.
2. Bosaaso is among the last generation of Somali women who benefited from the military regime's academic scholarship program in overseas countries, which increased women’s participation in public and private industries. The military dictatorship of Siyad Bare established an educational funding program in the 1970s, which for the first time allowed Somali women to travel and acquire higher education around the globe (Abdinoor, 2007). These opportunities ended with the collapse of Bare government and the break out of the civil war in 1991. She briefly spoke to me about her experience living in the United States as an international student and what led to her claiming refugee status in Canada in 1991:

My first degree was Economics, I graduated in Somalia then I had my second degree in Economic Development because I was working with the Minister of Planning and Development. When I came to do my Masters degree in the United States it was with scholarship. I was working before I got the scholarship, worked for a long time in Somalia and then I came as a government-sponsored person. I lived in the United States for 3 years doing my Master’s degree. I was about to finish my Masters then the Somali civil war broke, then I didn’t have a country to go back to, I never planned to live outside of Somalia, that was my plan to change something in my own culture, in my own country, with my own people.

Bosaaso was in the United States at the time with J-Visa, which prevented her from claiming refugee status and since Somalia was meddled in a civil war, she decided to come to Canada with her three children as a refugee claimant:

When I inquired about staying in the United State, they told me J-Visa is a government visa. So J-visa you cannot apply for refugee, you have to get out of the country to get in. There was no way I can get out of the country and get in without a visa, so the best thing was that to come to Canada.

Bosaaso activism in Canada was also a continuation from Somalia, albeit different. Her activism in Somalia was about gender equity and providing shelter and escape plan for
Somali women experiencing domestic violence in urban dwelling. Bosaaso spoke about how her childhood and her mother’s commitment to educating her extended relatives inspired her to always treat people fairly:

We were well off family back home and my mom used to bring her relatives from rural areas and educate them. So, so many people lived in our house, my brothers and sisters and also so many relatives. So we grew up in a communal household and my mom used to be fair to everybody, her own children and other children. We did not grow up that I am better than my cousin who came from rural area.

Bosaaso shared with me the story of assisting a battered woman to return to her family, which was her first activist role as an adult. This particular incident demonstrated the failure of cultural negotiation, often led by men, which does not consider the welfare of the women in abusive marriages:

When I graduated from high school, I was placed to get a job in the Ministry. After a while, they promoted me into a position. So, one day I was at work and one of my co-workers came in with bruises and I took her to the tearoom and said, [what happened?]

And she said, my husband hits me all the time. Two times I called people, you know for negotiation, we have that in our culture to negotiate. Two times they came and they said you have children with him, you cannot leave and they said to him not to hit her and all that, but he still does it.

And [I said what would you like?] You know we are divided into tribal thing. So, she said if I had money and go to my tribal place, he would not dare to hit me.

Bosaaso continued to tell me how she rallied her female colleagues to raise enough money to purchase a bus ticket for the woman and her children to return to her family outside of the city. Helping her colleague escape an untenable marriage sparked the idea of setting up a committee to assist women who wanted to escape their abusive husbands:
So, I didn’t stop there and I said I need another 2 little girls. So, we got another two womyn who are working and we made a committee that helps womyn who want to run away from their abusive husbands.

Bosaaso spoke about the fact that lack of government support and non-existent shelters for battered women in Somalia forced her to come up with the only viable solution outside of family and clan allegiances. She also spoke about her background as a basketball coach in Mogadishu and her role in setting up disability program. Bosaaso is also one of the few Somali women activists that have established well-known program in Toronto, for Somali mothers and youth, addressing educational barriers and the school to prison pipeline for Black youth. She is one of the co-founder of Positive Change intended to support Somali youth who encounter the criminal justice system.

3. Burco is a Somali woman activist born and raised in Kenya. Her background is significant in this research because I wanted to include first generation Somali women activists from diverse regional background, to better reflect the Somali community in Canada. Burco has lived in Ontario for twenty-four years and did not come here as a refugee since she was not born in Somalia and held a different passport. According to Burco, one day her mother decided she will be moving to Canada with her family:

    I think I was 19 or 18 and I woke up one morning and my mom said, you know what, you are going to Canada with the rest of the family.

Burco considers her experience living in Canada, completing her high school and university degree to be a positive one. Since English is the official language in her home country in Kenya, Burco did not encounter language barriers or struggle much
academically, hence her first career choice was in finance before she began to engage in activism:

I think because of my age and because I came from a background where we learned in English, it was fairly easy for me to settle. Fairly easy compared to a lot of people, because I came in I believe February 1990 and by April I was working. Towards the end of that year, I was going to part time school to upgrade and then within a year I was in university.

According to Burco, her activism was accidental and came about as she became further entrenched in Canadian society. She stated that her activism shaped her personality because growing up, she never saw herself as an activist:

I did not choice to be an activist, I was pushed into it because I spoke English well and I articulated the issues better than many of my family members who perhaps did not speak the language. I did not think I could be an activist, because I was shy growing up, I was a reader, I was an introvert, so I was pushed into it and that dramatically changed I guess my characteristic.

She expressed similar sentiments to the other Somali women I interviewed for this research that their activism was born out of necessity because they could not afford to stand by while the Somali community was being publically marginalized and their youth facing multiple barriers.

I think as I grew older and I became entrenched in the Canadian society, I realized that there was a lot of racism in Canada. I realized that there was barriers to employment, good viable, meaningful employment, even if you had several degree, I think if you are a woman, a Muslim, if you happen to be somebody who has an accent, it was much harder to kinda progress the way you would want to.

Burco has been a visible presence in the Somali, Black and Muslim community in Ontario in the past sixteen years. She was one of the first Somali women to arrange sports
and swimming sessions for ‘Muslim girls only’ in her riding, she was also a strong advocate for Black youth experiencing racial profiling in public schools.

I have been instrumental in doing some amazing youth programs, integrating our Islamic culture, advocating for Muslim swimming programs for women and girls and we’ve done so well and we demanded that some of the Mississauga life guards be trained, so that they understand our values and respect our privacy.

Burco wanted to emphasize that her activism and that of other Somali women are rarely limited to one field or one type because they will always respond to the need of their families and current issues facing the Somali community.

4. Baidabo is 47 years old Somali born social worker who lived in Canada for over twenty years after immigrating from the United States:

I was living in the State, where I did my first degree. I was actually trying to get the American permanent residence and I was denied and given deportation notice. So, as a result of that I came to Canada and it was such a blessing come to think of it.

Baidabo settlement experience in Canada echoes that of the majority of the Somali community, including some of the other participants in this research. She eloquently spoke about the lack of employment she faced in the early years in Canada, despite having a degree and work experience from the United States:

I found it really difficult in the beginning simply because my expectation was high and its always about our expectation and the reality and how they collide. Coming from the State and having a bachelor degree, and having experience working in a Bank and working for an immigration lawyer, having 5 years of work, no close to three years of work, I assumed that I would be better off than people who came directly from Somalia and did not have the same experience. And it proved to be that racism was alive and well.
Baidabo is in the mental health field, focusing on Somali mothers facing the risk of losing their children to Children Aids Society and or dealing with family court. She is among first generation Somali Canadian women activist to directly challenge the cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, one where Somali women, men and children often live in isolation and do not seek help. In addition, the work Baidabo does with Somali mothers often includes more than accessing mental health resources, because these families are also experiencing anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia from service providers and they often do not know how to navigate the system:

I work with Somali women who happen to have mental illness and they face huge stigma not only in the outside community, but also the internal community. The stigma of having a mental illness in Somali culture is huge; so my role is to navigate the mental health system, assist my clients navigate mental health system. The education system, the hospital system, the system within which they have to get financial support, the school system for example for their children.

Baidabo indicated that she gives close attention to what she called the ‘determinacy of health,’ for the Somali women she works with, whether they have formal education or not, its about supporting them in navigating these systematic barriers that often isolates and evicts women of color. She sees her role as an advocate, to provide the resources and tool for Somali mothers who are dealing with multiple issues beyond their mental health concerns:

The biggest piece is with Children’s Aid, the court, because when someone has mental illness and they are the sole support for 7 or 8 children, and they become ill and no one else is around, the children go into the system. So that becomes the ballgame, it’s a whole complex situation with the court system, with CAS, with lawyers. So, that in of itself is a huge piece of the work that I do and within that is the biggest advocacy.
Similar to the other seven first generation Somali women activists I interviewed, Baidabo provided critical perspectives about the internal disfranchisement within the Somali community and external anti Black racism and Islamaphobia experienced by them. She spoke about the economic burden facing Somali mothers who are often the sole care provider of seven-eight children, facing poverty, lack of adequate employment, absentee fathers, illiteracy in combination with systematic racism and marginalization:

I think the biggest challenge that all Somalis face is the fragmentation of our community and as long the Somali community is fragmented, it will be very difficult to have one person or one agency deal with one issue at a time. Issues like racism and discrimination within the school system, within mental health and justice system where justice is not equal for all.

Baidabo considered all of these issues interconnected, that they are not separate from what is going on in our society, they are not separate from the government housing that majority of Somalis are living in; neither is it separate from the fact that majority of Somalis live under poverty line, and that Somali children do not see visible mentors they can aspire to in the media and public institutions.

5. Berbera is a 40 years old Somali woman with double masters in Social Work and Social Justice and Diversity, and lived in Canada for over twenty years. She also immigrated to Canada with her family outside of Somalia. After the collapse of the Somali government in 1991, some Middle Eastern governments deported Somali families with legal residence, hence her family were the first wave of Somali refugees seeking asylum in Canada:
Because at the time Somalia was going through civil war and even though we were not living there, the United Arab Emirates were revoking people’s residency as a result, we were displaced. Then we had a choice of coming here, we had a lot of relatives in Canada, so we arrived in Canada.

Berbera spoke about her experience growing up in Canada and how at the time she was one of few Somali children in the country, which shaped her experience since few people knew who and what Somalis were. Berbera’s experience as a Somali woman growing up in a predominated non-Somali environment was overall positive and she grew up strongly identifying with her Blackness:

When I arrived here there was not a lot of Somalis, so I was associated with the Black community. Meaning at that time they referred me as someone who came from the Caribbean, because of the texture of my hair, my facial features, so I was labeled, or identified me as ‘coolie’ and not Somali.

She spoke about the shift that occurred in high school, when more Somali families started arriving in Canada, where she experienced identity crisis and cultural shock because she did not fit in with the status quo of Somali refuges that came directly from Somalia. Having her identity shift from being a Caribbean to Somali seemed to have impacted her high school experience, where she felt confused and powerless:

When Somali people started to slowly enter Canada, what happened was, I then went from a category of being a Caribbean to now Somali, but I did not fit in the status quo of the Somali refuges that came directly from Somalia because I have never seen Somalia and did not know the Somali language. There was that not understanding who I was, my identity got lost in the process.

Berbera also talked about the alienation many Somali youth experience growing up in Canada, similar to her own, where parents are so busy working multiple jobs to sustain
their families, that they forget about the emotional and cultural piece that is needed to affirm ones identity and self confidence:

Our parents do not understand the emotion piece; they understand the livelihood piece. So, our needs are being met, our financial situation was good, our health was good. You know, eating habit was good, going to school, dropping you there, picking you up, but in term of helping you understand the system here, teaching you about the system, trying to protect you from the system here, no one understood.

Three of the first generation Somali women activists raised in Canada has also expressed these sentiments, which was a different generational perspective. Some of them have discussed the fact that their parents were also learning to navigate these systematic challenges and did not know how to help them. Berbera herself expressed the struggles her mother was facing while also maintaining a family and working for a living:

I spoke to my mom recently about it and she said, ‘how could I explain something to you that I don’t even understand,’ because at the time she was also new, we all came at the same time and she was also learning too, right. We were just thrown into a system that we did not understand.

Berbera worked in the mental health field for over ten years, for an ethno-racial mental health organization that helps racialized communities experiencing extreme marginalization. She considers activism as part of her everyday life, where she feels we ought to change harmful and oppressive elements happening in our society. Accordingly, Berbera regards activism a life long commitment of sharing ones knowledge and teaching clients and the Somali community the tools that enables them to help themselves:

My whole philosophy in life is that if I die and I have not contributed anything into this world that is positive, then my life was worth nothing. So, I work towards that and I believe that God gave me certain amount of times in life, to fulfill those things that I am
supposed to. I never give up, I don’t give up on my clients and I don’t give up on anybody.

Berbera attributes her interest in activism to her mother, who was one of the first Somali women to create Somali led agency in the early 1990s. Her whole family are politically engaged and have long fought for human rights and democratic principles in Somalia and abroad. When I asked her why did she choice to engage in activism, this was her response:

Because of hoyo, because I grew up with it very young, remember Siyad Bare? We went on a bus when we were just like kids; we went all the way to Ottawa to protest. I remember my brother M, he was 2 years old and we came home we kept on repeating to him, ‘dictatorship, no, democracy, yes,’ and we would confuse him, but he will still get the answer right.

Presently, Berbera’s focus is on capacity building within the Somali community and with her clients. She wants service providers, in the mental health field in particular to shift the funding and programming from reactive need-based measures, to capacity development of their clients, which would empower them to achieve independent living:

I think the more you succeed at achieving, the more you feel empowered as a person. The more you see people like you fighting for the same cause, the more you feel empowered, the more you associate with people like you, the more you feel like you are worth something. You continuing the fight knowing that there are people who are like you, even though there might not be that global change, all those little changes actually when they multiply, you feel the same sense of gain.

6. Hargeisa is a 34 years old Somali woman activist born in Somali and raised in the Middle East, where she moved to Canada with her family before completing high school:
I am a mother of one, I am a Somali woman, Black Muslim, visibly Muslim. I work in public health; I have an undergrad and a Master in public health. I have done a lot of things including project management for IBM, working in counselling and mental health, doing case management work. Community facilitation, program planning, youth work and so forth.

Hargeisa spoke about the contributing factors that led to her family moving to Canada, which were lack of educational opportunity for her beyond high school and the fact that United Arab Emirates does not provide citizenship status to individuals born and raised in the country:

We had a good life, my father was working, and I was coming close to finishing my school. Given that in the United Arab Emirates, there is no option of receiving citizenship, or at the time an option of going to University, unless you were a local. My family made the option of immigrating to Canada.

Hargeisa expressed that she was one of few Somalis that did not come to Canada as refugees. She pointed out that not all Somali Canadians had the same lived experiences; neither does the Somali community experience in the same degree systematic barriers and societal marginalization.

So, growing up in Dubai, I went to an American school, so the Canadian life style was not something I was necessarily impressed with. You know, it was a norm for me, so the first question I always heard was, so are you dealing with culture shock? I am a Somali, there was an assumption that was my experience. I had to continuously reiterate the fact that coming to Canada made us poor, because we paid out of pocket. We had to give up a lot of luxury that we had in Dubai and we were self-sponsored and we did not have the refugee experience.

Hargeisa was one of two Somali women activists that I interviewed who articulated the significant role education in combination with class and income play in the lived experiences of the Somali community. Here the degree to which Somali immigrants have
experienced visceral anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia will vary depending on their ability to effectively navigate the Canadian system and have access to financial support individually or through family:

If you are able to go to a private school, if you are able not worry about transportation, if you don’t feel safe in the neighbourhood that your parents, I will not say choose because a lot of time it’s not even a choice, if your parents are not worried about where the next meal will come from, or who will be talking down to them, or humiliating them in term of their ability to provide for their children, or being questioned by children aid’s society, a lot of those things.

Having introspective outlook beyond ones privileged life, while critically reflecting on the lived experiences of the Somali community was important to Hargeisa:

I haven’t had any major challenges in term of my schooling or my university, or ability to secure a well paying job, being able to speak up for myself and so on and so forth. But the reality is, the more I become aware of systematic issues of oppression, racism, sexism and Islamaphobia, I realize that my experience is not the norm and just because I have not faced those challenges on a personal level, it does not discount that these challenges exist. I was perhaps some of the few who were able to escape and go through the cracks, but the wall exist from the floor to the ceiling, it’s a huge wall that a lot of our community members are not able to go through, and it’s not credit to my ability.

Besides working in the public health field, Hargeisa is also the founder of Aspire to Lead, a professional networking group that brings first and second generation Somali Canadian youth together, to socialize and celebrate successes in the community. According to Hargeisa, Aspire to Lead created a much needed space for young Somali men and women to meet and celebrate each other’s achievement, but to also dispel the myth in the community that one cannot be a practicing Muslim and professionally successful:

There was a perception within the community that when somebody whether male or female went to school and studied and had a good job that means they were Western and they were distant from the religion, right. So, we wanted to showcase that you can have
the best of both world, and just because somebody visibly does not fit your definition, it
does not mean, they are less practicing or that they are less Somali. I continuously met
these amazing people, like how do we bring these two worlds together, that was basically
the birth of Aspire to Lead.

Celebrating Somali success stories in an environment that constantly erases your
Blackness and Muslim identity in the media and public sphere were significant to
Hargeisa’s advocacy within Aspire to Lead:

The people that kept on coming to us were young professionals, people who finished
school and doing great, but had nowhere to connect with. Every times we hosted
something, everybody would be like, I did not know we had this in our community, I
didn’t know we had so many great people, right. At a time, which we are still dealing
with, but it’s much better now, we didn’t really have things to celebrate our successes; we
did not have venues to showcase amazing men and women of Somali descendent who are
doing wonderful things, right. It’s almost like everybody felt they were silo, that they
were struggling on their own and had nothing to reflect on. No peers to feel good about,
right.

Representation matters to all marginalized communities, in particular the Somali
community, which are one of the largest and most visible Afro-Black Muslim diaspora in
Canada. Currently, Hargeisa’s focus is in advocacy, where she believes it’s important to
actively engage with Canadian institutions beyond protests and grassroots activism:

I have made a conscious decision over the past year to move myself from the role of an
activist to the role of an advocate. So, the difference being an activist someone who
operates and tries to break the system from the outside vs. an advocate as someone who is
willing to sit on the table across from people who completely hold different views, are
oppressive at times, but willing to engage in dialogue.

Hargeisa seeks to foster an environment where the Somali community are included in all
public institutions that impact them and their children’s future:
As we move into this era of we are here, I don’t need to be on the outside shouting at you, I am an equal, I will sit next to you and tell you why you are wrong and I will prove to you, why you are wrong as a colleague, not as someone who is operating from the outside of the system.

Hargeisa spoke about the importance of acknowledging that the Somali community have been here in the past thirty years and have achieved great strides, despite having experienced systematic anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia. She hopes to see the Somali community playing an active role in shaping what it means to be Canadian:

I want our youth and the next generation to shape what Canadian norms and values are. So I want our culture and our way of living to inform and become mainstream. Why not, like why does it need to be Eurocentric and why does it need to be Judo-Christian way of living, why can’t Islam be part of that equation? I want us to be relevant and I want us to be part of the equation.

7. Kismayo is a 30 years old social media activist and the first Somali woman activist I interviewed for my research. She is a woman in her own lane because her work entails breaking down cultural taboo about sexual abuse impacting Somali girls and boys. She is also a social media influencer and a role model among many Somali and Black youth activists in Toronto. Kismayo came to Canada when she was six years old with her family as refugee and her experience growing up in Toronto in the 1990s was one of anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia:

My Somali identity and I was othered all the time. Like spaces were violently white. I was the only Somali girl I was the only Black girl on top of being a Somali. I was the only Muslim girl. I had instance, where like children, like white children particularly would like try to choke me with my hijab, because they were trying to take it off of me and I refused for them to take it off of me.
Kismayo went to school in Toronto at a time where Dixon area was predominately white and there were not that many Somalis or students of color in her school, which led to an environment dominated by violent anti-Black racism:

Like, my siblings who are younger than me 11 and 6 years differences, they went to elementary, middle and high school during a time when there were a lot of colors. I’ve had situation where white teachers would call me nigger and I didn’t even know what that word meant. Like I didn’t know what that meant, so I went home and I asked my mom: What is nigger mean? And my mom didn’t even know, there was that language barrier.

Having such traumatic childhood experience in Toronto shaped Kismayo activism. For instance, witnessing her mother fight for her, despite the language barriers and challenge school administrators and teachers who wanted to marginalize her, was an inspiring example of Somali women activism:

I find that like my mom, my God, my champion. Diaspora mothers deserve all of the love, like I feel like crying thinking about it. Remember how earlier I said the school dismissed me as a stupid child? They actually tried to put me in Special Need class, and my mother, even though she didn’t understand, she knew, what they were doing was illegal because it is illegal and TDSB has to get confirmation from both parents, not just one, both parents have to agree that their child needs to be in special needs class. But they wanted to shut me in without my parents consent. So, my mom showed up to school one day and I remember they completely tried to invalidate her because of her language barriers. Like, she barely spoke enough and I remember thinking how embarrassed I was, but now I think about how powerful she was.

The isolation and marginalization Kismayo experienced resonated with her and the ways in which language barrier and accents influences how immigrants, in this case the Somali elders are treated:

To this day like, holly cow, my dad would order something and I would casually stand besides him and like the customer service rep would look at me, or worse give me the
change. Like what are you doing? And I get really annoyed because of the accent, they’re completely dismissed as unworthy to be acknowledged and it’s frustrating.

Kismayo activism was born out of a need to affirm her own sense of being while navigating the multiple challenges she faces as a Somali Black Muslim woman within the Somali community and in mainstream society:

I am an activist because I don’t know what else to be. I don’t know how else to navigate other than challenging stereotype, gender expectation, sexism, racism, and misogynoir particularly, like I cannot imagine not challenging these things.

Kismayo is someone who experienced violent anti-Black racism, Islamaphobia and sexual assault and as a result mental trauma, but she is more than a survivor. She believes her work is about establishing the spaces for present and future Somali generations to speak about rape culture, taboo topics masquerading as religious teaching, gender stereotypes and the multiplicity of Black identity within the context of the Somali community in Canada:

I am part of a generation of young, Somali women who are refusing to let gender stereotype prevents us from speaking out. There is injustice in the community, like yes there is injustice on a global scale, but if my home is broken, how can I help another? I wanna normalize a lot of taboo topics, like sexual violence because I am a survivor, mental health cuz I have a lot of mental illness, and also I advocate for those Somalis that no one wants to acknowledge, like those in the queer community, who are dismissed and invalidated, which is horrific as hell.

Most of the work Kismayo engages in on social media centres on self-care and well being of young Somali girls. She believes in fostering a space that is free of misogyny, anti-
Black racism and Islamaphobia. Here Intersectionality matters when speaking about the lived experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women:
Most of what I talk about to me seems very basic, like hey did you love yourself today, hey you know, talking to me that way is very violent, I don’t appreciate it. Things like standing up for myself. I wanna normalize talking about these vulnerabilities because they shouldn’t be silenced. They shouldn’t be tugged away in a little corner, to be left alone. Not only do Black lives matter for us, but our womanhood matters to us. And so does us being Muslims matter, some of us don’t have the luxury to separate ourselves and just call ourselves Muslims. That’s why Intersectionality is so important.

Kismayo intends to break down toxic cultural norms within the Somali community, by cultivating an environment that protects victims of sexual violence, as supposed to catering to their abusers:

My community cater to and cultivate this like community of abusers being protected and sheltered, while the victims are like expected to support the abuser. And I am, no, I am not supporting the abuser. I totally understand that hurt people, hurt people, but I am not going to put an abuser over the victim, that’s not how it is.

She also acknowledges that her activism is a continuation of the inspiring work Somali elders have achieved and still do all over Somali territories. Somali women have always been ahead of their time in challenging harmful cultural practices in the interest of Somali women and children:

I feel like going back to the narrative of the Somali powerful ‘Arawelo.’ We are so powerful, we are healing the nation, and I just wish the men would actually listen. Omg, look at Fartuun, Fartuun in particular she created with the organization, umm, the Ilmaan Peace…I forgot its along line of a title, but they created the first rape crisis in Somalia. That’s incredible in a State that does not even acknowledge the conversation for it to even exist. Somali women, like we have Hawa Abdi, we have Fartuum Aiden, we have freaking Edna, like these people are here for us, always having our backs, always making sure, building us.

Since most of Kismayo activism centres around social media, she developed hashtag conversations in the past five years that tackle cultural shaming, sexual violence, self-care, and harmful taboo surrounding mental health:
I created first Somali ‘hishood,’ which was about rape culture, just like misogyny, patriarchy and like, God I forgot all of the names, there were so many of them. ‘Haaqa qadan,’ was about mental health, before all of these, I started ‘Dear Abaayo,’ a love letter to all my sisters, all my Arawelos all over the world; it doesn’t matter where you are. Please engage in love notes, in 140 characters of course.

Despite receiving a lot of social media backlash and death threats, she refuses to be silenced and continues her activism:

I get like death threat, you know what, okay fine, I am going to get backlash, I expect it, but they never get the luxury of saying they have silenced Kismayo. So, I am part of a group on twitter that we came together, as a support, to just have each other’s back. So, whenever we have a hashtag conversation, we all mobilize each other, how can we help you, what can we do, right?

As a result of her social media activism and persistence in engaging with the community and the public over topics that are life and death for many young girls and women around the globe, Kismayo developed a support system with other Somali and non-Somali women over twitter and Facebook:

Because of my hashtag conversations, a lot of activists were developed and a lot of powerful ass women showed up and like started sharing their stories. And I noticed that the more hashtag I now, umm, I took a break obviously for self care, but the more hashtags I create now, there is more solidarity among the sisters, where we literally are like anytime a guy tries to derail a conversation, umm, there is a lot of backlash from the women, where its like: no, you are not going to do this, this is not what you are going to do today and I am going to tell you why you are wrong.

Her activism on social media have fostered the space for other girls and women to share their stories without shame or threat of silence:

When people see me doing these things and talking about these things with no shame, because I refuse for shame to be a reason to be silenced. I can see the ripple, like the ripple is a tiny wave right now, its not like a huge wave, but I fully see it developing momentum. So, as a result, a lot of people have approached me and shared their stories.
Kismayo also collaborates with diaspora Somali women, including those who work and live in Somalia, by focusing on survivors of rape and sexual assault. This in turn enabled victim of sexual violence to join in the conversations and find a safe space to speak about their trauma:

The most magnificent thing about social media, it connects you to people that you wouldn’t physically be in the presence off. Did, you know the Fartun Aiden Rape Crisis Centre that I was telling you about? They love my work that we collaborated on May 28th, the mark of the day that I was made a survivor, like 13 years ago, wow its so long now. Umm, we made a hashtag together called, ‘hasheegin (don’t tell) and it was magnificent because that one, ‘Somali hishood,’ yes survivors spoke, but ‘hasheegin,’ was literally just for survivors, right, like I’ve had little girls somehow make twitter and follow me, just to have peace. And that gives me so much honor, because you can clearly see there is ripple, people are like okay, even guys who didn’t agree with me in the beginning are now in my messages saying: I am sorry I dismissed and invalidated these conversations, because I can now see.

Kismayo’s activism also includes humorous hashtags that targets misogynistic trolls on social media, many of her hashtags are cultural reference among Somali diaspora:

So, basically I made special nicknames, for my particularly Somali trolls who are very vicious and malicious. So, I call the man ‘Ashy Abdis.’ Ashy is like, when a person of color doesn’t lotion themselves, right? I try to match the first letter with the name letter, so ‘Ashy Abdis,’ two As, and because I’ve noticed a weird epidemic of women who were constantly supporting them, who were the quickest and loudest to come for me, I call them ‘Misogynistic Maryams.’

Kismayo’s vision and hope is to eliminate toxic elements from the Somali culture and eradicate the notion of shame and silence around taboo subjects. She considers her activism a necessary battle to endure so future generations do not have to struggle with cultural patriarchy that silences and shames them while protecting their abusers:

My whole mission is to eradicate this whole notion of silence; I want silence to never be an option for someone to never share their story. I am trying to remove that as an option, because no, silence is violence. I am in a lane by myself and I remember my friend Rema
even pointed that out, where she’s like; yo, you are literally engaging in a topic that nobody even wants to look at. It’s the dirtiest of the dirtiest, FGM receives more empathy because there is more sympathy for that, but sexual violence of my calibre, no one really gets, so we are breaking doors. I am doing all these things, so that the second and third, and so on and so forth can benefit from it, because they are so important to me, because they are going to continue my legacy.

8. Xamar at 27 years old is the youngest first generation Somali Canadian women activist I interviewed for my research. She will be considered 1.5 generation, which are those born in Somalia or elsewhere, but were raised in Canada. Xamar family are from Somaliland region and her father was among the Somalis who escaped Siyad Bare regime due to ethnic and regional prosecution:

I think for me, I know like before my dad left members of my family were being targeted by the government because I come from a tribe that the dictatorship at the time was antagonistic to. They were also part of a political movement that was trying to go against the dictator even before the war. My family felt particularly targeted and my dad had a gun put to his head, his life threatened and this was before the actual war became public and everybody knew it was a civil war.

Xamar’s father was among few Somalis who came to Canada in the 1970s and 80s for post-secondary education and managed to sponsor Xamar and her mother to join him in Canada during the Somali civil war in the 1990s.

My dad was already here for studies before the civil strive. So, we were in Ethiopia for a little bit, we didn’t settle and then resettle, it was just part of the transition. We were there for few months then came to Canada. So, Canada was probably where we intended because ‘abo’ was already here.

Xamar talked about the dynamics of her nomadic family who lived outside of urban dwelling and how without the break down of the Somali government and the eventual civil war, they would not have moved to Canada:
Both of my parents were like nomads and their life was in the desert, so they were not necessarily going to aspire to be urban. So, my mom tells me, if the war did not happen, we would probably continued to live the way we’ve lived for 1000s of years. So, like many Somali Canadians, we did not choice to come here. It was out of the reality of war, where my family was seeking refuge. We came here, so our lives could be spared.

Accordingly, Xamar’s childhood in Canada carries two sets of memories: one where growing up in Ottawa she felt included and supported, while in Toronto, she experienced a more restrictive upbringing. Here, she spoke about her education in private Islamic school in Ottawa versus Toronto, where the former held good memories for her and her siblings:

I have two sets of memories to be honest. We were in Ottawa from when I was three and a half till I was about 12 and I have very fond memories. I have memories of going to a lot of sports, after curricular sports. I went to a private school. I went to an Islamic school.

She further elaborated on her gendered experience living in Toronto, where unlike her Islamic schooling in Ottawa, she felt stifled by the more conservative treatments imposed on her and other young Muslim girls:

So, in Ottawa I felt free, I felt like a young girl, my parents let me express my athletic ability and the community was okay with that. But in Toronto, I have more restrained memories, not being able to access a lot of things, I didn’t really pursue sport much in middle school, I wasn’t able to pursue at all in high school. I went to Islamic school education for my whole secondary, except for that one-year in grade three. In the high school years, I felt as if though they expected me to be lady-like and it wasn’t lady-like to be in a soccer team competing with young men. I had good memories too, but in Toronto, for some reason I tend to bring up not being able to enjoy my childhood.
Xamar’s childhood upbringing and schooling in two different cities in Ontario influenced her, where it was less about settlement difficulties and more about navigating cultural boundaries in two different Muslim communities:

So, my experiences in Ottawa and even though I am much younger at this age, I felt they were much more fluid, they were much more gentle in allowing my family to settle. My dad told me that people and neighbours were very warm and would come over with cookies and muffins and say welcome to Canada. So, for me the settlement process was not very difficult and neither for my parents, they were landed immigrants so for them they have bits of their documentation and it went through a smooth process.

Xamar acknowledged that her settlement experience was not the norm within the community where most Somali refugees struggled to navigate systematic barriers, while fighting for legal recognition:

I know that is not necessarily the majority from what I hear and just from the work that I do now, listening to people experiences and that kind of legal limbo, where people had to demonstrate good behaviour and immigration officer had the complete discretion to pretty much land someone or not and the immigration amendments. So, I am aware of those things, but in my family, it wasn’t necessarily that way and my dad was very young when he came here as a student, so he was able to understand the system a bit more and he came before the influx. So, we had a much more smoother settlement process, my mother and I became Canadian citizens quite readily.

Despite having smooth sailing in term of her immigration journey into Canada, Xamar spoke about the racism that she and her mother experienced in Toronto. She talked about what it meant for her to be politically Black, constantly arming herself to fend off anti-Black racism in everyday interactions:

Quite interesting my experiences with racism happened in Toronto, but also in rural part of the province, up north. And I guess I expected it from up north, I shouldn’t like, I shouldn’t be a racialized person arming herself every day to deal with almost a society that reminds me that it did not intend to include me, it just happen to be because I am
here. So, I hate being an afterthought, I think racism is one of the challenges for my community and I think for us, it was a shock becoming Black, politically Black.

Xamar’s professional background is in youth advocacy, specifically working with racialized and marginalized youth. She currently works with Somali youth:

I think I am very privilege in the sense that I have a job that allows me engage in activism, I am a youth outreach worker and I am targeted to serve the Somali community directly. I have been doing this for two years now, and in that way I do everything in my mandate to serve young people the best way that I can, while trying to address some of the discussion that happened or need to happen. I am also an activist in my own time and space to get conversation that I might not be able to say in the hat that I wear as a worker, to actually stand against what our government continuously ignores like poverty.

Xamar touched on how under resourced and stressful youth advocacy work is, where government’s priorities are not about adequately funding and supporting racialized youth who live on the street, experience abuse at home or live with mental illness. She eloquently articulated that she often feels like a bandage for societal bullet-holes, where she is expected to suture the wounds of structural anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia, which has been detrimental to the Somali community:

I sometime feel like I am a bandage for bullet-holes, I feel very under-resource a lot of time and its purposeful. I need to serve the youth that come to me, but if they don’t have security, if they are living in an abusive situation, if they have mental health concern that is not being addressed, if there is racial aggression that’s not being addressed, I sometimes feel like they expect me to be the miracle worker and to be the face, here we have a Somali serving the Somalis. So I fight against that, I fight against them trying to tokenize who I am and the work that I do.

She is also spoken word artist and an advocate against police violence towards the Black community. Similar to Kismayo, Xamar also grew up in Dixon neighbourhood, where a large segment of the Somali community settled in the 1990s. It is in Dixon where Xamar
activism emerged, focusing on police carding, racial profiling that targets and criminalizes the Somali community:

So, I grew up in Dixon, which is why I was very interested in the Dixon raid, so that’s a good connection. The Dixon raid, I was very upset with it. I lost it with the police chief now, Mark Saunders; he was the deputy chief of special command when he raided Dixon, which is where I grew up when we came to Toronto. So, my activism sometimes can be very direct, arguing with the deputy chief now about how inappropriate his tactics were, I don’t know what kind of training they go through, but on a human level, I think it was unnecessary. I don’t know if you saw the report, but there were grandmothers who were detained, 96 years old was detained, so I was translating their stories, and I saw that as a form of activism. I went to the town hall meetings and they told their stories in such elegant and such dignity in Somali.

Xamar considers her activism a form of healing, where it started as a way to process and recover from a lived experiences mired by poverty, anti-Black racism, and Islamaphobia and family violence:

I grew up in poverty, I grew up with difficulty within my parents, I grew up with abuse, I grew up with a lot of things a child should not. I am not licking my wounds, I am not interested in victimhood anymore, there was a time where I did, there was a time where I felt like there was some sort of moral superiority in being a victim, I don’t believe that anymore. So, for me, it’s healing.

Similarly, Xamar's activism is very much connected to her Somali identity. She wants to challenge and shape the narratives about what it means to be a Somali, one that is neither monolithic nor stagnated:

My activism is connected to my Somali heritage, of course I look at issues around race, but I am also interested in my community, the Dixon community, kinda the strong hold of the Somali community, it doesn’t have to be, just the archetype of the Somali communities. I am also interested in controlling narratives, which is where my poetry comes from, which is to make sure the narrative that I want is out there about who I am and who my people are and invite more people to join in.
Chapter Four

This chapter offers a historical review of the Somali community immigration and settlement experiences in Canada by analyzing the findings of my interview with first generation Somali Canadian women activists. By critiquing the settlement experience of the Somali community, I will demonstrate the ways in which neoliberal multiculturalism has been used by the Canadian state to define, exploit and constrain the Somali community. This history is both racialized and gendered and has informed the lived experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women, which in turn led to their activism and advocacy. Despite these systematic barriers and societal stigma, Somali women have exhibited extraordinary strength and resilience in the face of overwhelming adversaries.

Findings And Discussion

The findings of my research are presented in two sections that correspond to the research questions guiding this investigation. Firstly, a discussion about the factors that have both informed and influenced Somali women activists - one that is derived from their encounter with systematic racism, misogynoir and social marginalization. Secondly, a commitment on the part of the Somali women activists to challenge and respond to the systematic barriers experienced by the Somali community. The anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia Somali women activists are confronted with in Canada are a mirror reflection of the broader Somali community immigration and settlement process.
Therefore, the immigration and settlement experience of the Somali community will be reviewed, through the lens of the Somali women activists that I interviewed.

4.1 The Somali Immigrant Experience

The settlement of the Somali community in Canada began in the late 1970s when the Canadian Immigration Law removed its discriminatory clauses; nevertheless prior to the 1990s most were international students and rarely remained in Canada after graduation. To put it into perspective, refugee claimant cases by Somalis rose from 31 in 1985 to 3,503 by 1991 (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). The total number of Somalis who applied for refugee status from within Canada between 1985 and 1991 was 12,957 (Opoku-Dapaah, ibid). This made Somalis the largest African refugees coming to Canada and the only non-English speaking Black diaspora in North America (Kusow, 2006). The substantial increase in Somali refugee claims between 1988 and 1991 was correspondent to the heightened regime repression, which resulted in a civil war, famine, and displacement in Somalia during that period (Dualeh, 1994; Ali and Matthews, 2004; McNamee, Herbst and Mills, 2012). So the first wave of Somali families who immigrated to Canada came as refugees in 1988 and consisted mostly of families from Northern Somaliland, Kenya, Gulf region and Djibouti; many were highly educated, settling mostly in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver (Berns-McGown, 2013, page 6). These migration patterns among the Somali community are demonstrated in my interview with first generation Somali Canadian women activists, many of whom came to Canada with high level of education and professional background or as children with their families:
**Afgoye:** I came with high hopes that I have German education with a master degree from a very well known global university.

**Berbera:** When I arrived here, there were not a lot of Somalis. We came as a refugees, because at the time Somalia was going through civil war and even though we were not living there, the United Arab Emirates were revoking people’s residency as a result, we were displaced. We lived in Montreal and then moved to Toronto.

**Baidabo:** I came from the State with a bachelor degree, and having experience working in a Bank and working for an immigration lawyer.

**Burco:** I was 19 or 18. I woke up one morning and my mom said, you know what, you are going to Canada with the rest of the family.

**Hargeisa:** I kept on hearing about the refugee experience and because I am a Somali, there was an assumption that was my experience. I had to continuously reiterate the fact that coming to Canada made us poor, because we paid out of pocket. We were self-sponsored and we did not have the refugee experience.

A higher influx of Somali refugees came to Canada from 1992-2007 with the breakdown of Siyad Bare military regime (Ali and Matthews, 2004; The Atlantic, 2008; McNamee, Herbst and Mills, 2012). Most of the early arrivals were fleeing violent war and political repression against targeted tribes (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995).

**Bosaaso:** I lived in the United States for 3 years doing my Master’s degree. I was about to finish my Masters then the Somali civil war broke, then I didn’t have a country to go back to.

**Kismayo:** We were one of the fortunate; we weren’t exactly in the conflict area, after that unfortunately I lost a lot of family members to war. I lost my grandfather to a bomb in the masajid.

**Xamar:** So, like many Somali Canadians, we did not choice to come here. It was out of the reality of war, where my family was seeking refuge. We came here, so our lives could be spared where the government was targeting my family because I come from a tribe that the dictatorship at the time was antagonistic to.
During this period of settlement, the majority of the Somali community choose to live in Ontario, where there was effectively no Somali community agency to help them navigate government bureaucratic barriers and discriminatory practices in accessing education, employment and housing (Mohammed, 1997; Jakubowski, 1999; Danso, 2001; Valverte and Pratt, 2002; Spitzer, 2006). Difficulty in navigating governmental institutions with little public support were identified as one of the obstacles faced by the Somali community during my interview with first generation Somali Canadian women activists. When I asked the question, what were some of challenges they faced, as refugees/newcomers in Canada, here were some of their comments:

**Afgoye:** The unknown factor within the system, where we did not know how to navigate the healthcare system, we did not know how to navigate the education system, we did not know how to navigate the police and justice system. So, all of these systems were something new to us, so instead of Canada helping us, they actually put even more barriers and more problems in front of us. You know, we did not have strong base community that welcomed us, showed us the ways and how to navigate the system. So, I think these are some of the initial issues we experienced.

**Bosaaso:** I felt as an educated women, adult working in her own country to go and start life was difficult because back home I had a house, I had a job, I had everything I needed in my own country. So coming here was a challenge, were I did not have someone to guide me, a community before me that have been through the settlement difficulty. So the challenges for the Somali community was about are you getting the services you need? Do you know which school to take your children to? Do you know what else to do? If you come into some money, do you know where to invest? So all of these things were missing and we had to struggle and learn the hard way.

Eventually the Somali community grew rapidly from 40,000 to 50,000 in Toronto and another 20,000 in Ottawa by the mid 1990s. Toronto became a popular choice for resettlement by Somali refugees, due to its ‘multicultural’ composition and comparatively betters economic opportunities (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995; Kusow, 1998; Danso, 2001).
Today, the Somali community has doubled, but the exact number is contested since the census under-reports community population. The Canadian Somali Congress claims the figure to be closer to 200,000, with most residing in Toronto and Ottawa, but some have also settled in London, Waterloo, Calgary, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Inuvik (Berns-MGown, 2013).

4.1.1 The Socio-Political Marginalization of the Somali community

In order to understand the racial and gendered conditions of Somali women in their quest for legal recognition and full citizenship rights, it is worth reviewing the key documents that have informed immigration policy and economic legislations in the past 25 years. Two documents, ‘Not Just Numbers’ (1997) and ‘Building on a Strong Foundation for the Twenty-First Century: New Directions for Immigration and Refugees Policy and Legislation’ (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1998) shaped the framework for the passage of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA, 2001). These new changes granted settlement to those individuals with high level of education and financial capability in supporting themselves or resettling within 12 months in the case of refugees (Arat-Koc, 1999, page 19-22). The period of 1992-2007 have experienced the largest influx of Somali women and children entering Canada as refugees. By putting emphasis on ‘human capital’ and financial capacity, these changes to immigration policy created an unrealistic standard for Somali women. The government expectation that Somali women and children would be resettled within 12 months failed to recognize the emotional trauma of war, the absence of identity documents and lack of financial capital and
supportive social network in a new country. This in turn resulted in anti-refugee/anti-immigrant sentiments, where Somali women fell victim to an environment that not only lacked a gender-based analysis, but also failed to adequately address the inherent racism and discrimination against women of colour in the immigration and refugee system (Arat-Koc, ibid). For example, in my interview with Somali women activists, one of the questions I asked was: what were some of the challenges facing Somali women twenty year ago, versus today? Have these difficulties remained the same or are they different today? Here were some of their reflective thoughts on the question and the ways in which systematic racism and social marginalization continue to persist and negatively impacts the Somali community:

**Bosaaso:** I think the difficulty that continues to persist is racism. It’s not something you can touch, but you can feel it, you feel it from the body language of the person you are talking to, you feel it from the words they use, and you feel it when you are looking for housing or a job.

**Burco:** I think they are similar because racism still exists, while today, there is more heightened Islamaphobia. When we first came, people were curious about us, now people are afraid of us, which is very different. I think that’s reflected in the school also, by the way our kids are treated. A lot of our boys are treated like criminals in the school. I think our mothers are very intimated by the system, even 20 years down the road, they are still intimidated because racism still exists.

**Hargeisa:** I would say more likely 20 years ago, the issues of the community or the women would be one of settlement, learning the language, learning the transportation system, just learning how to survive in a new land and a new language.

**Kismayo:** The whole community of Somali people in general have like a severe post-traumatic stress disorder due to war and anti Black racism and no one has allowed us to heal. We are still surviving in this country. I feel like our community has so much more to go, if we acknowledge that we are hurting and we need to heal.

Moreover, the unemployment rate in the Somali community in the 1990s was over 40 percent, in comparison to the national unemployment rate, which was 10 percent
(Kretsedemas and Aparicio, 2004). This in turn fostered a hostile and oppressive settlement condition for the Somali community. Accordingly, the findings of this research illustrates the ways in which anti Black racism and Islamaphobia impacted Somali women employment prospect, which continue to persist even among second generation Canadian born Somali youth:

**Afgoye:** I think one of the barriers is employment, that no matter what credential you have, that they are not accepting it. The unemployment rate of the second generation, because we thought if our kids go to school here and speak the language with no accent, have Canadian credentials, they cannot blame us as newcomers, but they still are in the same boat. I see if a job opening comes up, the smallest job opening, you see so many kids who apply for it and who are highly over qualified for the position. The barriers are not just about accessibility, but the systematic racism in the system that are actually impacting second generation the same way it has impacted us first generation.

**Berbera:** I also experience a lot of the barriers, when I apply for jobs, I would be asked, you have all these credentials and you can speak well, but how is your writing? How do you answer those kind of questions, I have a Masters degree, graduated from UofT and you asking me about my writing skills, so I don’t understand. It’s very difficult for youth to move forward in this kind of society, especially Somali youth, which are constantly marginalized.

**Baidabo:** When I finished my Master; I still couldn’t find a job. So, I started looking in the Somali community and started working for $800 a month with a Master.

4.1.2 It is more than a settlement: Encountering systematic barriers

It was in 1993, when the Progressive Conservative government under Brian Mulroney passed Bill C-86 prohibiting the granting of permanent resident status to Conventional refugees who did not have ‘satisfactory identity documents’ (Aden, H.J. et al. 1997). Bill C-86 was introduced in the House of Commons on June 16, 1992, as an alteration to the Immigration Act of 1976. There were no substantial guidelines or definitions of what a satisfactory document might entail, neither was there a list provided by the government
outlining, which documents might be acceptable. The government justified the law by arguing that allowing undocumented refugees to come to Canada, not only compromised the integrity of the Canadian system, but also were potential security threat. Dismissing the fact that the refugees targeted by this new law have all been legally accepted by the Canadian government as conventional refugees and were already in the country. Mulroney’s government argued that the bill was for the protection of Somali women and children, as it prevented Somali warlords from entering the country under the auspices of seeking asylum (Aden, 1997, Page 96). This in turn gave unlimited power to immigration officers on the refugee board, where even those with passports were rejected. Consequently, the Somali and Afghani community were the most negatively impacted by this new legislation. The refugee advocacy community saw Bill C-86, as pandering to wide- spread anti-immigrant, anti-refugee racist sentiment and a major step backward. In fact, the Somali community in Ottawa challenged the constitutionality of the requirement, arguing that it violated Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Aden, 1997, ibid).

The Somali community at the time acknowledged the Canadian government concerns that providing legal residence to refugees without documents might create security risk. In an attempt to address the legal limbo many of their community members were in, Somali women and men suggested the establishment of Somali Council of Elders to work with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (Mohamed and Hashi, 1998). The Council would be charged with issuing identity documents if it were positive of the identity of the person and confident that the individual had not committed human rights
abuses. Here, it is important to bear in mind that judges in immigration hearings were already using this method informally, through the selection of Somali interpreters of different regional and tribal identities to validate the claims of many Somali refugee cases. But the proposal met with little enthusiasm from Department officials, who saw the use of such an organization as an unacceptable transfer of their departmental authority (Ahmed, 1995).

Without landed status, Somali refugees were denied access to post-secondary education, and could not access employment agencies available to permanent residence, neither were they eligible for provincial healthcare coverage, creating an environment characterized by poverty and meager welfare dependence (Kretsedemas and Aparicio, 2004: 216). Somali refugees were also denied opportunity to many professions and to some types of employment that require specific insurance and a living wage (Kretsedemas: 217). One of the Somali women activists I interviewed, Afgoye spoke about her experience with Canada’s credential assessment, demonstrating the struggles many Somali refugees and immigrants faced in the 1990s, which was one of ambiguity and devaluation of their skills and professional background:

**Afgoye:** I came with high hopes that I have an education from German with a master degree from a very well known global university. So I thought they will recognize it at least. So, when I send it to this place at University of Toronto that recognizes credential, and the result was, ‘oh you know Ms. Afgoye, you have something above our bachelor degree, but below our master degree.’ So I was above bachelor, below master, somewhere in a vacuum, something that doesn’t exist.
Due to these immigration policies, most were also ineligible for government training programs or bank loans to start their own businesses (Kretsedemas alt., ibid). Moreover, Somali conventional refugees experienced unwillingness on the part of many employers to hire and train them for fear they would not remain in Canada for long (Mohamed and Hashi, 1998). Having the inability to acquire employment forced many to rely on social services, which further dehumanized and stigmatized them:

**Baidabo:** racism isn’t overt in Canada, but implicit in the ways people are treated. After I came to Canada, I looked for work for nine months and I still did not have a job. Essentially I looked for a job from the day I arrived Until the June or July of the following year. When I realized nothing was working, at the time, I applied for welfare, for the first time in my life. I always had an understanding that when you have an education, you have a job. So, for me that was the biggest shock, but I had a child that I came with to Canada, so I had to put food on the table. I found it really degrading, the way they treated you, the way the staffs at the office talked to you, the way they assumed a lot of things.

In 1999, the waiting period for identity confirmation was reduced to three years, despite the calls from various community and human rights sectors on the Canadian government to reduce it to one year and to institute a system of sworn personal affidavits to confirm identities (Spitzer, 2001, pages 49-50). Somalis and Afghans were the only two groups targeted by the Citizenship and Immigration Department’s regulation imposing a five-year waiting period for acquiring permanent residency, refugees from former Yugoslavia and Kosovo had an 18 months waiting period (Adan, 1992). Moreover, the government’s own internal report disputed its original claim that they were simply protecting Canadians from criminals and terrorists. In fact its own “Evaluation Framework” prepared for the Citizenship and Immigration department and obtained through the Access to Information Act by the Canadian Council for Refugees, reported that: “Not a single criminal or
security threat was found among those who had completed their five-year waiting period and applied for landing under UCRCC as of April 1998” (Audit and Consulting Canada, 1998). These immigration policies politically targeting the Somali community fostered fear and uncertainty within the Somali community that a loved one could be deported with little consideration and transparency, which was also expressed during my interview with Somali women activists:

*Xamar:* when the conservative government has a bill called ‘the faster removal of foreign criminals act,’ and your child has a PR and you haven’t gotten a PR for them because you were in that blockage waiting ten years, your challenges is making sure they do not commit any kind of offense because they will be deported for loitering, they will be deported for driving without a license, they will be deported for the littlest thing because they are waiting for that racialized body to commit an offense that is so deplorable that you are not allowed in our country.

After all, most of the Somali refugees were women and children, since most Somali adult males remained behind in Somalia, Middle East and elsewhere in the hope that they will eventually reunite with their family and children (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). Eventually, in 2001, approximately nine years later, the immigration policies and procedures under Bill C-11 led to the Undocumented Protected Persons in Canada (CIC fact sheet, 1999 / 2000). The new law sanctioned the reality that refugees might resort to forged documents to escape an untenable situation. It further allowed the Refugee Protection Division to take into account claimants’ lack of identity paper due to war and forced migration (CIC fact sheet, 1999/2000). It was the grassroots activism of Somali women and the Afghani community with the help of immigration lawyers that enabled this law to be realized (Danso, 2002, page 55). The changes to the Refugee Protection Division have enabled Somali women to attend ESL classes, enrol their children in primary and secondary
school. It also meant they could seek employment opportunities, albeit these opportunities did not recognize their professional credentials. It is using this historical context and understandings of Somali community’s settlement in Canada that I continue to examine Somali women lived experiences and how it influenced their activism and advocacy, redefined their gender roles and reshaped their relationships to Islam and Somalinimo, especially as it relates to the affirmation of identity confirmation as a gateway to Somali-Canadianness in the contemporary period.
Chapter Five

The Intersection of Blackness and Muslimness

In this chapter, I would be exploring what I term the triple consciousness of being Black Muslim women, which have shaped the lived experiences of Somali women activists and influenced their diaspora identity formation. The intersection of being Black Muslim women in Canada critiques the accepted narratives of Blackness, which others and excludes the Somali community. Most of the participants in the research are challenging white supremacy’s definition of Blackness as non-divergent and monolithic. The Somali women activists I interviewed have indicated that yes they are Black, but they are also Somali and Muslim; and being Somali, Muslim and Black in Canada has a different trajectory than being Caribbean and Black or Black that fled the United State to come to Canada 250 years ago, which is completely different kind of Blackness. Moreover, this triple consciousness Somali women experience in Canada is about reconciling ones multiple identities as a Black Muslim woman in a settler colonial land that is constantly questioning their sense of belonging if not humanity.

5.1 The Triple Consciousness of Being Black Muslim Women in Canada

It was W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 who developed the concept, Double consciousness in his book, “The Soul of Black Folks,” which characterizes a socio-psychological or socio-historical disposition of Black America, where individual’s concept of self and the other
is deeply rooted in history of slavery and segregation in a white settler society, which produces racial classifications and social location. Here Black people’s sense of self has been shaped by a society that has historically repressed and devalued them, where it becomes difficult for them to unify their Black identity with their American identity (Edles and Appelrouth, 2010: pages 351-352). Du Bois attributes this Double consciousness to what he termed as the ‘Veil,’ or barrier between white and Black America, which produces an ubiquitous and pervasive anti-Black racism that impedes Black people from having a sense of self image that is neither damaged by white supremacy nor shaped by socio-economic marginalization. Here, Du Bois argues that unlike white America, Black America can clearly see the veil. After all, Double consciousness is about the reality of living in an anti-Black environment that is ignorant of its own whiteness and unwilling to comprehend the legacy of slavery and colonialism that continue to impact Black America and recent immigrants of African diaspora to North America. Accordingly, Du Bois has described what African Americans seek in their quest to achieve a true sense of being or true consciousness albeit a gendered one that excludes Black women perception of self,

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (Edles and Appelrouth, 2010: page 351).

Some historians and social scientists have attempted to dismiss and devalue Du Bois ‘Double consciousness,’ as lacking in empirical evidence (Ernest Allen, 2002: page 217), or merely contingent to a particular era and not a “racial condition whereby millions of individuals experience a peculiar form of bifurcated identity simply by virtue of racial
status” (Adolf Reed, 1997: pages 123-25). On the other hand, theorists, such as Edles and Appelrouth have argued that “The Soul of Black Folks,” subjectively critiques race and class in America because racism does not work from a rational standpoint,

The workings of such complex phenomena as race and class cannot be fully understood using only ‘scientific’ means. Du Bois argued that colonialism and imperialism led to the domination and exploitation of Africa, and that, beginning in the fifteenth century, “race became central to world history” (Edles & Appelrouth, 2010: page 347).

So if racism cannot be rationally explained, yet carries material and physical cost towards racialized communities, what does the story of the Somali Muslim woman activist in Canada tell us? What is being suppressed when Canadian media and political figures caricature the Somali community? What has been the long embedded racist practices towards Black bodies in Canadian public and private spaces? These inquires are intended to unearth the power that produces anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia, which is lodged in everyday societal practices and norms that creates this triple consciousness Somali women experience in Canada. Some of the questions guiding this research was around the Somali community awakening to their Blackness, or more specifically, what it meant to be politically Black. During my discussions with the participants, I asked, how has their activism shaped their perception of self as a Black Muslim Women in Canada? Here are some of their thoughts on the tripe consciousness of being Black Muslim women navigating these multiple identities in different spaces:

Kismayo: Not only do Black lives matter for us, but our womanhood matters to us, so does us being Muslims matter, some of us don’t have the luxury to separate ourselves and just call ourselves Muslims. My activism and the responses I get never lets me forget I am a Black Muslim woman.
Baidabo: I find myself as a Muslim woman first and then a Black woman second. Being a Muslim and being Black is a double jeopardy I believe and that’s a bigger challenge. We are constantly negotiating identities, I just remember constantly negotiating identities.

Afgoye: You know thank God, I was living in Germany and early enough I decided that I am in Germany studying in German language and I must stay Somali. So, that will of not changing my identity and keeping true to my identity was there even before I reached Canada. And when I came to Canada, I kept the same mindset and I said, I am Black and I am Muslim and I will stay Black and Muslim.

This particular analysis is significant because being a Somali in Canada entails both Blackness and Muslimness, in what has been termed: Somalinimo. Abdi M. Kusow was the first Somali researcher to tackle the triple consciousness of being a Black Muslim women and men, one where Somalinimo is defined as “an uncontested and natural state of being” (Kusow, 1998: page195). Somalinimo is by definition the essence of being a Somali, which includes Islam as an integral part of such identity. This identity formation subsumes all Somalis are of the Muslim faith, which excludes Somali minorities of Christian and pagan traditions. Even though majority of the 10.5 million Somalis in the world are Muslim despite the degree to which they might express it, it nevertheless marks all of them under one faith.

In his dissertation, Kusow asked non-Somali respondents, “How do you define Somalis?” the participants said “they are Muslims, Black from East Africa” (page 139). Here the Canadian based results identified the Somali community with Islam, followed by their Blackness and then their geographical location in Africa. These findings articulate a distinct marking imposed on the Somali community, which is different from larger Black communities in Canada, who are predominately Christian. Moreover, subsequent research conducted by Kusow among Somalis in Canada and the United States, titled
“Migrations and Racial Formations Among Somali Immigrants in North America,” indicated a critical understanding on the part of the participants about racial formation and its function in North America. Here the respondents vocalized their Positionality in Canada as Somalis and the first group of African diaspora that are non-English speaking and Black Muslim (Kusow, 2006: page 544). Consequently then, being a “Muslim” becomes a category that contains multiple meanings, including religion, ethnicity, and race. Hence, the significance of putting emphasis on Somali women’s gendered and religious identity.

Accordingly, to understand the complexity of Somali women’s lived experience; it is important to foreground religion as part of the way we understand intersectionality. In this case it is race, gender, class and religion that are centrally operative. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) “demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies,” informs us how case law, white feminist discourse and Black liberation politics treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. Here, the limitation of the legal system is displayed in its inability to acknowledge the multiple disadvantages faced and experienced by Black women. Crenshaw calls this ‘bottom-up’ intersectional representation and if allowed in a court of law, would address the interlocking system of multiple oppression, instead of looking at discriminatory cases on an individual bases (Crenshaw, 1989, page 139). Case and point, the experience of Somali women with settlement, employment and education reflect Canada’s failed multicultural policy, because it ignores the intersectionality of race, gender, religion and
class. In addition, the elision of difference in identity politics has often ignored the socio-economic violence experienced by Somali women in Canadian society, where they are always aware of their hyper visibility as Black Muslim women. This in turn affirms oppressive practices that invisibilized Somali women-interlocking form of marginalities that inform their daily life:

**Berbera:** I came here to Toronto with a French accent and they started me with ESL, imagine somebody went to a private school in Abu Dhabi for that many years and then the United States for 3 years and then came to Montreal for 2 years. They did not even look at our history and background, automatically, you are new immigrant, and ESL is the process for you.

**Baidabo:** When I finished my Master; I still couldn’t find a job. So, I started looking in the Somali community and started working for $800 a month with a Master. So, you have to start somewhere and I started there. My mother, who was an educator, head of principle school in Somalia, of course could not get a job here. So, she has to do community work as well and she was one of the first who worked in the community at that time because she had the language skills and the knowledge to be able to do that.

**Kismayo:** My Somali identity and I was othered all the time. Like I went to elementary, middle and high school during a time when there were not a lot of colors. Like spaces were violently white. I’ve had situations were I painfully felt othered…. nobody took time and effort to realize that I was near sighted cuz my last name is J. So, I was always placed in the back of the class so, my entire first half of elementary, I was called stupid, slow, dumb. Like it’s actually in my transcript. I was like, a child that wasn’t worthy to be spent any energy on. I’ve had situation where white teachers would call me nigger and I didn’t even know what that word meant.

The Somali women activists I interviewed for this thesis felt depending on the space they occupy, they are constantly negotiating between their multiple identities, which influences their experiences in Toronto. Having your Blackness questioned, your Somalinimo criminalized and Muslim identity othered, makes it difficult to have a unified sense of self. Here colorism strips away the diversity within Blackness, while
anti Black racism permeates Muslim spaces. This in turn leads to a constant othering of Somali women in both Black and Muslim spaces:

**Kismayo**: There is a lot of anti-Blackness within the Muslim community, particularly from brown people and white people or white presenting people rather. Because they don’t acknowledge that not only are Black Muslims, Muslims, but we are also Black. It’s interesting because like we are constantly erased from the Black movement and we are constantly erased from the Muslim movement. So, we are always challenging and debating our humanity.

**Xamar**: For me it wasn’t even you know the white Canada, it was other section of racialized communities subjecting the racism onto me.

Coming from a mainly homogenous society (without discounting the heterogeneity of the Somali people based on tribes, region and even indigenous dialects) that speaks one official language and of predominately Sunni Muslim population, into a settler colonial land added to the Somali community mental trauma as survivors of a civil war. Here, the Somali community, which does not employ racial categories to negotiate identity formation, experienced racial trauma by immigrating to Canada, a country founded on the premise of race based categories to implement social stratification. This does not mean colorism and shadism is not part and parcel of the Somali culture, because white supremacy is a global phenomenon and the British, French and Italian after all did colonize Somali territories. Rather I am arguing that the conceptual way in which Blackness is negotiated in Canada is fragmented and lacks uniformity and can be witnessed in the ways in which Somalinimo is othered within Black communities and white society:

**Kismayo**: Particularly as an East African, my Blackness is always debatable, like people are always challenging me. I’m never Black enough or I am never, I don’t know what
other alternative because clearly I am a Black person. Especially when you think of an African person, people automatically assume, a West African, rather than an East African, like our Blackness is constantly being challenged.

**Xamar:** It was a shock becoming Black, politically Black. We are homogenous in a lot of ways, in our existence in East Africa. And we enter into a politicized, racialized body in Canada you become Black before anyone cares about your heritage, before you enter that space and with it anti-Black racism carries an additive trauma for our community.

Accordingly, this fragmented racial stratification have created an acceptable narratives about Blackness in Canada, where the Caribbean Community have become the gatekeepers of who is considered Black, which also assumes the presence of a unified Black identity within Black diaspora and equally erases the large presence of Caribbean Black Muslims:

**Burco:** I guess being a Black activist entails for you to be a Christian, so if you are a Muslim, you seem to be the other even within the Black community. So, it’s very challenging for me to identify as Black activist anymore because I just don’t feel I am being accepted enough, right now.

Historically, social science researchers demonstrated that Blackness is performed differently among Black diaspora in North America, which informs the consciousness and identity formation of Black people (Kusow, 2006: page 535). In fact Haitians, Jamaicans and other West Indian communities have a long history of rejecting Blackness by appealing to their ethnic based identity categories that emphasizes Jaimaciness, or West Indianness as a way to distinguish themselves from African American in the State, and as an opportunity of formulating a Caribbean culture that speaks to their heritage in Canada (Foner 1987; Stafford 1987; Essad, 1991; Charles 1992; Kusow 1998; Laquire 1998; Mary Waters, 1999; Maines and Kusow 2001; Kusow, 2006). This is not to deny the fact that racial classification in the Caribbean is more complex due to the Atlantic
Slave Trade than the hegemonic black - white categories found in Canada and the United States (Kusow, ibid). Moreover, social stratification in many parts of the West Indies is derived from the intersection between colorism and class, where whiteness is superior to Blackness, and privileged segments in these societies have traditionally been light skinned (Charles 1992; Woldemikael 1989). Similarly, there are strong elements within the Somali community that denies their own Blackness by and large due to Arab supremacy followed by European colonization in East Africa:

**Baidabo:** When Somali parents are not enlightened enough, conscious enough, aware enough about the fact that Somali children are Black children, it leads to children believing they are different, perhaps better in some ways, but end up falling into the same systematic trap because this skin determines who we are. Our skin color first determines because that’s what people see first and perception creates the problems that you deal with all the time.

**Kismayo:** I am not only a woman, but I am a Black Muslim woman, right. From a culture that does not even acknowledge it.

The rejection of ones Blackness by Somali elders and/or mothers in Canada speaks to a radically different classification system and identity categories that African born immigrants recognize than the binary of Blackness and whiteness recognized in North America (Kusow, 2006: page 537). According to Odim-Johnson (2000: 59), contemporary African immigrants have created “much of the old country in the new’ and in ways not available to those who preceded them through the Atlantic slave trade, a whole new approach to understanding the mediated nature of Blackness becomes possible.” It within the context of such possibility about Blackness that I hope to complicate when speaking about the Somali community, where Islam and their regional location plays a factor in their identity formation in Canada. When Somalis came to this
country, they not only moved physically, but they also carried with them the cultural and social stratification as a survival method living in a settler colonial land and a tool to formulate their own concept of Blackness as was expressed by first generation Somali Canadian women activists. Thus, reclaiming the narratives about Blackness and Muslimness was significant to the Somali women activists I interviewed. They did not want the conversation about Somalinimo and Blackness to be a monolithic category that denies the diverse perspectives within the Somali community:

**Xamar:** I don’t want to see my community be a monolithic, un-complex, simplified and reduced community. We are very complex and we are ought to be, and we need to continue to claim and push for our nuanced to be acknowledged because only in that way will we continue to be humanized in these spaces and continue to get what is ours as Canadians and as human beings.

5.1.1 The making of the ‘Fraudulent Somali Refugee’

In the previous sections, I described the juncture from which Somali people have been racialized and stigmatized, which is rooted in anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia. The Somali community are the first non-English speaking Black Muslims in Canada, which locates them at the intersection of two political spectrums: Black Africa and the Muslim world. Here, the language used by Canadian politicians and mainstream media when describing the Somali community since the 1990s is often at a crossroad between Orientalism and Africanism. Orientalism is an ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient/Muslim’ and the ‘Occident/West,’ while Africanism characterizes the African continent and its people as primitive and subhuman. Both Orientalism and Africanism denote characteristics that lead to fixed perception and image that are rooted
in anti-Black racism in one hand and Islamaphobia on the other. Case and point, Canada, like so many other Western nations, embarked on a series of immigration and public funding reform in the 1990s intended not only to tightly regulate who could get in, but who was entitled to the full benefits of citizenship (Razack, 2000; Pratt, 2002). Identity documents and welfare policies became a useful tool in this project of identifying the deserving and undeserving ‘subjects’ under the law. Beginning with Bill C-86 under the Mulroney government and continuing with the creation of the 1997 Undocumented Convention Refugee in Canada Class, under the Liberal government, Canada joined other western nations in the creation of a class of people labeled “undocumented,” which were less deserving of judicial and social rights by virtue of their lack of passports or travel documents: Afghans and Somalis. Simultaneously, policy shift and austerity cuts towards social welfare centered on the ‘fraudulent’ Somali refugees abusing Canadian generosity and deceiving the ‘deserving’ Canadian taxpayer.

The 1990s economic campaign against fraud was no longer towards organized crimes or money laundering, rather it localized its focus on the Somali refugee. The claim that the Canadian welfare state reduced the rights and freedom of ‘deserving citizen’ by redistributing financial support from taxpayers to ‘undocumented’ welfare recipients can be seen in the campaign and policy implementation of the Liberal, NDP and Conservative members of the legislator. The liberal party, which was in opposition to the Reform Party, equally perpetuated the racist anti-immigrant political narratives by specifically targeting the Somali community, which was at the time in Canada less than 3 years. For example, Lyn McLeod, Ontario Liberal Leader commissioned a report in 1993, written
by a Federal Immigrant Intelligence Officer, which she then spoke about at City Hall, telling Legislature:

"This whole process appears to be designed to send welfare money back to Somalia to fund the purchase of weapons and arms for fighting in that country." She added, "According to the report, these kinds of activities are costing Ontario taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. Ms. McLeod said the report shows that some individuals collected as much as $100,000 to $300,000 each year under as many as 20 different names." (Monika Reif-Hulser, page 164)

The report which was presented by McLeod to the Ontario Legislature called Somalis “masters of deceit and corruption” and stated that “our Western and primarily Christian based way of life” has little meaning or relevance to these people" (Reif-Hulser, page 165). This othering of the Somali community early on marked them as a threat on the virtue of their Muslim and Black identity. Much research has gone into examining the othering and criminalization of refugees and non-white immigrants in the 1990s by claiming it was a shift in government policy. However, I argue that these political campaigns and legislative policies, which impacted the legal status of the Somali community for close to ten years, were a continuation of Canada’s racist policies towards non-European communities for decades. The othering and dehumanizing process by the Canadian state might shift from Indigenous to Chinese, to Blacks and Muslim immigrants, but the tactics of neoliberalism remains the same. One that is politically crafted to economically marginalize and institute a state of ‘exception’ for racialized communities, in this case the Somali community. The participants in this research have alluded to the economic marginalization of the community and the criminalization of Somali youth that continue to persist even twenty years later:
**Afgoye:** I think the initial issues because you see Somalis that are here now after twenty years, still have settlement need. They still don’t have jobs; they still live in housing and did not get their own place. So, what all you know people say after five years, the newcomer not a newcomer, is after twenty years, people are still newcomers.

**Xamar:** I think racism in Canada, unlike other parts of the world is very polite. I think we boast about our culture being polite, Canadians saying please and thank you, but racism is also shrouded in please and thank you. People will tell you this is a land of multiculturalism, the land that created the multicultural polices, we were the first in the world, but I feel it’s an artifice, it’s just makeup on what can be very ugly history and very ugly story day to day for racialized people.

Moreover, if we were to understand neoliberalism as a governing system, then Neoliberal policy prompts new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between the self-sufficient privileged and the collectively stigmatized ‘lazy other,’ which is almost always non-white. This in turn allows neoliberalism to incorporate multiculturalism in a manner that makes it appear fair, while obscuring the racism and inequalities on which the neoliberal project depends on. Himani Bannerji tells us how Canada’s neoliberal multiculturalism depoliticize the racist discourse of class politics:

> With no interest in class politics, and any real analysis of or resistance to racialization or ethnicization, chiefly preoccupied with bureaucratic representation or inclusion for a very limited power sharing within the status quo, these political terminologies became current usages. The multi-ethnic, multinational state, with its history of racialized class formation and political ideology, discovering multiculturalism as a way of both hiding and enshrining power relations, provided a naturalized political language even to the others of the Canadian society. (Bannerji, 2000: 31)

The neoliberal policy of the government of Ontario in the 1990s turned into a racial story about Canada as besieged nation by foreign Black Muslim immigrants that did not ‘respect us,’ and will reward ‘our’ generosity with crime. This “racio-logic” (Razack, 2000) became the national story told by legislators, politicians and media institutions.
This in turn reflected in government reports, which propagated the neoliberal economic assumption that welfare recipients are 'locked in a lifestyle of dependency' (Government of Ontario 1994: 9-10). This ‘lifestyle’ device came to associate Somali refugees and subsequently those who rely on social welfare as deceitful swindlers to maintain the lifestyle to which they became accustomed. Therefore, the government had no choice but to become strict with public funding and to monitor more closely those coming in to Canada. The public in turn came to regard those on social assistance, Somali refugees in particular as untrustworthy and undeserving of Canadian ‘generosity.’ As Pratt stipulates in ‘From Deserving Victims to 'masters of confusion': Redefining Refugees in the 1990s:

> Cracking down on those who 'cheat.' and by extension, on all those who neglect to fill out forms correctly or who fail to show up for all their interviews, does not save the taxpayers any great amount of money, but it is regarded as crucial for the maintenance of the liberal moral universe in which enterprise must be rewarded and in which lack of economic success is always under suspicion of laziness (Pratt: 140-41).

The economic recession of the 1990s ultimately made the Somali community an easy escape goat of the economic failures of neoliberal multiculturalism. The Somali story turned into the figure of the ‘bogus refugee,’ defrauding the welfare system, through combination of government policies, popular fear and political discourse. Associating immigrant of color with criminology or social welfare has been well founded in Canadian history (Avery, 1979 and 1995; Roberts, 1998; Kelley and Trebilcock, 1998). Suffice to say, those deserving of the benefits and protection of the law and the entitlement of citizenship have always been central to whiteness. Although criminology have been an exclusionary racial category for non-whites, the inclusion of the ‘transnational criminal activity,’ in the working mandate of immigration enforcement, and in the Canadian
Security Intelligence Agency (CSIS) has been considered unprecedented by some social scientists (Pratt, 2002: 136-38). With the end of the cold war era, the fear of terrorism and espionage was expanded to include organized transnational crime as part of Canada's national security, one where the integrity of government programs and institutions and its economy became central to CSIS agenda (Pratt, ibid). Hence, identifying the 'dangerous' foreign immigrants as 'peril to the public,' was part and parcel of Canada’s neoliberal economic agenda in the 1990s. Eventually, in a time of recession, the Canadian state mediating the economic and political inequality decided to pit the most vulnerable population (the Somali community) against the dominant white community. Therefore, the processes of both social welfare and immigration policy became governed through crime and punishment. It ultimately became about those deserving and undeserving of the law and the protection of Canada’s multiculturalism.

Consequently, Ontario government economic policies in the 1990s seemed to be racist and classist under the banner of neoliberal multiculturalism and can be seen through the targeting of the Somali refugees during the provincial election at the time. Anti-immigrant sentiments were one of the main campaign agenda of the Reform Party, which later became the Harris government of Ontario. The description of the Somali community by one of many reports commissioned by the Department of Immigration have been said to be full of “Orientalists rhetoric” that was contrary to the supposed ‘liberal’ policies of Canada (Pratt: 138). The political party explicitly linked refugees with economic impoverishment of the nation by calling for the restriction of new immigrants entering the country. The Reform leadership called on cutting new immigrants to 150,000 per
year as long as unemployment rate was above ten percent. This logic implied that neoliberal economic crises, such as unemployment can be solved by reducing racialized immigrants, renewing the old racist stereotype (contrary to documented evidence) that immigrants drain national economy and come to take from ‘real Canadian’ their jobs and rip off ‘our’ welfare system (Globe and Mail front section, October 31, 1993). The targeting of refugees escaping a civil war, leaving behind everything and seeking protection and a better life in Canada have been blamed on what critics of neoliberalism called, ‘the death of the social (Rose, 1996).

Canadian economic history teaches us, that the relationship between white citizens and refugees is deeply colonial and can be revealed in the political rhetoric, public policy and media publication about teaching refugees to be truthful and respect Canadian generosity. After all, the national narratives are rarely about the perspectives and lived experiences of racialized communities, whether they are refugees or Canadians. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to Canadian ‘political culture’ and its economic marginalization, and constitutes one of the main connections between neoliberalism and multiculturalism. For instance, to convince white Canadians, who by and large support the welfare state and its role in alleviating the economic consequences of neoliberal policies, the state must find an ‘undeserving’ target in order to stigmatize social welfare recipients and justify government cutbacks. So, the ideological shift from Keynesian economic principles of collective responsibility and public spending in time of economic recession can be seen in the 1990s when the New Democratic Party (NDP) embraced the neoliberal assumption that social assistance is a
choice and a ‘life style’ (Government of Ontario, 1992: 47). The consequences of these economic policies are reflected in the Somali community, which has produced socio-political disfranchisement across the board:

**Afgoye:** The unknown factor within the system, where we did not know how to navigate the health system, we did not know how to navigate the education system, we did not know how to navigate the police and justice system. So, all of these systems were something new to us, so instead of them helping us, they actually put even more barriers and more problems in front of us.

**Xamar:** I think economic disfranchisement is the biggest challenge facing the Somali community today.

5.1.2 Dixon Neighbourhood as Contested Racial and Spatial Site

The Dixon Neighbourhood in the 1990s served as another frontier in the Canadian settlement/racial project. Within the Canadian immigration discourse the spatial imagination of the state, white residents and mainstream media colluded together in shaping the identity of the Somali community as uncivilized, undeserving and problematic members of society. Since the concept of who is Canadian is racially imagined and spatially articulated in our architectural landscape in term of who belongs within urban environment, it produces exclusionary spatial conditions for non-white communities. For example, the reform rhetoric facing the Somali community in the 1990s combined economic discourse (they drain our resources and abuse our Canadian generosity), with citizenship discourse (citizens' rights are imperilled by their fraudulent claim) and cultural discourse (their uncivilized strange culture is different from ours), where the architectural landscape of Dixon was retroactively associated with Somaliness.
It’s from this juncture of racialized spatial imagination that I’m interested in examining how the Somali community became a symbol of ‘polluted body politic,’ in Dixon neighbourhood, one that necessitated to be physically contained. This section will utilizing the CBC documentary “A Place Called Dixon” and Toronto Life article, “Dispatch from Dixon,” and subsequent police raids that have continued to criminalize the Somali community in recent years, in order to put into context the link between race and space, including agency, identity and body politic. More specifically, within the context of this thesis I will explore these questions: I) why was Dixon a contested spatial and racial site? ii) How did the mainstream media manage to construct an image of the innocent white Canadian citizen under siege by foreign Muslim Blacks invading their ‘pure spaces’? iii) Why wasn’t there an uproar about other Somali neighbourhoods in Scarborough and Jane/Finch? IV) Did these other spatial locations seem more natural in already racialized poor areas? To effectively address these questions, I apply insights from George Lipsitz, David T. Goldberg, Kathleen M. Kirby and Samira Kawash in order to theorize the racialization of Dixon and the Spatialization of the Somali community, which led to the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women. After all, the immigration and settlement experience of the Somali diaspora is primarily racialized and spatialized.

Dixon is significant to the Somali immigrant story in Canada and continue to shape public perception through the media, case and point, the Vice hatched documentary, titled ‘This is Dixon,’ released this year with vocal protests from first and second generation Somali Canadians (This Is Not Dixon Collectives, 2016). Moreover, Dixon is also the
birthplace of Somali women activism, including the participants I interviewed for this research:

**Afgoye:** Originally when I came first to Kingsview Village, when I was forty-something, I was just about preventing and reacting to issues that came up, like having a homework club, sessions for parents to understand the language of the report card and what the teachers are telling them, take kids out to summer camps, to give the kids a break during the summer.

**Xamar:** I am also interested in my community, the Dixon community, kinda the stronghold of the Somali community, it doesn’t have to be, just the archetype of the Somali communities. So, I grew up in Dixon, which is why I was very much interested in the Dixon raid, so that’s a good connection to my activism.

Since housing policy is nonexistent in Canada and most Somali families in the early 1990s could not access Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) due to their immigration status, many had to rent in the private market and support each other to access adequate neighborhood for their children. It was during this time that members of the Somali community came together to utilize organizations such as Somali Immigrant Aid and the Somali Women Forum that were founded to address immigration issues; to develop community meetings and workshops; and to discuss systematic racism, affordable housing, concerns over public schools attempt to criminalize Somali boys, as well as mainstream media’s constant attack on the Somali community. It was within this environment that ‘legitimate’ media outlets began to introduce to mainstream Canadians the Somali community in Dixon, through the CBC produced documentary, “A Place Called Dixon,” and the Toronto Life article, “Dispatch from Dixon.” As a result, Dixon became a contested racial and spatial site, where the image of the Somali resident was constructed as a dangerous third world entity undeserving of Canada’s generosity.
Dixon is a community of six high-rise buildings located at the intersection of Dixon and Kipling in Etobicoke, a city in the northern suburb of Toronto. The six buildings have a total of 18,000 units serving a diverse population ranging from white Canadians, to Latin Americans and later Somali refugees from Mogadishu who fled the civil war. The arrival of the Somali refugees coincided with Transport Canada’s decision to allow planes taking off from Pearson Airport to fly over the Kingsview Village where the Dixon buildings are located. This decision apparently increased jet noise, and in turn led to many white residents moving out, consequently lowering the property value of the neighbourhood. I wonder though if the state’s decision to allow the plain to fly over Dixon was not in itself a racial spatial project, which contributed to the ‘white flight’ that took place in the 1990s. After all, Dixon neighbourhoods ultimately became a racial and spatial construct by both the public and the private sector, to contain and dislocate racialized communities in substandard area.

The settlement of the Somali community in Dixon, located in northern Etobicoke, was not a unique phenomenon to the Somali community. In fact, Scarborough and North York had similar Somali residents in the 1990s and onward. The targeting of the Somali residence living in the six high-rise private condominium buildings on Dixon road was a shock to members of the community at the time. Many of the Somalis who immigrated to Canada in late 1980s – 1990s were mostly women and children and as is typical of most new immigrants in the history of this country, many of the Somali community choice to reside in spaces where they felt safe or had the possibility of community support. Thus, Scarborough and Etobicoke became the primary spatial location for the Somali
community. However, its only Dixon that became the archetype of the Somali immigrant, where today it is synonymous with the Somali community. Some have argued, including in this research that due to the discursive nature of the othering of Somalis, it necessitated for the State, mainstream media and white residence to contain them in within this specific landscape.

Author Kirby in “Re: Mapping Subjectivity: Cartographic vision and the limits of politics (1998) tells us how the Western subject since the Enlightenment era tended to define itself by cataloguing others (women, native, criminal, insane) which it opposed because it did not require definition (p 47). In other words, white subjects define themselves in opposition to non-whites, in this particular case; white residents of these condos and the media located themselves by mapping and constructing the racialized bodies of the Somali residents. Here, the Somali community is not the subject, rather they are the means of becoming – “invaded and colonized.” Both the CBC documentary and the Toronto Life article became an adventure stories about the colonial gaze retelling the story of a foreign entity occupying a Canadian landscape, in particular one designed for market value and property appreciation. These adventure stories are ‘pedagogy,’ and they are needed to keep the racialized exclusionary system up and functioning. Hence, it necessitated the eviction of the Somali community in the public eye, because they neither belonged nor were entitled to live in this particular neighbourhood according to the non-Somali residence and media. Case and point, Toronto police raid of Dixon in 2013, named ‘project traveller,’ exemplified the colonial gaze invading and occupying a Somali space:
Xamar: So, I come back to Toronto in October 2012 and the raid is happening in June 2013 and lord and behold, they name it ‘project traveller,’ I lose my shit, excuse my language because I am thinking, are they talking about Somalis, because we have a rich heritage of being nomadic, travellers and our borders are still being contested on what is ours. So, I felt like, are they making a comment on my community which is ‘Project Somali’? So, I wrote a piece, I wrote a poem called ‘Project Traveller,’ and I was invited to share my poem at a press conference at the time.

This adventure stories that have racialized and stigmatized the Somali community has been cemented over twenty years ago in the consciousness of the Canadian public by the CBC produced documentary, “A Place Called Dixon,” and the Toronto Life article, “Dispatch from Dixon.” For example, David Stoffman’s article provides vivid description of the number of Somali people who live in the condominiums on Dixon Road, imprinting on the readers’ mind a place crowded by so many Somalis, it became hazardous to those who live there. The article makes reference to the 1993 CBC film produced by R. Christmas, “A Place Called Dixon,” that depicted the Somali community as a social hazard from a ‘Third World primitive culture’. Stefan clearly paints the story quite vividly so that, there is great resemblance between the article and the CBC documentary. During this time, most Somalis had been in Canada less than 3 years. The media’s production of Dixon through the CBC documentary and the Toronto Life article was not just about the omission of Somali resident voices but was rather about an imagined and produced phantom of a Somali subject that became static and permanent in the consciousness of mainstream society. For instance, Stoffman’s article depicts two Somali characters and one white Baptist Minister that tells the reader the kind of space and subject that is being mapped and how they operate in the story to determine who is the legitimate/illegitimate refugee, who has successfully assimilated and who is appointed as the savior of the Somali refugees. Here the absence of a diverse Somali
voices is as important as the presence of the phantom Somali caricature in both the article and the documentary. This fictional characterization of the Somali subject can be seen the ways in which first generation Somali Canadian women activists experience anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia in public spaces:

**Kismayo:** I was the only Muslim girl in my school and wore the hijab. I had instance, where like children, like white children particularly would try to choke me with it, because they were trying to take it off of me and I refused for them to take it off of me. So, that the fight that ensued were basically, me choking, right

**Xamar:** I also seen the space that I occupy sometimes and the surprise that I am there. I am Black, I am wearing a headscarf, the comments, oh you are so articulate, and oh that was so well said. I still don’t have a good reply for that.

In the article, Stoffman introduces Ms. Anab Osman to the reader, a woman according to him, embodies the Somali identity; Mr. Bob Swan, a Canadian Baptist Minister who is supportive of the Somali community; and Mr. Nor, referred to as ‘Sheik’ and community elder. ‘Sheikh’ Nor is introduced to us as someone who considers the north-Etobicoke neighborhood to be the ‘Promised Land’ for Somalis in refugee camps. According to the writer of this article, Nor told him Dixon is well known to Somali community living in refuge camps. Moreover, due to Dixon Road’s proximity to the Toronto International airport and the sound of the planes arriving and leaving, the writer describes the disruptive nature of the area and the constant complaints from the non-Somali residents.

Through out the article, the reader cannot help but question Stoffman’s claim about the Somali community in Dixon and abroad within Somali territories. Case and point, the author claims at one point: “Nowhere could be more unlike Somalia, a tropical nation of
nomadic camel herders, than this modern suburb...yet some 4000 Somalis live in Dixon.” It is clear from his statement that Mr. Stoffman is neither informed nor aware about the climate in Somalia because camels only dwell in non-tropical areas and tends to inhabit harsher and drier environment. However, his reference to “a tropical nation of nomadic herders” demonstrates the constructed notion of the Somali subject that is unfamiliar with modernity and urban life. This construction formulates both the non-Canadian and the Canadian character, placing Somalis outside of the boundaries of Dixon’s private and commercial condominiums in which whites resided at the time. Goldberg (1993), in his chapter, “Polluting the Body Politic’: Race and Urban Location,” explores the category of space as discursively produced and ordered. “Just as spatial distinctions like ‘West’ and ‘East’ are racialized in their conception and application, racial categories have become variously spatialized…. Racism becomes intuitionally normalized in and through spatial configuration (p 139).” Here, the imagined Somali subject in the Toronto Life article is one outside of Canada, where they are both alien to the Canadian urban environment and unfamiliar with modernity. Accordingly, the 'periphrastic space,’ described by Goldberg and imagined by Stoffman, implies dislocation, displacement, and division — the primary modes by which Dixon becomes a space of racial marginalization, expressed and produced through the medium of mainstream media. Their bodies in that space are also evidence of their savagery. The modern buildings simply cannot contain the nomads – ie, Somalis.

Stoffman’s article next mentions Anab Osman as the first Somali he met and spoke to about the Somali diaspora. He writes that Somalis are “just like the Chinese and the Jews,
the East Indians and the Hungarians, Somalis have spread across the globe.” He also says that Anab has some 25 siblings, who are scattered across the world as a result of the civil war. With this brief introduction Mr. Stoffman stages the interview to be about the Somali immigrant experience, and after one meeting with Anab Osman, he becomes an expert on the Somali community in Toronto. The experiences and struggles of the Somali community are represented through Ms. Anab and Mr. Nor, but never experienced by the ‘Canadian’ reader. The audience of which both Stoffman and Christmas CBC documentary seeks, includes neither racialized Canadians nor refugees. Here, Dixon as a spatial location is permanent, while the constructed experience of the Somali body going through the space represents a particular image the author deems necessary. In order for us to deconstruct what each medium is telling us, we need to cut through the mythologies about Black Africans and in this case Somalis, to reveal the truth behind the crude and racist stories being narrated by CBC and the Toronto Life article. It is ultimately about stories of the dominant and the colonized; embodied white subjects telling the stories of incarcerated and immobile racialized bodies of the Somali character.

This form of ‘parachute journalism,’ continues in the article where Mr. Bob Swan is introduced to the reader as a friend of the Somali community in Dixon and “understands their political and social structures.” Stoffman tells the reader Swan, is a biologist who spent 10 years working in Kenya with Somalis and has now moved to Dixon to help them resettle in Canada. Stoffman tells the reader Mr. Swan first heard of Dixon at a refugee camp, where a person of Somali origin informed him that his brother lives in Dixon. No where does the author mention the fact that Somalis in Kenya and Tanzania,
before the Somali civil war in the 1990s, lived in these two countries for 300 years and like their South Asian counterparts own many properties and businesses, which begs the question what exactly was Mr. Swan helping Somalis with 10 year prior to the war? In fact, Somali refugee crisis in Kenya began in 1992 and the only aid supporting them were the UNHCR, (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) and Red Crescent and rarely would a Baptist Minister be allowed to assist the refugees unless he worked for these international bodies. However, I believe Swan’s story is intended to construct the Somali subject as a landless nomadic traveller, looking for fertile ground. Therefore, the writer intends to convey to his readers how Somali refugees had Canada in their sights as their new home, intended to overtake a given landscape, in this case Dixon neighbourhood.

The third person that plays a significant role in Stoffman’s article is Mr. Nor, referred to by the ‘journalist’ as a “talkative, sociable man who loves an audience.” Stoffman also mentions that Nor holds a degree in Economics, speaks five languages, and was recently laid off from a plastic factory job. Although the author states that Nor is an early Somali arrival to Dixon, he does not indicate much about his immigration and settlement experience in Dixon and beyond. Nevertheless the author of this article characterizes Nor in such a way that allows his credibility to maliciously batters the Somali community, as I will demonstrate later on in my analysis. Moreover, the author draws on cultural representation to qualify Mr. Nor’s ability to represent the community. Here, Stoffman gives Mr. Nor the “Sheik” title, which enhances his profile before the Canadian reader. In Islamic tradition, the title “Sheik” is only given to someone with religious stature in his or
her community and this title is the equivalent of a Priest or Rabbi. To non-Muslim Canadian readers who are unfamiliar with Somali culture, this title presented Mr. Nor as a religious figurehead worthy of speaking on behalf of the whole community. This particular chapter of Stoffman’s article embodies what critical race theorists call ‘the universalization of whiteness,’ where one or two racialized individuals can be the voice and representation of everyone in their community. Having a singular Somali story told through the white gaze, silences the diverse voices of the Somali community, while conceptualizing a racist and Islamaphobic caricature of the Somali subject in Dixon. The othering of the Somali community, which contributed to their marginalization in Toronto are touched on by the Somali women activists I interviewed:

**Bosaaso:** I am not taking anything for guaranteed, I know this can be challenging, my hijab can be challenged, and I have to be ready to fight for that. I know my religion can be challenged, I have to fight for that, I know my skin color will be challenged and has been challenged and I also have to fight for that. Fighting can be in a deferent way, I know I can fight with my pen, write my opinion in the newspaper, also call the TV to take views and questions, people have to see on TV this has to be stopped.

**Xamar:** I don’t want to see my community be a monolithic, un-complex, simplified and reduced community. We are very complex and we are ought to be, and we need to continue to claim and push for our nuanced to be acknowledged because only in that way will we continue to be humanized in these spaces and continue to get what is ours as Canadians and as human beings.

The mapping of the Somali subject is dissimilar to how Dixon Road is being mapped by Stoffman and the CBC documentary. Here, the boundary between Dixon as spatial location and the Somali subject is patterned and shaped as a constant barricade enforcing the difference between the two sites, preventing assimilation and integration. Dixon road is described as the epitome of Canadian urban living with medium-income families being
invaded by poverty and disease stricken fraudulent Somalis arriving from refugee camps in Africa. This cartographic space builds on the premise that reality can be modeled in ways that communicate to the reader and the viewer, an imagined spatial location and the bodies that move through it. Thus, what both mediums communicate to mainstream Canadians are two narratives bounded by the same geography if not the same history. Both the filmmaker and journalist play the role of the explorer, maintaining their ideal of ‘stable, rationalized space, while occupying a space that is chaotic and mobile (Kirby, p 47).’ Stoffman and Christmas are the stable rational subjects narrating the chaotic, unstable Somali subject that needs to be contained in Dixon.

The externalization and control of space both mediums seek to propagate goes hand in hand with their attempt to formulate a condensed caricature of the Somali subject. Both the article and documentary serve the purpose of introducing the Somali community to Canadians, in order that they might be fixed in space, Dixon and in time, nomadic and prehistoric era. In Kawash’s article (1998) we learn that people who are “without private homes and therefore by definition residents of public space are precariously positioned in the ongoing battle over who belongs to the public, who has access to public space, and who has the right to decide what uses of space are within the public interest” (p 320). Case and point in Dixon, where that public views towards the Somali subject, was one without property and their presence in these private condos was seen as “a threat to the property and place possessed and controlled in the name of the public interest” (Kawash, p 320). The threat of nomadic people who might be carrying diseases and foreign Islamic culture fostered a panic syndrome where landlords, security guards and the media
constructed ways to protect the public from them. It is through the “protection of the public” that public and private spaces are constituted as a place where non-citizens are evicted financially and psychologically if not physically. Thus, these formal forms of exclusion of tenant laws and State interventions are used to ensure that the Somali community is erased from the public imagination, and if that fails then next best thing is to confine and incarcerate them in a given space – Dixon.

5.1.3 Complicating the African Diaspora Discourse

Paul Gilroy (1994) in The Black Atlantic, describes African Diaspora as a counterculture to European modernity, to the project of the Enlightenment and its associated scientific rationalism. He argues against essentialist versions of racial identity and racial nationalism. More significantly, the slave journeys of the Middle Passage take on a foundational position in his book. Gilroy argues that the origin of the racial terror and dislocation is one shared by Black communities throughout the Atlantic (page 15), but one that he aims to rescue from what has otherwise been cast as wholly negative, perpetuating a limited sense of victimhood, cultural exclusion and inferiority (page 22). So, if we were to take a page out of Gilroy’s scholarly work about African Diaspora and apply it to the Somali community socio-economic oppression and systematic barriers, we can recognize that they share similar experience with the rest of the Black Diaspora in Canada. However, because they are identified as Muslims, Somali women are not just African and/or Black to mainstream Canadian society, including the African Diaspora. Rather their Muslim identity intersects with their racial marking, which has forced them
to redefine their faith in relation to their racialized lived experience in Canada. Somali women multiple identities are not stand alone, but it’s intertwined with being both Black and Muslim. Therefore, by rejecting the Islamaphobia essentialism of the hopeless, voiceless Muslim women in need of rescuing, Somali women activists reformulated their Somalinimo, one that includes their faith, gender and racial marking:

**Hargeisa:** Whether it’s just conversations that I have with friends, it almost like shall you pick your battles and not talk about this, or its going to happen so let’s just address it. I don’t let anything go, honestly speaking, which is sometimes exhausting especially when it comes to dealing with men in the community. If it is not the core issues, which are women’s right and youth, Somali youth engagement, I don’t have the energy to deal with.

**Kismayo:** I feel like I am part of a generation of young, Somali women who are refusing to let gender stereotype prevents us from speaking out. I am first and foremost an artist. I am also a social media activist apparently. When people see me doing these things and talking about these things with no shame, because I refuse for shame to be a reason to be silenced. I can see the ripple, like the ripple is a tiny wave right now, it’s not like a huge wave, but I fully see it developing momentum. I am constantly like pushing the idea of ‘Somalinimo,’ because that is literally my legacy.

The African diaspora, refers to Black communities that are descended from the historical movement of peoples from Africa, predominantly to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, among other sites around the globe. The term has been historically applied to the descendants of West and Central Africa who were enslaved and forcibly shipped to the Americas by way of the Atlantic slave trade, with the largest population located in South America, where 75% of Black slaves ended up, followed by America and Canada (Harris, 1993: pages 8-9). The term has recently been used to refer to contemporary emigrants from Africa, which is were my research paper puts greater emphasis on, in this case the Somali community in Canada. The phrase "African Diaspora" was coined during
the 1990s, and gradually entered common usage during the 2000s (Akyeampong, 2000: pages 183-215). Studies on the African Diaspora have recently moved in the direction of understanding the growing African immigrants in North America and its formation in contemporary time. This shift is in reaction to the traditional ways in which Africans have been described in European history and literature, as victims and people without much historical and socio-political agency. Often Africans and their descendants are portrayed as representatives of primitive culture and/or slavery. The current consensus among scholars like Paul Gilroy is that by observing the contribution of the African Diaspora to the historical and political development of Europe and North America, it gives us a more complete appreciation of their scholarly engagement and response to western modernity (Gilroy, 1994). The effect of the African diaspora on modernity can be viewed through the history and culture of its diverse communities from the Caribbean, Indigenous Blacks to recent African immigrants in Canada and the United States.

Moreover, the African Diaspora around the world has kept some ties to the African continent, creating a global community. Like them, the Somali community has carried with them their culture, values, views on public-private domain, and their spiritual beliefs. Unlike the descendants of the transatlantic diaspora, contemporary African diaspora in Canada maintain institutionalized ties to ancestral homelands, host societies, and other diaspora communities. Primarily this shift is attributed to the advancement of technology and its impact on the relationship between homeland and diaspora and the social networks between different diaspora communities (Kusow and Bjork, 2007, pages 2-6). All eight first generations Somali Canadian women activists I interviewed
emphasized the importance of having a strong sense of Somalinimo, which includes their faith, race and gender identities. Here, being a Somali was essential to their activism and they wanted to convey to future Somali generations that no matter where they are, their Somalinimo would be apart of them because we are living in a settler colonial land that will always other the Somali community no matter how many generations are born and raised here:

**Afgoye:** The first thing I will tell you and I will tell everybody is before you learn activism, become Somali. And what makes you Somali is learning the language and the culture. So, if you don’t know the language and culture and become this Somali person who speaks English but wants to help somebody Somalinimo, it will always be a problem. Your success depends on the success of the total Somalis. So, you can be living in Yellowknife, but at the end of the day if something happen to you, you will be the Somali lady Hodan. You should always learn the interconnectedness of you to the larger community. I think, we can rise together or we will fall together.

**Baidabo:** Second and third generation Somali youth are really not that different from their parents and they are not going to be that different from their children; the first generation and the last generation will have the same experience, slightly different. You may speak English better, you maybe able to advocate better, but you will always be asked where you are from and that is your true reality. Because of your Somali identity, you will never be able to belong completely and the earlier you accept that, the better for you.

Being a “Somali diaspora” then becomes a category that contains multiple meanings, including religion, ethnicity, race and nationality. Hence, the significance of putting emphasis on Somali women’s gendered and religious identity. More notably, the gendered nature of Islamaphobia, in which Muslim women are commonly portrayed as oppressed because of their clothing, is one simple example of the ways that cultural racism and sexism build on one another. In this case, the two systems of oppression interlink, affecting Somali women in ways that are distinct from the ways that
Islamaphobia affects Somali men, and from the ways that sexism affects non-Muslim women. Therefore, Islamaphobia cannot simply be understood as additive, the sum of being a Muslim plus being a woman. Critical race theorists, Himani Bannerji, Sherene Razack and Yasmin Jiwani, among others have demonstrated in their published work that all issues related to immigration, housing, legal system and social services are experienced in a particular way by women further marginalized by race, poverty, religion and language barriers:

**Afgoye:** Critical observation is you don’t need to look very far, where you see your community still on the ground. Unemployment is very high; hidden illiteracy among Somali mothers is high, school dropout for boys is high, you know now kids are killing each other. The homicide rate in Toronto in the Somali community is higher than any other group in the city.

**Xamar:** The hijab for me is recognizable anti-mainstream piece of clothing, that has been attacked, that has been a narrative of oppressive, the narrative of the oppressive women, and the narrative of the terrorist’s religion that narrative was there. I refuse for them to label it that way, so things like that, my religious journey has changed with my headscarf, it’s not religious expression at all for me, which my mom would die hearing, you know. It’s just the evolution of it, my activism has brought me to that conclusion, it might change back to it, but at the time, I wear it for making a political statement.

Somali women must therefore contend with barriers associated with being visible Muslims as well as other forms of social differences, such as race, gender and class that lead to multiple marginalities. The diasporic experience for Somali women then become positioned as distinct from that of the Caribbean and Indigenous Black Canadians, because they carry with them the identity of being Black and Muslim. This multiple identities convey all the racial and social schemes of Africanism and Orientalism. Here, both the Orient and the African has been an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Both of these subjects has been used by the west to dominate, restrict, define
and authorize the history and socio-political lived experiences of non-white populations around the globe. Accordingly, race and its articulations with religion, gender, class and sexuality continues to have fundamental importance in the construction of Black/diaspora identities. More significantly, Africa and its nations continue to be racialized within a global political and socio-economic hierarchy. Therefore, Diaspora studies in North America cannot fully tackle the constitution of racialized Black identity without direct engagement with the largest Black African immigrants who also happen to be Muslim: the Somali community. This articulation of a distinct diaspora identity can be seen in the participants responds about the nature of their activism:

**Afgoye:** I think in my activism, staying true to who I am; my Blackness and my faith have actually worked for me. I get invitation from some board, oh Afgoye, you fit what we are looking for, you are Muslim Black women in labour field, and a lot of identity they need. So, some of them want me for window dressing, while others are well intentional.

The anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia experienced by Somali women in Canada further cemented an intergenerational response among first generation Somali diaspora that while longing for a homeland, they continue to reject white supremacy’s tool of isolation and marginalization:

**Bosaaso:** When we came to this country, we did not open our suitcases we always hoped to go back. I am very much focused on change though, because we are not going anywhere, this is my country. I will live here until I die, I already buried my two parents here, so I don’t think I will be buried somewhere else. So I want this country to accept me as who I am, to accept the Somali community as part of the different ethnic community and we have to make sure in order for this to happen. It will not happen by itself, so many people have to sacrifice their time and money, we are paying from our pocket, in order to get a better life for my own children. I raised 3 children here, 4 children, but one was killed. So, I am fighting for their children too because we are not going anywhere.
Hargeisa: I want our culture and our way of living to inform and become mainstream. Why not, like why does it need to be Eurocentric and why does it need to be Judo - Christian way of living, why can’t Islam be part of that equation? I want us to be relevant and I want us to be part of the equation. As we move into this era of we are here, I don’t need to be on the outside shouting at you, I am an equal, I will sit next to you and tell you why you are wrong and I will prove to you, why you are wrong as a colleague, not as someone who is operating from the outside of the system.

Another social transformation that is significant to mention about the Somali Diaspora is the shift that occurred in gender relation and leadership roles. Historically, Somali society prior to the 1960s were pastoral and patriarchal, mostly men worked outside of the home, while women had domain over the household and rearing of their children (Duale, 1981). However, with decolonization and under the military regime of Siyad Bare, the role of the Somali women went under significant changes. The “promulgation of the family law” enacted in 1975 gave men and women equal rights in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance (Alim, 2008; Ingiriis, 2015). This law also promoted the equality of women in the workplace and in 1978 gave Somali women equal opportunities to participate in government and to reach positions of leadership (Forni, 1980; Aidid, 2010, Ingiriis, 2015). However, when these laws were enacted, not many women embarked on political life. Instead, a number of women started to enter the field of trade and business at all levels according to their ability to raise funds for family or other savings schemes. Furthermore, Somali women gained strong autonomy in business and demonstrated management capacities equivalent to that of men (Maxam, 2011, pages 2-4). The significance of this historical evolution can also be witnessed among the Somali women activists who came to Canada with their families:
Afgoye: You know, I came to Canada after I have done a lot for myself; I went to school in Germany and got my masters degree.

Berbera: What first generation, our parents in particular taught us, is you can always start from ground zero, you don’t have to start from the top or the middle; you can start your activism from scratch. My mom is one of the founders of Somaliland Canadian society.

Bosaaso: When I came to do my Masters degree in the United States it was with scholarship. I was working before I got the scholarship, worked for a long time in Somalia and then I came as a government-sponsored person.

Hargeisa: I am a mother of one, I am a Somali woman, Black Muslim, visibly Muslim. I work in public health; I have an undergrad and a Master in public health.

The Somali diaspora identity was formed after the collapse of the military regime that led to the civil war in 1991, forcing millions of families to immigrate to various countries around the globe. This in turn created the production of feminized spaces (Trtoz, 2011), evidenced by the presence of Somali women activists in various fields within and outside of the community, including the establishment of an Islamic learning circles, or Somali women opening local businesses and creating Somali market in Etobicoke and Scarborough to provide for their families. These opportunities have fostered a clear sense of communal belonging in relation to their gendered consumption practices. These spaces became a site to respond to ongoing intersections of racist and Islamaphobia experiences in Canada. The Somali women activists I interviewed spoke about the fact that their first site of activism was centered around their community, which was also the only space most Somalis were able to develop their professional credential in Canada:

Bosaaso: My work in Toronto is about educating Somali mothers about the system, a system that will always target their children, boys and girls. The organization that I am now in Positive Change, that’s what we organize. We work with the police, the juvenile
and prison systems where our boys are languishing, we with TDSB, which now we have reduced the drop out rate of our boys. I want to change the system that is not working for us. I can divide it into two, one thing is to change my community’s thinking, in order to integrate not assimilate. To integrate into the community they lived with. The other part is I want to change the system, in order to be fair to the Somali community.

**Hargeisa:** Having my activism start within my own community, made me extremely confident, I am comfortable within my own skin, I am comfortable with my skills. I am super proud of my people and what they were able to do, their resilience, their ability to come from hell and back basically. It’s almost enrages me when I see Somalis people who are not really as engaged or as proud, like we are great, come on, you can do it. I think definitely on a personal level, it’s a confidence boost.

Since the largest Somali Diaspora in Canada consisted primarily of women and children, the Somali community began to engage Somali women in leadership roles, where they became the visible voices and representation of the community. Whenever the imams or Somali men needed to make major decision that will impact the Somali community, or act on new projects such as building an Islamic school or a new Mosque, Somali women will be called upon for consultation. In fact, rarely are decisions made today in the community without the input of Somali women scholars and leaders. This dynamic gender and cultural shift among Somali diaspora community in Canada seemed to have led to negative consequence according to one of the participants of the research:

**Bosaaso:** We are coming from a culture where the husband is the head of the household. So, the husband provides the family income, he is entitled to do the expenses and to have a say. So, when we came here, we were given cheques whether through meagre employment or from social assistance and were written in the name of the mother. So, our husbands lost the power they had, so the family structure is damaged. After a while, because if I have an income and I never had an income before, then this is mine and I can do with it whatever I want. I can send it to my family because we were struggling back home. So, we mothers suddenly had tremendous power, we can say whatever we wanted in the house, we can decide which school the kids goes to, we can decide what to buy, we can decide without asking what he wants. So fathers became redundant in the family household. So what happened, they moved on. They moved to the United States, they moved to the Middle East or back to Africa.
Bosaaso assessment is one I have often heard, which adds to the narratives surrounding the fact that about fifty percent of the Somali household in Canada are often led by a Somali woman (Michael Ornstein, 2006), and the impact it has had on second generation Somali youth, boys in particular. This gender analysis about the patriarchal structure within the Somali family, which by and large collapsed due to migration stresses have also been touched on by other Somali women activists responding to my question around settlement and immigration challenges faced by the Somali community, Somali women in particular:

**Baidabo:** As a mother, I think the biggest challenges remain the same for parenting when it comes to women and men for that matter. The fact that men are not home is a huge issue for children and women as well. When you look at the majority of women coming from Somalia have lower standard of education or none at all, because where they come from and the families they come from have chosen that girls stay at home and boys go to school. That has put tremendous pressure on females who arrived in Canada without an education. With and without education you will have two different experiences. I know that I am privileged arriving here with an education and with the language skills and with the ability to advocate for myself, but womyn who cannot do that, I can only imagine what they go through, I can’t speak for that, but I see that every day.

The forms in which gender dynamic within the family and society develops are embedded in social structures of contemporary communities, where the gendered experience and behaviours of first generation Somali Canadian women can be best understood by examining the intersection of various ideologies of power, including gender, race, class, religion and ethnicity. When Somali women, where majority did not come with their husbands or adult male relatives immigrated from a highly patriarchal society with clear guidelines about gender role and responsibility to Canada with more or less fluid gender interaction, their familial responsibility shifted. Here, the social context
in Canada, which is still a patriarchal society, has influenced the perspectives and family
dynamics of the Somali community. Social theorist, Connell's (1987) have described the
ways in which power operates between genders by defining gender as a structure of
social practice:

Not only class but also race, gender, age, religion, etc., as social features structuring
women's oppression. Moreover, race, class and gender are seen as autonomous, though
intertwined, structural features through which power relations are generated to shape the
subordinate status of women. In this sense, unlike the other feminisms of the 1970s,
socialist feminists were not involved in disagreements about what to pinpoint as 'the
crucial source' of women's oppression” (Maharaj, 1995: page 55).

According to Connell (2005), gender is affected by both the impersonal power of
institutions and the more intimate and interpersonal connections between people. So
when the Somali women activists I interviewed emphasize the shift in power relations
between men and women in the community, one where Canadian culture does not
support, it draws an explicit picture where the relational and hierarchical function that
comprises of shifting masculine and feminine defined roles have collapsed after
migration. This perceived traditional role of Somali men as breadwinners, which does not
include actual parenting of their children (without assuming all Somali household
functions similarly), it would eventually lead to the collapse of such gendered relation.
Social theorists consider the performance of gender a by product of social interaction,
which maintains the patriarchal function in a society, which leaves women and children
vulnerable to an oppressive conditions that intersects with race, culture, religion, class
and other social relations (Garfinkel, 1967; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; West &
As was articulated by the participants in this research, the Somali community is suffering
from a toxic hegemonic masculinity through cultural representations of genders portrayed as natural, where the casualty of such limited perception about gender dynamic are Somali youth, boys in particular:

**Berbera:** Now as an adult, you see that male involvement is very important. Kids develop their behaviors and the way they function from 0 to 6. So, whoever you are today, it's because of what you did from 0-6 and I know our mothers are responsible for giving us that push, where we kinda excel, where our men are not involved in the child rearing, and I think that’s why our boys struggle and they need that strong male presence in their life. You need a role model that portrays an example of Black masculinity that is not what is portrayed in mainstream culture, specifically the media.

This social transformation in gender roles and income distribution also reflect on the global Somali Diaspora. It is approximated that 80% of the Somali income into Somalia comes from women (Maxam, 2011). Yet, there is a dichotomy in the contribution of Somali women to civil society, conflict resolution, their involvement in government, and their participation in currently functioning political systems. Additionally, the International aid and governmental agencies rarely consult Somali women pertaining to issues that directly impacts them and their children, such as humanitarian aid contributions, although these same organizations have little objection in investing in male clan leaders who are not engaged in the reconciliation process (Yasmeen Maxam, ibid).

Overall, the Somali Diaspora has experienced dramatic social and political upheaval since the civil war. One that has changed the gender dynamic within family and society at large, but without the structural support in Canada, and the acknowledgement by Somali men and international bodies within the global context.
Chapter Six

Historicizing Black Women Activism in Toronto

The following review of literature is divided into three distinct but interconnected parts. First, I briefly historicize the activism of Black women in Canada, Toronto in particular. Secondly, I theorize the lived experiences of Black women activism within the context of critical race theory and transformative feminism. Whether it was about the direct involvement in the anti-slavery movement, the resistance to segregation through civil disobedience or the significant role education advocacy, religious and community organizing played in the Black community, Black women were irrefutably present and active in the fight for racial and gender equity in Canada. Thirdly, I provide a brief historical overview of Somali women activism in Somalia, prior to the civil war, which led to them immigrating to Canada.

6.1 Black Women Activism: A History of Resistance and Empowerment

Black women activists have always highlighted the ways social categories intersect with lived experiences. In this case, race, gender, class and sexual orientation formulate a system of oppression, where individuals embody them and carries it as they encounter the world everyday (Combahee River Collective - Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1994). Social theorists and feminist scholars have articulated that these social identities are not rigid, rather fluid, but its oppressive means and methods continue to impact people’s lives.
Audre Lorde, in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” illustrates the ways in which Black women have to constantly choice certain parts of their life and deny or hide others that challenges patriarchy and hetronomative privileges (Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1994: 283-94). Black women activists have long acknowledged the special circumstances of their lived experiences in Canada and the United States: the commonalities they share with women and Black men, one of sexism and racism. Thus, Black women are confronted by both a women question and a race problem, where their experiences with oppression and marginalization are due to the dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism (Terrell, 1904; Lerner, ed., 1973; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1994). This particular narration can be explicitly seen in my interview with first generation Somali Canadian women activists, affirming the significance of Intersectionality when analyzing their lived experiences.

Historically, Black women’s bodies were the battlegrounds from which white men employed violence and sexual assault as a tool to buttress their notions of racial and gender supremacy, to demonstrate power, and to disrupt Civil Right movement’s progress through harassment and intimidation (Friedman, 1979; Lerner, 1972). As Sojourner Truth was the first to connect Black oppression with women’s oppression, Black women were also the first to break the silence around rape by testifying before Congress following the Memphis Riot of May 1866, during which a number of Black women were gang-raped by a white mob (Lerner, 1972). From the abolitionist/anti-slavery era to present day contemporary concern over police brutality and racial profiling, Black women in Canada have been a leading force for change. The experiences of Black
women in many of these historical movements of resistance to systematic oppression and societal marginalization is both gendered and racialized. By gendered and racialized, I mean that the mobilization of resources, the structures of power, access to justice, and the experiences of Black women activists were all affected by the racial and gender constructions in Canada and the United States. Hence, theorizing about alternative conceptualizations of being a Black woman on a settler land is crucial to their activism because there is power in naming and critiquing the dual oppression of their lived experiences. As bell hooks indicates in her essay, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” theory has a healing power, in particular when theorizing is connected to action, critical reflection, and practice and lived experiences (hooks, 1994). For instance, Black women’s activism in Canada has taken many forms, individually and collectively: by initiating and leading critical changes in their own communities, while seeing themselves as an active part of a larger citizenry (Bristow, 1993:146). Therefore, for Black women activists, one cannot speak about race without making reference to issues of class, gender, ableism and sexual orientation (Beale, 1970; Henry, 1998; Spivak, 1988; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2000; Nash, 2008; Njoki, 2013).

6.1.1 Black Women Activism in Toronto

The Black community has been in Canada approximately 400 years, where the first Black person to have set foot on Indigenous land was Mathieu Da Costa, a multilingual free man who was an interpreter for Samuel de Champlain’s 1605 expedition into Quebec (Switala, 2006). Not much is known about Da Costa, other than the fact that he came
from one of the oldest and most advanced empires in West Africa, Benin Empire, where he was a freeman kidnapped by European colonial explorers for his multilingual talents (Strayer, 2010; Taveira, 2006). He is thought to have been fluent in Dutch, English, French, Portuguese and pidgin Basque, the dialect many Aboriginals used for trading purposes (Strayer, 2010; Johnston, 2012). Moreover, most Black settlers in Canada were either those that escaped slavery through the underground railroads with the help of Harriet Tubman (Clinton, 2005; Petry, 2007); or the Black loyalists, who settled in Nova Scotia in the 17th century (Kimber, 2008), including the Maroons from Jamaica (Grant, 2002).

The first wave of Black loyalists were approximately 2,500 slaves brought by white American loyalists, where the British government promised them freedom, land and rights in exchange for services during the American Revolution, 1775–1783 (Walker, 1992). The second wave of Black settlers were mostly merchants and labourer, a total of 3000 settled in Birchtown near Shelburne, while the rest set their homes in New Brunswick (Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia: Bccns.com; Grant, 2006). Even though most of the Black settlers were escaping American slavery and segregationist law that limited their options to exist and prosper, historians have detailed the racial violence, and prejudicial legal system enacted to exploit Black settlers and immigrants alike in Canada since the 1600 (Hawkins, 1972; Walker, 1992; Beaton, 1995; Terborg-Penn, 1995; Jakubowski, 1997; Clayton, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Backhouse, 2001; Carson, 2002; Murdie, 2002; Novac, Hulchanski and Darden, 2002; Darden, 2004; MacDougall, 2005; Teixeira, 2006; Kimber, 2008; Besner, 2014).
Suffice to say, Canada’s history despite its race-free and gender-neutral attempt in literature, illustrates one where Black communities, Black women in particular have consistently resisted socio-economic segregation and political disfranchisement. More significantly, few scholarly work exist today, mapping out the activism of Black Canadian women and the fundamental role they played in both shaping Canada as a nation and in surviving the double jeopardy of being Black and women. Some scholars have called the crucial role Black Canadian women played in the advancement of civil and gender rights in Canada, the silent / invisible history that is often absent from public education and academic curriculum (Bristow, 1994; Hill, 1996). In the words of Rosemary Brown, speaking at the first meeting of the National Congress of Black Women in 1973, “…If you read the traditional history books you will find that we have never been here and indeed are not here even now - the invisible people - because where judicious prodding might unearth the names of one or two of the males who made contributions in the past - the digging has to be deep indeed to find the women” (Hill, 1996: 12). The historiography of Black Canadian activism tends to embrace men as the center, while rending Black women leadership in the advancement of the civil and political rights invisible.

By historicizing the Black Canadian women socio-political role, I will identify current literature on the topic, while attempting to fill in the gap through my qualitative research where it might exist. Therefore, it is within this contextualized summary of Black Canadian history and experiences with settlement, white supremacy, systematic racism and historical erasure that I will center the focus towards Black women activism in
Canada, Toronto in particular. Questions that come to mind are, how do we theorize and construct Black women history of activism in Canada? What are some of the significant additive Somali Canadian women activists can make to a four hundred years old history of anti-slavery, anti-segregation, anti-Misogynoir, class warfare and racial justice?

6.1.2 Decolonizing History: Black Women of the Civil Rights Movement

Audre Lorde states in Sister Outsiders, “it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves, we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment,” (Lorde, 1984: 45). As I illustrated in previous chapters, Black women's history has been at worst invisible, and at best marginal in Canadian literature, whether it’s by white male writers or by white feminists, with little analysis about racial injustice and economic oppression. By failing to make race, gender and class central to the analysis of women's history, these white authors and ‘activists,’ have dismissed the role “interlocking system of oppression,” such as race, gender and class plays in shaping the lived experiences of Black women, while making whiteness central to the narration of Canadian history (Herbert, 1989; Pierson, 1991; Gayle, 1995; Hill, 1996; Bristow, Brand, Carty, Cooper, Hamilton, Shadd, 1999). Therefore, making race along with gender central to historical analysis will reconstruct the way feminist historians write history, which will reveal hidden histories of racialized women to the forefront. In essence, when race, class and other oppressive factors are made visible in history and the ways it shapes women’s lived experiences, we come to learn the differences among Canadian women. While white feminists are privileged not to give much thought to their race, Black women can never escape the material cost of
their race, gender and class position in a white society that has marginalized them for hundred of years. Hence, why it has always been important to Black writers, academics and activists to preserve and narrate their own lived realities and that of their forbears and the tremendous sacrifice they have made for the progress of their community and that of Canadian society as a whole. In the following sections, I will highlight some of the Black Canadian women activists that have shaped government policy, legal framework and influenced societal perception about race, gender and the role public institutions play in Canadian education.

The Story of Mary Ann Shadd Cary

One of the first Black women activists in Canada was Mary Ann Shadd. She was also the first Black female publisher in North America and the first woman publisher in Canada, where she founded and edited The Provincial Freeman newspaper (Rhodes, 1999; Dagg, 2001; Downie and Errington, 2010). Shadd was born free in the slave state of Delaware in 1823, her parents were abolitionists, and their home was a station for the Underground Railroad (Bearden, 1977; Snodgrass, 2008). In September of 1851, Shadd attended the Convention of Colored Freeman in Toronto, where she met Henry and Mary Bibb, Black Canadian activists and publishers of the Voice of the Fugitive, an anti-slavery newspaper (Rhodes, 1999; Glass, 2006). The Bibbs persuaded Shedd to take a teaching position near their home in Sandwich, Upper Canada west, present day Windsor, Ontario (Library and Archives Canada; Bearden, 1977: 22-40). She immigrated to Canada after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act by US Congress in 1850, which allowed slave owners to recapture
escaped enslaved persons in states where enslavement had been abolished (Shadd, 2008; Library and Archives Canada). After immigrating to Windsor, Shadd began to write for the Voice of the Fugitive and opened a school for fugitive Black children (Library and Archives Canada/MIKAN 3191895).

Eventually, Shadd parted ways with Henry and Mary Bibbs, due to philosophical and political disagreement over Bibbs advocacy for racial separation for Blacks to prosper, while she believed Black immigrants aught to integrate into white society and strive to be as independent as possible (Bearden, 1977; Silverman, 2007). Shadd’s perspective on racial integration and Black independence in mainstream society was reflected in her writings, where her newspaper motto was “Self-Reliance Is the True Road to Independence” (Archives Ontario retrieved on November 2015). Eventually Shadd established an integrated school in Windsor that was open to all who could afford to attend, since education was not yet publicly funded (Rhodes, 1999; Tobin, 2008). In order to promote the successes of Black people living freely in Canada, Shadd began the Provincial Freeman newspaper (Downie, Errington, Robertson, 2010: 137), becoming the first Black women in North America to publish a newspaper, although at first she had to have a man - her co-editor, Samuel Ringgold Ward, a well-known public speaker and escaped enslaved person living in Toronto to stand in for her as the apparent publisher and author of her writings (Sadlier, 1995; Rhodes, 1999). Prior to returning to the US to work as a recruitment agent in support of the Union during the American Civil War, Shadd obtained her Canadian citizenship (Library and Archives Canada; Tobin, 2007). After the war, Shadd moved to Washington, DC, where she taught and eventually
pursued law studies, becoming the first Black women to acquire a law degree at Howard University (Bearden, 1977; Rhodes, 1999; Tobin, 2007). In the later part of her life, Shadd joined the women's suffrage movement, to fight for the right of women to vote and was herself the first Black women to vote on a national election (Breon, 1988; Tobin, 2007). Even though Shadd eventually left Canada returning to her birth country, in 1994, she was designated a Person of National Historic Significance in Canada (The Canadian Encyclopaedia, retrieved on January 11, 2016).

The Story of Viola Desmond

A decade before Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama public bus ignited what would become the civil rights movement in the United States, a Black Nova Scotia business women named Viola Desmond became the face of resistance to Canada’s own Jim Crow law of racial segregation in public spaces (Backhouse, 1999; Warner, 2010). Viola Desmond was a thirty-two-year-old, Halifax born beauty salon entrepreneur who owned “Vi’s Studio of Beauty Culture,” which provided hair and cosmetic services to Black and racially mixed clientele in Halifax (Warner, 2010; Backhouse, 2001). In addition, her “Desmond School of Beauty Culture” trained Black female beauticians from across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec, all of whom were denied admission to whites-only beauty schools (Backhouse, 2001: 19). Desmond civil disobedience and ultimate legal challenge to Nova Scotia’s racist segregationist policies began when her car broke down while she was on a business trip to New Glasgow, Nova Scotia (Backhouse, 1999: 238-40). Forced to wait while her car was
being repaired, she decided to purchase a movie ticket at the Roseland Theatre, where she was told by the white cashier he would only sell her a balcony ticket, explaining: “I’m sorry but I’m not permitted to sell downstairs tickets to you people” (Backhouse, ibid). Recognizing instantly that she was being denied downstairs seating on the basis of her race, Viola Desmond made the decision to sit at the downstairs section of the theatre, which ultimately led to her being physically dragged by the white theatre manager, with the assistance of the white police chief, who arrested her (Backhouse, ibid). Since the police could not charge Desmond with ‘watching a movie while Black,’ they brought her up the next day to the white New Glasgow police magistrate and charged her with tax evasion. The legal ploy was necessary because there were no formal laws on the books to enforce racial segregation in theatres or in most public spaces in Nova Scotia (Backhouse, 1999). Instead, the authorities used the provincial Theatres, Cinematographs and Amusements Act, which required that theatre patrons pay an amusement tax based on the price of the ticket (Backhouse, ibid). The Roseland Theatre charged forty cents for downstairs seats, and thirty for upstairs seats, including a tax of three cents on the downstairs tickets and two cents on the upstairs, and since Viola Desmond decided to sit at the downstairs seat, while holding an upstairs ticket, she was one cent short on tax (Backhouse, 2001: 18).

In the case of King v. Viola Irene Desmond of 1946, she was arrested and charged for refusing to leave the “whites only” main floor of a movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. Viola Desmond was the only non-white person in court during her arrest and trial, neither was she advised of her right to counsel, or told she might seek an adjournment
(Backhouse, 2001: 18). When she attempted to explain that she had offered to purchase the downstairs ticket and was denied, the court ignored her and proceeded to convict her with twenty dollar fine (Backhouse, ibid). Shocked and disturbed by her arrest and quick conviction in the span of two days, after her return home, to Halifax, Desmond began to organize the Black community to help her mount a legal appeal. As a successful and respected figure in the Black community in Halifax, Desmond spoke with a number of Black leaders who convened a meeting of the newly established Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People – NSAACP (Backhouse, 1999: 245). The question of whether to appeal Viola Desmond’s conviction, or to begin fund-raising to bankroll such an initiative, provoked heated debate in the community. There were those that feared racist backlash if the community decided to legally confront racial segregation, including questions over whether equal admission to theatres was a pressing issue when more serious concerns over housing and employment injustice was facing the Black community (Backhouse, 1999: 243). Others have accused her of trying to pass for ‘white,’ as the reason she decided to sit in the downstairs portion of the theatre, but Desmond and subsequent research and interview with her family confirmed the allegation to have been unfounded (Backhouse, ibid). Desmond was apparently unaware of the segregated seating policy, and initially wanted the seat on the main floor because she was shortsighted and could see the movie more clearly from closer range. However, when she was told to move to the balcony on the basis of her race, she made the decision to stay seated as a civil disobedience on her part and demand equality in access and treatment for the Black community in Nova Scotia, rather than a ploy to claim white identity (Backhouse, ibid).
Regardless, those who supported her and advocated for eliminating racial segregation in public facilities eventually won out, and the NSAACP joined with the Black press to support Desmond legal challenge. The Black community rallied behind her by raising funds and hiring legal counsel and despite the fact that their collective efforts to challenge the unjust arrest and conviction of Viola Desmond, Nova Scotia Supreme Court dismissed the application for judicial review in 1947 (Backhouse, 1999: 246). The failure of the legal battle was disappointing to many, but most legal observers consider Desmond the torch that ignited the Black community in Nova Scotia to challenge and ultimately win a number of successful campaigns for integration in the workplace and public sphere (Backhouse, 1999: 243-44). Prominent Black figures in the province reflecting back on Desmond civil disobedience and legal battle for the elimination of racial segregation considered her ‘aggressive’ tactics to have “…enhanced the prestige of the Negro community throughout the province” and spawned “much of the positive action” that subsequently ensued” (Colin, 1986: 84). Viola Desmond was eventually granted a posthumous pardon, the first to be granted in Canadian history, which was released on the eve of her death, on February 1965, at the age of 50 years old (Carlson, National Post, 2010; Backhouse, 2001). The government of Nova Scotia also apologized for convicting her for tax evasion and acknowledged she was within her right to resist racial discrimination (Warner, 2010; Nova Scotia Canada, April 15, 2010). Viola Desmond story exemplifies the significant presence of Black Canadian women in the history of civil rights activism. One where Desmond decision to legally challenge against racial segregation deeply entrenched in Nova Scotia’s society made her one of the first women in Canada to ignite civil rights activism.
The Story of Kay Livingstone

Livingstone was born in London, Ontario, in 1918 to politically and socially engaged parents, who founded the Dawn of Tomorrow, the first Black newspaper in Ontario (Hill, 1996: 21). Livingstone was a television personality and radio actor and had a show titled the "Kay Livingstone show" for CBC radio in the early 1950s (Hill, 1996: 22). Her show explored the traditions and cultural activities of Black people in the diaspora (Hodge, 1975; Hill, ibid). She is attributed in reformulating the Canadian Negro Women’s Association (CANEWA), which was originally called the Dilettantes; a social club consisting of Black middle-class women that met to organize bakes sales, dance classes and garden parties (Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 84). According to the founders, Rella Draithwaite, Penelope Hodge and Aileen Williams, as membership grew, the Black women in the Dilettantes wanted to address problems facing the Black community in Toronto, in the hope of fostering a more socially conscious Black women organization (Wharton-Zaretsky, ibid). CANEWA shift from a social club to a more politically engaged organization was attributed to the needs of a Black community unsure of its place in Canadian society in the aftermath of World War Two (Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 85). In particular, Kay Livingstone is credited as the main figure that transformed CANEWA from a social club to an association intend on addressing the education of Black youth and other social concerns at the time, in order for members and the community to “…become aware of, to appreciate and further the merits of the Canadian negro” (Hill, 1996: 14). When she joined the Dilettantes, Livingston proceeded to immediately change both the name and the club's focus. As the new organization's first
president, she encouraged members to take up social activism and service oriented projects in the Black community (Hill, 1996). An early CANEWA undertaking, and one which would continue throughout the group's existence, was the provision of scholarships to Black students. Later activities included the organization of the Calypso Carnival (which later became known as Caribana Festival) as a fundraiser for other service projects (Braithwaite, 1976; Hill, 1996).

Kay Livingstone served as the president of CANEWA from 1951 to 1953 and continued to play an influential role in the group for many years afterwards. She was the guiding force behind CANEWA's most public success: the first National Congress of Black Women, which was held in Toronto from April 6 to 8, 1973 (Hill, 1996). The Congress brought together 200 women from across Canada, workshops were held on subjects such as education, single parenthood, senior citizens, and resolutions on many subjects were passed (Hill, 1996: 95). Most importantly, the Congress inspired the delegates to maintain close ties with each other, leading to further conventions at Montreal in 1974, Halifax in 1976, Windsor in 1978, and Winnipeg in 1980 (Library and Archives of Canada retrieved on January 11, 2016). It was at the Winnipeg meeting that the Congress of Black Women was formed, an organization which today has over 600 members and is one of Kay Livingstone's legacies (Hill, 1996; Library and Archives of Canada, 2016).

Moreover, Livingstone was said to have been the originator of the term "Visible Minority" (Hill, 1996: 23). According to a 1975 tribute after her sudden death in 1974, where Penelope Hodges published article titled “A Tribute to Kathleen Livingstone" for
the Canadian Negro Women’s Association, a paper of the Ontario Black History Society stated: Kay was determined that minority groups should not be overlooked and it was she who coined the phrase 'Visible Minority Groups' which has been picked up and used so liberally in this past year by the media (Hodge, 1975). This political phrase still used by Statistic Canada and public institutions shaped how Black Canadians and people of color were spoken about in the dominant discourse (Hill, ibid). In particular "visible minority" distinguished Blacks and people of color who were visibly different from whites (not just in their socio-political and economic opportunity) from those who were ‘white presenting’ (Hill, 1996). Thus, the term "visible minority" was an organizing tool, which CANEWA members used to challenge discriminatory policies and unjust institutional practices in education, policing and immigration (Hill, 1996: 14).

In recent history, the term "visible minority" has become a contentious issue, where some feminists have argued it’s a divisive tool often used to divide and conquer among racialized communities, rather than a political term to address systematic racism and societal marginalization (Bannerji, 1998/2000; Turner, 2005; Álvarez, 2007). Moreover, studies have shown that the use of visible minority obscures the anti-Blackness that is rooted in Canadian institutions and mainstream society, where more often than not Blacks and people of color are invisible to mainstream society and media (MacGregor, 1989; Simms, 1989; Pierson, 1993; Goldberg, 1994; Kusow, 1998; Bhabha, 1998; Turner, 2005; Álvarez, 2007). Nevertheless, according to Hobbes and CANEWA founders, Livingstone's construction of the term "visible minority" was intended to provide an organizing tool from which to make "visible" to the federal government the
concerns of the Black community and people of color in Canada (Hodges, 1975; Hill, 1996). In the last years of her life, Kay worked as a consultant to the Privy Council of Canada, travelling the country in preparation for a conference on visible minorities in Canada (Sadlier, 1994; Hill, 1996). One of the people she met on her travels was Carrie Best, where after Livingstone's death in 1975, Best formed the Kay Livingstone Visible Minority Women's Society in her honor, an organization that provided educational funding for young Black women making a difference in their community (Sadlier, 1994: 72). In 2012, the Canadian government recognized Livingstone as a Person of National Historic Significance.

National Congress of Black Women (NCBWC)

The first National Congress of Black women was organized by CANEWA and its president, Aileen Williams, and was the basis for the creation of the National Congress of Black Women of Canada - NCBWC (Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 93). The NCBWC and its members were instrumental in engaging the Canadian government and public institutions, such as Toronto District school Board, to make visible the racism and historical erasure Black Canadian, Black women in particular continue to experience. The two main resolutions of the newly formed NCBWC were twofold: protection of Black women domestic workers and reconstructing Canada’s public education by including Black Canadian presence and contribution in classroom curriculum (1973 Report of the First National Congress of Black Women; Silvera, 1983). For instance, NCBWC denounced Canada's immigration policies that discriminated against Black and other immigrants
from developing countries. In particular, the organization criticized the Domestic Scheme section of the Immigration Act, which in the 1970s only permitted temporary resident status to Black women who wanted to immigrate and work in Canada (Silvera, 1983: 9; Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 94). This was in contradiction to the legislation itself, enacted in 1955 and titled ‘West Indian Domestic Scheme,’ which provided automatic permanent residence to West Indian domestic workers coming into Canada, but immigration officers and the law itself discriminated against Black women and the gender disparity entrenched in Canada’s immigration policy regarding women was highlighted by NCBWC (Calliste, 1991: 136; Bristow, 1994: 2017-20). The resolution also called for international effort by Caribbean and African governments in challenging Canada’s immigration law towards Black womyn (Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 94). In particular, the NCBWC resolution paid special attention to the possible sexual abuse of Black women domestic workers by white and Black men, since they faced legal limbo and were often single with little familial or institutional support (Wharton-Zaretsky, 1999: 95).

Moreover, NCBWC report called on TDSB and public educator to include Black history in curriculum at all levels. The authors of the report, members of the Black Women Congress were also willing to lend their knowledge and assist school boards in writing the curriculum, one that included Black Canadian history, one that reflected the multi-racial and multi-cultural society, centering anti-racist educational training to teachers and administrators:

Accordingly we recommend that sensitivity training be compulsory for all teachers and that courses in psychology and sociology address themselves particularly to the pathology of racism, with a view to helping teachers free themselves of those stereotypes

Founders of the NCBWC and the author of their significant resolutions, Braithwaite, Hodge and Williams, believed racism in public education was an institutional problem, one that impacts the learning and success of Black Canadian students (Braithwaite, 1973; Walker, 1979; Braithwaite and Ben-Ireland, 1993). Hence, the call for anti-racist training and inclusive educational curriculum was crucial to their public advocacy; to reflect an informed and non-white centered teaching tools that would benefit Black and non-Black students alike.

The National Congress of Black Women of Canada was critical in making visible the living history, contribution and activism of Black women, one that engaged public institutions and society in the interest of Black women and the Black community. Some of the significant legacies of NCBWC, which is a continuation from CANEWA are: Black History Month, Caribana, and the political language/terms, such as ‘visible minority,’ and ‘multiculturalism,’ that shaped legislative policies enacted by the Canadian government. This in turn, visibilized the contribution and concerns of Black Canadians, even though we still have a long way to go in creating a Canada that is not white centered in its erasure of First Nations, Black and other racialized history. Some might even argue that the monetary gain from present day corporatized Caribana fails to address the financial need or reflect the political will of the Black community in Ontario. However, what NCBWC and CANEWA have achieved in establishing Black History Month and Caribana, is that it provided the basis of political advocacy for Black
Canadians, while giving the government the global clout of a supposed ‘multicultural Canada,’ including the profit Caribana provides yearly to the city of Toronto. Even though the vision and goal of the founders of the National Congress of Black Women was not about financial gain and more about providing the political agency and advocacy for Black Canadian women, it nevertheless shaped the national discourse about Black Canadians and their contributions in both the public and private sphere.

6.2 A Radical Pedagogy: Black Canadian Women Activism

The systematic oppression and societal marginalization Black Canadians experienced for centuries have been the driving force behind Black women activism. The Black community, Black women in particular have continuously resisted white supremacy and challenged institutions that uphold whiteness as the unearned privilege in education, legal system, employment, housing and healthcare, which disfranchises racialized communities (Braithwaite, 1973; Walker, 1979; Braithwaite and Ben-Ireland, 1993; Bristow, 1994; Hill, 1996; Henry, 1998; Cooper, 2000; Backhouse, 2001; Darden, 2004; Teixeira, 2006; Reading and Wien, 2009; Besner, 2014; Nestel, 2012; Pollock, Newbold, Edge and Lafrenière, 2012). Here, gender and race cannot be separated when theorizing and analyzing the lived experiences of Black women and their activism. As one of the Somali Canadian women activist I interviewed indicated to me, you couldn’t be Black today and a Muslim Black women tomorrow, for Somali women, all three components are integral and inseparable part of who they are and the work that they do.
Black feminist theorists were the first scholars to challenge the misogynoir\(^1\) reflected in history and in feminist scholarship and educational theories. One method they used was to deconstruct the term ‘woman,’ but many of their insights, warnings, and appeals still remain unheeded (Cooper, 2000: 40). For instance, Black feminists and activists have called for the "particularization" of the term ‘woman/womyn,’ one that sees the heterogeneity of Black Canadian women, because Black women historical experiences as members of the same racial group vary and are shaped by religion, colorism, language, class, sexuality, and culture (Gayle, 1992; Cooper, 2000). In essence, the experience of a Nova Scotia Black woman is not the same as that of a Jamaican Black woman in Toronto, or a Somali woman in Ottawa, despite the commonality of their race and gender. All of these women carry with them their particular history in Canada, their class, visible faith or lack thereof, language, gender and sexual identity, and how all of these interlocking system of oppression shape lived experiences. For instance, the lived experiences of Somali women in Canada is multilayered because its one that reflects their race, gender and visible Muslim identity.

Social scientists have increasingly acknowledged that there are multiple understandings of the world, multiple ways of theorizing and validating knowledge. For instance, sociologist, Annette Henry has emphasized the need for scholars to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Black women history, because often than not “one Black woman’s story becomes a kind of canonic text, universalized as representative of Black woman

\(^1\) Misogynoir refers to misogyny directed towards Black women, grounded in the Intersectionality of race and gender. Queer Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey, coined the term to address misogyny toward black women in American visual and popular culture.
everywhere” (Henry, 1998: 8). Here, misogynoir renders readers satisfied with limited understandings of the complex and diverse history of Black Canadian women, one that generalizes an entire diaspora population. Rather, we need diverse theoretical understandings of marginalized experiences, where we can attempt to historicize Black woman life and work (Henry, 1998: ibid). Moreover, in presenting Black woman as agents of history, there has been an overwhelming need to replace ‘victimhood’ with ‘resistance’ to oppression. However, acknowledging the historical facts that Black woman has for the past three centuries in Canada suffered gender and racial injustices does not diminish their activism and advocacy.

In presenting the complexity and heterogeneity of Black women history, it allows the reader and researcher alike to access literature that insists on “presenting the complexity of the sources of power and weaknesses in women’s lives” (Gordon, 1986: 25). There should be no dichotomy between being a victim of white supremacy and a fighter of institutional racism. After all Black women resistance and quest for new paradigms of knowledge production are in response to the unrelenting oppression and marginalization they have experienced and continue to do so. This was clearly reflected in my interviews with FGSCWA, where most expressed the importance of acknowledging the diversity in identity, lived experiences and activism of Somali Canadian women:

**Kismayo:** I wanna normalize a lot of taboo topics, like sexual violence because I am a survivor, mental health cuz I have a lot of mental illness, and also advocate for those Somalis that no one wants to acknowledge, like those in the queer community, who are dismissed and invalidated. They shouldn’t be silenced. They shouldn’t be tugged away in a little corner.
Xamar: I don’t want to see my community be a monolithic, un-complex, simplified and reduced community. We are very complex and we are ought to be, and we need to continue to claim and push for our nuanced to be acknowledged because only in that way will we continue to be humanized in these spaces and continue to get what is ours as Canadians and as human beings.

One realm where Black women activism has historically centered on is educational pedagogy, in particular, equal access to higher learning and racially informed curriculum for Black youth. This was in response to what educational theorists Frank Reeves and Mel Chevannes (1983) called the ideological construction of Black underachievement. For decades, there has been an acceptable racist discourse in Canadian literature about Black children, which reflected, according to sociologist, Annette Henry the “language of theories about Black cultural and linguistic deprivation, notions of disadvantage and underachievement, of immigrant deviance” (Henry, 1993: 208). In other words, research and educational curricula has perpetuated white supremacist ideological thinking (Lawrence, 1981; Saakana & Pearse, 1986; Yekwai, 1988), which in turn has systematically failed Black youth in public education (Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1991 and 2015). For instance, despite the historical perception of Ontario, Toronto in particular as a safe haven for African American escaping slavery in the United States, it has a legacy of segregation and anti-Black racism in public education (Houston and Prentice, 1988; Knight, 1997; Rhodes, 1999; Glass, 2006; Bakan, 2008). This legacy of racial segregation might have disappeared by the mid 20th century, but anti-Black racism have continued to persist in public education, something expressed by the Somali women activists interviewed for this research:
Burco: A lot of our boys are treated like criminals in the school due racial profiling. I think our mothers are very intimidated by the system, even 20 years down the road, they are still intimidated because racism still exist.

Baidabo: Racism and discrimination within the school system, within mental health and justice system where justice is not equal for all; all of those issues are interconnected.

From a Canadian historical context during the 19th century, there was a growing influx of African Americans, which precipitated a hostile environment where white communities throughout Ontario began to exclude Black children from attending public schools (Bakan, 2008: 3-29). White parents lobbied the provincial government for legislation to legally enforce their existing practice of excluding Black children from public schools (Knight, 1997: 275). This deliberate effort to limit access to education for people of African descent is rooted in Canada’s history of anti-Black racism, dispelling the myth of a meritocratic system of education. One man in particular named Edwin Larwill, a school commissioner in Raleigh Township, editor of the Chatham Journal and local politician, was the leading figure of a racist movement in western Ontario, which opposed funding for African Canadian schools in 1841, despite the fact that Black settlers as taxpayers contributed to the rebuilding and running of white schools (McLaren, 2004; Bakan, 2008; Hamilton, 2011). In 1848 his anti-Black resolution was supported by the Western District Council, which represented the counties of Essex, Kent, and Lambton, the most important areas of black settlement in Ontario (McLaren, 2004: 32). A year later Larwill led opposition in and around Chatham to the planned Elgin settlement southwest of the town in Raleigh, by claiming “the Negro is a distinct species of the human family ... far inferior to the European.... Amalgamation is as disgusting to the eye, as it is immoral in its tendencies and all good men will discountenance it” (Simpson, 1971: 335). The
superintendent of schools for Canada West, Egerton Ryerson, complied with this request and added a provision to the Common School Act of 1850 that allowed racial segregation in public schools:

> It shall be the duty of the Municipal Council of any Township, and of the Board of School Trustees of any City, Town or incorporated Village, on the application, in writing, of twelve, or more, resident heads of families, to authorize the establishment of one, or more, separate schools for Protestants, Roman Catholics, or Coloured people (Wilson, Stamp and Audet, 1970: 232).

Racial segregation in education was legal in Ontario for decades to come, despite the advocacy of Black parents and educators for inclusive, non-segregated public education. Black residents continued to pay their property taxes, which funded the growing public educational system in many Ontario communities, without accessing and benefiting from it (Walker, 1999; Bakan, 2008). Toronto was the only city in Ontario where racial segregation in public schools was not the norm. One of the few literature on this topic argued that the presence of anti-slavery activists, including an affluent population of African Canadians, which immigrated over a century and had established a strong infrastructure to support new Black immigrants, prevented such blatant racist practice to take hold (Hill, 1963: 76-84). However, others have argued that with a 2% Black population in Toronto, compared to 20-30% Black communities in southwester region of Ontario, segregated schools were less of a concern in Toronto and more of an issue in communities with strong presence of Black Canadians (Shad, Cooper and Frost, 2002; McLaren, 2004). Besides, most of the Black community was concentrated in one area of the city, St. John’s Ward (Shadd, Cooper and Frost, 2002: 33), which meant Black
children mainly attended the same school in their district, eliminating the need to seek white-centered public schools (Shadd, ibid).

Suffice to say, the legacy of racism, segregation and anti-Blackness is deeply entrenched in Canadian public education, which presently reflects in the ways educational curriculum erases Black history and school administrators targets and pathologies Black youth in public education. This in turn necessitates the importance of carrying out educational research and theoretical analysis that speaks to the experiences of Black Canadians and the political work involved in Black women activism (Gilkes, 1988; Collin, 1990; Henry, 1993). In Canadian literature, rarely is the Black community conceptualized as a site of political, cultural, and intellectual resistance. In educational models and feminist scholarship, rarely are the complexities of Black women activism examined whether it’s in relation to the Black community or ‘mainstream’ society. This deficiency in Canadian methodologies and epistemological knowledge, one that pushes Black women activism in the margin speaks to the centrality of whiteness in literature. In other words, if history as stated by Robert Young in ‘White Mythologies,’ is a “humanist invention that depends on an excluded non-Western other and the assimilation of contradictions and differences to re-constitute a Western self,” then history is the “West’s greatest myth” (Young, 1990: 3). The normative discourse that has developed and shaped scholarly research and scientific methodology since the 19th century, is one that operates from a Eurocentric perspective to “affect an egotistical and….white supremacist constitution of the West that negates, appropriates, and incorporates the other” (Young: 34), in this case Black women. Therefore, it is incumbent to ask, how do Black women
researchers and activists exonerate from their thoughts and work the unnamed and often implicit white supremacist normative ideologies, which affirms a racist discourse that pathologies the Black community? Furthermore, can we reconstruct an alternative theoretical model that speaks to the lived experiences of Black women activists, one that deconstructs the language of dominance and oppression prevalent in social science paradigms? These are some of the questions I will explore in my concluding chapter, as I reflect on the racialized and gendered experience of first generation Somali Canadian women activists.

6.3 Somali Women Activism in Somalia

White anthropologists and researchers have mostly caricaturized Somali people, its territories and history into a monolithic and simplistic history (I. M. Lewis, 2002). This is in contrast to the complex, rich traditions, socio-political structures, and tribal norms and customs that describe Somalis before and after decolonization (Cadaan Studies, 2016: Harvard workshop). Therefore, in order to offer a comprehensive overview of Somali women political movement and social activism prior to the civil war and immigration to Canada, I will provide some key historical factors that connect the activism of the eight Somali women I interviewed with the past, without venturing beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, its important to acknowledge that Somali women political and social activism is over seventy years old beginning in the 1940s, thus playing a crucial role in the formulation of Somali national identity, advocating for an independent and unified Somali territories (Alim 2008; Ingiriis, 2015).
Somali society prior to the 1940s was mainly pastoral and patriarchal, where mostly men worked outside of the home, while women had domain over the household and rearing of their children (Bryden and Steiner 1998: 67). Since Somalis are primarily composed of tribal and clan allegiances, Somali men have always held dominance on all major political decisions, including marriages, conflict resolution, divorce, inheritance and judicial procedures (Bryden and Steiner, 1998; Ingiriis, 2015). Consequently, Somali women were excluded from any and all decisions in the public sphere. Despite these gendered cultural exclusionary practices, Somali women have actively resisted these toxic patriarchal practices and negotiated their own public spaces to be heard (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964; Ingiriis, 2015). One method through which Somali women have resisted political and cultural oppression is in poetry, which is called ‘buraanbur’ in Somali. According to Dr Lee V. Cassanelli about Somali poetry is,

> Not only cherished form of artistic expression and popular entertainment, it is also a major vehicle for social commentary on events of interest to the community (Cassanelli, 2011: page 10).

Another form of resistance Somali women employed to challenge patriarchal structure in society and the erasure of their voices was by employing historical dissidents to counter men’s dominant narrative about Somali history. Somali women wrote heroic mythical female characters and lionised their roles in society, one where according to Ingiriis (215), “they literally monumentalise–themselves in using sheeka- xarirooyin (mythical tales), such as the stories of the mythical Queen Araweelo, a legendary phenomenal woman who was thought to have once ruled northern Somalia and Dhegdheer, another
legendary autocratic woman held to have oppressed Somali men under her rule” (page 378).

Furthermore, historians have noted the different gender normative discourse between northern Somaliland (former British colony) and southern Somaliland (former Italian colony); one where the former had a more nuanced practices about gender relation, while the latter limited women influence in society. Northern Somaliland is claimed to have ‘extremely’ autonomous and independent women (Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964: page 24), while southern Somaliland restricted the freedom of women, their rights to land ownership in particular until the 1980s under Siyad Bare regime (Besteman, 1995: page 193). However, Somali women in the south had more authority in matters of religion, where rural women often led their own movement (jameecooyin/community), where female sainthood was promoted (Mukhtar, 1995; Kassim, 1995; Reese, 2008). For instance, a legendary poet, Dada Masiti, is the only documented woman saint in Somali history (Kassim 1995: page 34).

During decolonization, Somali women were active in independence movements and election procedures, demanding the right to vote and political participation in government (Alim 2008; Ingiriis 2010). On the one hand, in October 1958, southern Somalia while under UN trusteeship (Tripodi 1999: 359) became the first territory to grant women suffrage (Castagno 1964: 535; Lewis 2002: 159). On the other hand, northern Somaliland allowed women to vote in 1961 a year after decolonization, where they voted for the referendum on national constitution (Bayne 1965: 104; Lewis 2002: 178). Somalia’s
democratic governing structure and political freedom was short lived though, with the military coup of Major General Mohamed Siad Barre, in October 1969 (Ingiriis, 2015: page 386). Shortly after ascending into power, Barre focused on gender policy, to further legitimize his military regime (Alim 2008; Ingiriis, 2015). Under Bare government, the “promulgation of the family law” enacted in 1975 gave men and women equal rights in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance (Forni, 1980; Duale, 1981; Aidid 2010 and Ingiriis 2011). This law also promoted the equality of women in the workplace and in 1978 gave Somali women equal opportunities to participate in government and to reach positions of leadership (Forni, 1980: pages 19-28). Somali women were also encouraged to serve in all level of the military, including the National Security Service (NSS), considered Somalia’s own version of Gestapo, thus becoming an arm of the military political repression (Ingiriis, ibid: page 387).

However, when these laws were enacted, not many women embarked on political life. In fact, some historians have challenged the claims by western authors that Siyad Bare military regime revolutionized gender relation in Somalia or that it supported Somali women’s political freedom:

 These narratives tend to overlook the condition of women in terms of freedom of speech and freedom to form independent associations, a right they enjoyed under the successive post-colonial governments prior to the military rule. Similarly, analysts have failed to consider women living in rural areas, rather than focusing on urbanised women, who allied themselves to the regime, in part because the regime recruited women adherents who could put military men’s interests before those of their fellow women’s (Ingiriis, 2015: page 376).
Since political repression and imprisonment were being implemented by Bare regime, which included Somali women (Ingiriis, 2015: page 389), many fled the country, while others started to enter the field of trade and business at all levels according to their ability to raise funds for family or other savings schemes. Furthermore, Somali women gained strong autonomy in business and demonstrated management capacities equivalent to that of men (Maxam, 2011: pages 2-4).

Whether it is Hawa Osman Taako, the icon of Somali liberator killed during the armed uprising against Italian colonial return in 1948 (Eno, 2008: pages 126-29); or the rise of Somali women political artists, such as Maandeeq calling for equity and justice for women (Ingiriis, 2015: page 383); or the political activism of Fadumo Alim, the first Somali woman to graduate from a university in 1962 (Duale, 1981; Aidid 2010), Somali women were present and active in all sphere of life in Somali territories. The significance of this historical documentation can be witnessed in my interview with eight highly educated and informed Somali women whose activism was critical to the Somali community. Whether their activism was a continuation from Somalia, or began after immigrating to Canada as children, first generation Somali Canadian women work continues to echo that of their foremothers in Somalia.
Chapter Seven

Conclusion and Recommendations

I have demonstrated throughout this thesis the complexity and multiplicity of Somali women activism, one that is socially and politically organized through relations of accountability within the community and mainstream society. I specifically analyzed two sets of interrelated social relations of accountability: individual accountability to anti-Black racism and anti-Islamophobic principles, as well as community responsibility towards systematic change. I described how first generation Somali Canadian women activists negotiate their commitments to Blackness and Islamic identity within existing social relations, where their activism is understood as both responding to anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia impedes in Canadian institutions and as a contestation of gendered cultural norms and misogynoir within the Somali community. Significantly, this thesis offers a conceptualization of first generation Somali Canadian women activism guided by the intersection of race, gender, religion and social location within neoliberal multiculturalism, which tend to depoliticize body politics. This chapter will summarize previous discussions and further analyze the different sites in which first generation Somali women perform their two sets of accountability and the practical and pedagogical implication that their activism holds for researchers and Canadian society at large.

The goal of this research was to develop an analysis of the personal, socio-political and community dimensions that led first generation Somali Canadian women to activism. To
achieve this, I interviewed eight first generation Somali Canadian women activists, exploring their dual experiences with anti-Black racism, Islamaphobia and their response to systematic barriers and societal marginalization. Throughout this research, I showed Somali women activists are very much conscious of the different spaces they occupy as a Somali, which includes their Blackness, gender and Muslim identity. I also demonstrated how their activism simultaneously responds to and shapes social processes within the Somali community. The following summary is divided into three parts: philosophical underpinnings, reflections on the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women, and the limitation encountered in researching the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women.

7.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

In the first two chapters of my thesis I detailed the research goals, reviewed theoretical perspectives on activism, and analyzed the findings of my interview with eight first generation Somali Canadian women activists. In addition, I set out to explore the factors that contributed to their activism through the lens of critical race theory, Black feminism and diaspora discourses, which allowed me to begin began formulating questions for my research, which I ultimately posted to participants:

1. How have Somali women negotiated and challenged institutional racism and societal marginalization in a neoliberal multicultural state?
2. How has their activism informed both their lived experiences and perception of self as Black Muslim women in Canada?

3. What are the different sites of resistance from which FGSCWA perform within the Somali community and the larger society?

These research questions in chapter one, developed from my own lived experiences, growing up with a mother that is socially engaged and a respected leader within the Somali community, and my social justice activism as a first generation Somali Canadian woman, including the academic knowledge I have gained by reading and researching about the history of Black women's activism in Canada. My aim was to understand from the perspective of critical race theory and Black feminist thought, the activism of first generation Somali women as a resourceful tool for the Somali community to overcome systematic barriers and social marginalization, while simultaneously critiquing patriarchal cultural norms and toxic gender relations within the community.

In the first chapter, I centred by research questions within a theoretical framework by defining key concepts in the literature review. Having a detailed scholarly review in my study provided a more nuanced perspectives about the layered context within activism in theory and in practice. Here, I examined interrelated theories on activism, from political and social activism, to civic volunteerism, adult education and antiracist feminist thoughts. Moreover, these theories have showcased the limitation imposed on the activism of Indigenous and racialized communities to transform relations of power that
are oppressive to them because ultimately it threatens the economic and political structures of a white settler colonial land.

Overall, the literature review in the thesis provided a context, historical backdrop and philosophical debates about Black women activism, first generations Somali Canadian women in particular. My interviews in combination with the literature described how the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women within the Somali community and mainstream society, facilitate tangible systematic change and cultural shift, while simultaneously limiting the possibilities of revolutionary change in a neoliberal multicultural state that is invested in the economic and socio-political marginalization of racialized communities. After all, these governmental and societal structures are not just thematic, rather they perform and enact particular social relations that are often based on “interlocking systems of oppression” and economic exploitation. Nevertheless, in spite of the multiple challenges facing first generation Somali Canadian women activists within and outside of the community, the findings of my research calls for a more nuanced possibilities about activism that supports the Somali community and larger Black diaspora quest to dismantle anti-Black racism, Islamaphobia and misogynoir. Ultimately, my intent is to examine the different sites of resistance first generation Somali Canadian women perform their activism, within and outside of the Somali community. Here, developing an analytical tool to observe everyday social relations of accountability among first generation Somali Canadian women activists is critical to achieving sustainable tools for progress.
My method of inquiry outlined in Chapter Two illustrates a semi-structured interviews that draws from life history approach, which allowed me to gain an in depth understanding of the activism and lived experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women. These interviews created the space, where participants were able to discuss their life prior to immigrating to Canada, their lived experiences, while reflecting on the social, economic, and political spaces they inhabit within the Somali community and mainstream society. This in turn enables me to communicate to the reader, how systematic barriers and social marginalization built on anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia led to their activism. In addition to utilizing personal narratives in my research, I also drew from critical race theory, Black feminism, Marxist feminism, anti-racist feminism, Radical adult education, and post-colonial and diaspora literature to develop a conceptual framework that guided my thesis development.

Moreover, exercising life history narrative in my analyzes, enabled me to capture intergenerational dialogue between first generation Somali Canadian women activists, one that speaks to a divergent concept about Blackness, gender politics and Islam. My research extensively focused on the nature of activism and the different ways in which Somali women provide spaces for the Somali community to reclaim their nuances and agency as subjects seeking systematic and societal change. I actively implemented several life history concepts throughout this process, such as Haglund’s (2004) assertion that life history methods can help connect past experiences to present day behaviours, which can be extrapolated that activism does occur in a vacuum. Consequently, by acknowledging the agency of each Somali woman activist I interviewed and their
personal journey, it enabled me to gain a more holistic perspective about their activism.

As I have previously noted, my research focused on the nature of FGSCWA which emerges out of everyday resistance to “interlocking systems of oppression,” (Colins, 1994, 2002) that targets the Somali community. I mapped a conceptualization of Somali women activism that centers on Somalinimo (Somaliness), which includes Blackness and Muslimness through relations of accountability and change; I looked at the ways in which Somali women activists mobilize the community and allies. In short, I used the concepts and tools of life history method to depict fully the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women, outside of the influences of governmental authority or cultural boundaries.

7.2 Reflecting on the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women

In chapter four, I reviewed scholarly literature about the Somali community migration and settlement experiences in Canada. My analysis explored the Somali immigrant story by providing a historical overview of the Somali community’s immigration and settlement process, and the systematic racism and social marginalization they experienced in Ontario. I talked about the disintegration of civil society in Somalia that precipitated a mass upheaval of the Somali community, bringing many to Canada. I highlighted the experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women continue to be shaped by previous governments’ oppressive policies and the anti-Black racism and Islamaphobic stories from mainstream media. Throughout chapter four, I demonstrated that the Somali community came to Canada with only the clothes on their back, with their
children and extended family members to support. They had to learn a new system in order to fight for legal recognition; challenged school administrators who attempted to criminalize Somali children; fought and won for the changing of social housing policies in order to keep their families together. Here, the settlement experience of the Somali community was the first site in which the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women emerged. Black feminist scholar, Alissa Trotz (2011) explores the significance of female migration in the formulation of Black migrant subjectivity: that in between spaces, which is neither here nor there, locating Black women in the communities they are apart of, where they have families and less about a distinct geographical location. In the case of first generation Somali Canadian women activists, there must be a shift in the focus from a place of origin to lived experiences and consequently to a more open-ended exploration of the changes that contributed to their activism.

In chapter five, I explored the complexity of Blackness and diaspora identity of first generation Somali women activists. I further critiqued the notion of Blackness that excludes the Somali community, in what I called, the triple consciousness of first generation Somali Canadian women activists. Specifically, I analyzed the term ‘Somalinimo,’ both as an adjective to describe the Somali community in Canada, and an adverb that denotes characteristics that includes Blackness and Muslimness. I further examined what Somalinimo means to first generation Somali Canadian women activists, one where the Intersectionality of their multiple identities is acknowledged. Somali women activists in this research have rejected the othering of their Blackness; one where colorism strips away the diversity among Black diaspora, while anti Black racism
permeates Muslim spaces. I further expanded on the Intersectionality of Somalinimo by exploring Paul Gilroy’s notion of the African Diaspora, and about how Blackness is performed differently by the Somali community. The story of the Somali community in Canada goes beyond the horrors of civil war, forced migration and the struggle for legal recognition. As was illustrated in this chapter, the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women are about challenging the interlocking forms of marginality experienced by the Somali community. More importantly, the participants’ activism is directly connected to their identities as Black Muslim women in Canada.

In chapter six, I mapped a trajectory of Black women’s activism in Canada in the past 200 years. I also, provided a brief overview about Somali women activism in Somalia, prior to the civil war that led to them immigrating to Canada. The account of Black women activism showed that they were always actively present and engaged in challenging systematic white supremacy and social marginalization. I argued that the history of Black women’s activism in Canada should be understood in relation to the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, which produced multiple responses to anti-Black racism and misogynoir. The accounts of Black women everyday activism in different spaces demonstrates a long history of socio-political movements that managed to influence public policies and social relations on a settler colonial land. The activism of Black women in Toronto further demonstrated a relation of accountability to one’s self and to the public. The first form of accountability is identifying and publically acknowledging the interlocking system of marginalities faced by Black women, one of gender and race, including other oppressive forms. The second form of accountability is
related to keeping government entities and the public accountable for the active role both play in fostering economic and political marginalization. In this case, social categories intersect with lived experiences where slavery, segregation, anti-Black racism and misogynoir have inflicted deep historical pain still felt by the Black communities in Canada. What the literature review in chapter six on Black women’s activism honed for me is that the activism of Black women in Canada is about self-liberation and community affirmation through social justice. By publically declaring Black Lives Matter, Black women’s lives matter, their humanity, their presence, and history matter, the Black diaspora communities are declaring socio-political emancipation beyond white supremacy. To be counted and represented in all that is Black diversity in a settler colonial land ultimately matters to Black women, which includes first generation Somali Canadian women activists.

7.3 Limitation encountered in researching the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women

In chapter three and four, my conversation with first generation Somali Canadian women activists touched on the advantages and disadvantages of being an activists and advocates within and outside of the community. Most considered collective organized effort to have more of a long-term impact, while for some their activism is about pushing cultural boundaries and naming harmful elements within the Somali community. In her article, Building from Marx: Reflections on Race and Class, Bannjeri (2005) states that:
Race, gender and class come together and are expressed through the concept of 'intersectionality'. It is said that each is developed through its own 'social terrain' and then crisscross and overlap with each other. In reality, lived experiences of women happen all at the same time, not separate or even related to the women's personal experiences of them. They should be thought of as cumulative and happening all at once within the person. (p. 144)

The lived experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women activists provide a specific context for examining the interdependency of their multiple identities and how it shaped their immigration and settlement experiences, and continue to do so. My research assessed all the factors associated with social structures, such as power relations, emotional relations, and gendered relations as described by social theorist Connell (1995/2009). Here, these social structures interact with normative influences in Canada, producing adverse impacts on the Somali community, Somali women in particular. However, it is important to note that gender patterns in the Somali community changed in the past twenty-five years and the most significant changes are in leadership and family relation. My analysis in chapter five and six, explored the centrality of Black feminism, critical race theory, and diaspora identity within and outside of the research participant’s community. Specifically, I observed how first generation Somali Canadian women activists incorporate Somalinimo, in their definitions of self, which includes Blackness and Muslimness. Examining the everyday activism of the research participants, I found that their personal ideals intertwined in all aspects of their activism.

Furthermore, I highlighted the ways in which first generation Somali Canadian women activists multiple identities are positioned within relations of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and faith. Thus, the participants’ activism is intended to unravel intersecting
relations of oppression tied to their identities as Black Muslim women and their experiences of being gendered and racialized. However, in spite of their personal commitments to anti-Black racism, first generation Somali Canadian women activists’ personal accounts within the Somali community showed a contradictory cultural perception about Blackness and gender politics. It’s in these contradictions of anti-Black racism and gender praxis that were explored fully in chapter six. Here, Black women historical account of activism demonstrated the different ways critical race theory and Black feminism were incorporated. I argued that the spaces first generation Somali Canadian women activism creates to support anti-Black racism and a more inclusive Muslim identity are both supported and constrained. The participants continue to struggle against patriarchal cultural practices within their community, and against Islamaphobia and anti-Black racism in mainstream society. As was detailed in chapter four, some of the Somali women activists spoke about being silenced, sanctioned and pushed out of different communities as a result of their activism challenging the normative discourse around race, gender and religion.

Furthermore, most of the participants in this research expressed concerns about the othering and evictions they experienced in Black spaces, including embedded oppressive assumptions about being a Black Muslim woman. My analysis in previous chapters focused on an exploration of the contradictions, tensions, and discrepancies between the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women and the practices of an anti-Black racist principles that expands on the concept of Blackness. The participants’ ideal commitments and activism at different sites continue to be challenged because of the
limited assumptions about Blackness and Muslimness. Here the normative ideas of Blackness exclude the Somali community by identifying Blackness as non-divergent and monolithic, which is the essence of white supremacy. To further elucidate the research problem, in chapter six, I developed an analysis of first generation Somali Canadian women activism within and outside of the Somali community. I argued that the contradictory and complex ways the Somali community defines Blackness in conjunction with Muslimness could only be understood by dismantling the presumption of static Muslim identity. Today, the Somali community remains a visible African diaspora community, marked and rendered hyper-visible at the intersection of orientalism and Africanism. In particular, Somali women are often the more visible presence in the community: their hijabs, jilbaabs, long black dresses, and non-Eurocentric outward signs marks them as visible Muslim women.

Additionally, there is a consistent gap in research about the Somali community, one that examines the ways in which Blackness and Muslimness intersects and mutually reinforce one another. Majority of the scholarly work and media documentation about the Somali community conducted in the past twenty years are deficit based, as supposed to asset based (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995; Stoffman, 1995; Jakubowski, 1997; Razack, 2000; Cynthia Wright, 2000; Pratt, 2002; Brons, 2001; Abdullahi, 2006; Hoehne, 2009; Forman, 2011; Jenkins, 2010), where the story of the Somali immigrant is always centered around the civil war, the failure of the nation state, legal battles, piracy, and more recently gang violence and terrorism. This in turn led to the formulation of a fixed perception about what it means to be a Somali in Canada, one where failure, helplessness, crimes and low
expectations are the only story told in the media, establishing a caricature of the Somali subject in the public mind. The participants in this research similarly articulated that perception dictates reality and it continues to marginalize the Somali community. Therefore, having the illegitimate, fraudulent, criminal and terroristic Somali image in the public spheres, leads to a community at the margin, where anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia are embedded in society. Case and point, the high unemployment rate among second generation Somali Canadian youth are attributed to the anti-Somali sentiments in mainstream society, which constantly others and dehumanizes the Somali community. There are countless stories of Canadian born Somali youth, boys in particular who face discriminatory practices in their employment, where despite their education and skills, many employers refuses to hire them. For example, the case of Jama Hagi-Yusuf from Kitchener and his complaint to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario over race based employment discrimination after applying to an entry-level position at an investment company. As was detailed in his interview with CBC, the employer declines his application, because of the ‘Somali culture of resistance to authority,’ where the letter read:

"I have read stories about how Somalia has a culture of resistance to authority. Such a culture would be quite different than the Canadian culture sees makes cutting ahead in a lineup as a great social error. The investment industry is a subculture with its own rules and traditions. It is normal for people to train for entry into this field. While your academic career suggests the training would be well within your competence, there is no demonstrated enthusiasm in past experience for entering this subculture. Due to lack of background, I must decline your application." Good luck with finding a suitable position. The letter was signed by J Sandy Matheson of Integral Wealth Securities Limited (CBCNEWS, July 07, 2016)
The blatant anti-Black racism Yusuf experienced is an example of how being a Somali entails an “interlocking system of marginalities” (Collins, 1994, 2002) that includes race, gender, ethnicity and religion. Here, being a Somali becomes an uncontested state of being in Canada, one that carries consequential racist schemes that is detrimental to the well being of the Somali community. What this thesis offers by interviewing first generation Somali Canadian women activists, is a more holistic and nuanced perspective about the Somali community, which focuses on what is working, individual and community success and the tools being developed and implemented by Somali women activists. The findings of my research demonstrate the Somali women in the thesis are fully cognisant of the challenges facing them, as they are equally competent and resourceful to empower themselves and their community. My analysis assumes the Somali community are fully capable of addressing systematic racism and social marginalization and well prepared to reclaim their narratives from those who attempt to speak for them and about them. The activism of first generation Somali Canadian women is significant because it rejects what Sherene Razack (2005) called "culture clash," where white settler colonial countries, in this Canada perform a rescue mission as the icon of liberty and tolerance that would save women of color, from their patriarchal cultures. The Somali women like most Black women in this country have been rescuing themselves and reclaiming their public and private spheres in their communities and mainstream society. As was mentioned by the Somali women activists I interviewed, what they cannot escape in a white supremacist society is anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia.
7.4 Grounding Somali Women Activism in Relations of Accountability

The Somali diaspora community in Canada is both dynamic and fluid and as much as it still carries and reinforces normative cultural practices, it also supports multiple sites from which power relations are being contested. The scholarly contribution of my thesis is in its analysis of the dual roles first generation Somali Canadian women activists perform pertaining to relations of accountability. I frame the subject of accountability in relations to both challenging systematic anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia in a neoliberal multicultural state, and in pushing against toxic patriarchal notions about gender relations and feminism. Examining how relations of accountability are constituted within the Somali community allow for a more nuanced understanding of cultural transformation, resistance to oppression and inclusive feminist spaces through the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women. Rendering visible the multiple sets of relations in an activist work is critical to analysing first generation Somali Canadian women. The participants in this research have expressed that their activism is about negotiating relations of accountability to themselves, their colleagues, their family, their community and to the larger society.

It has been over twenty years since the public became aware of the Somali community, mainly due to the CBC documentary and Toronto Life article, which was a cautionary tale for Somalis about the material costs of subjugation associated with Blackness (Kusow, 1998). As was described in the previous chapters, Somali women often bore the brunt of anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia, expressed not only in the media, but also by
social service personnel, administrators and bureaucrats with whom Somali women had
to deal with on a daily basis. For all of these reasons and more, first generation Somali
Canadian women often found themselves overburden with keeping their families
together, fighting for housing and income, challenging teachers and school
administrators, and dealing with the complex legalities surrounding police carding and
criminal justice system. First-generation Somali Canadian women, mothers in particular
have been at the forefront against systematic anti-Black racism and social
marginalization. It was not until 1992, for instance, that refugees became eligible for
social housing in Toronto. It was Somali women who fought the battle that changed the
rule (Mohamed, 1999).

The activism of first generation Somali Canadian women narrates a history of resistance
and resilience that has left little space for self-care and healing. The layers of trauma the
Somali community is still experiencing, as a result of the civil war, the settlement
process, systematic barriers is one of the key analysis that emerged from my interview
with first generation Somali Canadian women activists. The Somali community was
never quite fully settled in a way that supported Somali women and their children.
Rather, social services and the Canadian government imposed further obstacles for the
Somali community just to access housing, schooling and social services. This in turn
hindered Somali women’s mental health as a result of obstacles in navigating anti-
immigrant, anti-Black and an Islamaphobic system. The stories of the Somali community
in Canada go beyond the horrors of civil war, forced migration and socio-economic
marginalization. Nevertheless, the activism of first generation Somali women is not just
about what has happened to them or their community. Rather Somali women activists experiences include what happens when they engage in socio-political activism that shaped their social transformation. And how their social transformation was realized by reconnecting with their Blackness and Muslimness, one that has redefined their identities as being both Black and Muslim in relation to their Somalinimo.

7.5 Suggestions and Recommendations

There is a saying in Somali, “Af jooga loo ma adeego - You should not speak for one who is present,” in reference to whose story is told and how it’s narrated. As a first generation Somali Canadian women and as an activist-researcher, this thesis is about the agency and authority of a community that is always studied, spoken and written about with little critical thought or the inclusion of its diverse voices. The Somali story has yet to stand independent from its colonial legacy, where its history continues to be crafted by white supremacy. Canada and its history of genocide towards Indigenous population and legacy of slavery has invested greatly in formulating a European identity that holds cultural hegemony, which in turn carries material cost for Somali women’s autonomy, thoughts and presence in public and private institutions. For instance, corporate media, the legal system, educational institutions, as well as publically funded broadcasting networks are complicit in turning the Somali identity and experiences into a monolithic, uncomplicated and orientalist framework that functions as a form of eviction. Whether it was the CBC film, Toronto Life article or recent Vice documentary, the Somali community continue to be depicted as a social hazard from a ‘Third World primitive
culture.’ The Somali diaspora is uniquely racialized by a discourse created through colonialism, whereby everything from place of origin to notions of criminality depends on the Intersectionality of Blackness and Muslimness. The lived experiences of first generation Somali Canadian women activists and that of their community can be summed up by an Ewe-Mina proverb (a Niger–Congo language): “Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

My research suggests a number of possibilities through which first generation Somali Canadian women activism can be understood, as well as a tool to support researchers and student activists in their quest to mobilize their community and the public in the interest of anti-Black racism and social justice. I believe students, educators and activists alike can benefit from this study. Today, there are so many first and second generation Somali Canadian women and men who are researchers, writers, poets and emerging scholars that non-Somali researchers are not required to conduct fieldwork research on the Somali community. So, I strongly suggest for both Somalis and non-Somali potential researchers to decolonize the tools in which they conduct their work within marginalized communities. It’s incumbent upon us researchers to be critical of the traditional Western ways of ‘knowing’ and researching about Indigenous and Black diaspora. The extensive research methodologies and ethical guidelines at our disposal often depend on the researcher’s ‘gaze’ towards its human subjects. Accordingly, until Indigenous communities can tell the story of how America was “discovered” by European colonizers; until the global African diaspora can write the history of colonization and dispossession, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade; until marginalized communities
become the narrators of their lived experiences, and it is reflected in our public educational curriculum, history will remain partially complete, and will continue to privilege the perspectives and ‘knowledge’ of white supremacy.

Moreover, my research illustrates that the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women is on one hand about creating and fostering a more inclusive feminine space within the Somali community that can transform gender relations and normative cultural practices; while on the other it aims to shift inequitable social relations in mainstream society, where anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia reign supreme. Drawing from my extensive research and the knowledge shared by the participants and their concept about activism as relations of care and commitment, I outline four main recommendations about activism and sustainable change:

- For racialized women activists, Somali women in particular, to always reclaim their own story and to take moments for self-care and healing. Fighting for social justice and against anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia can lead to a process of individual and community retraumatization. Hence it is self care to take a step and refuel yourself by developing supportive network among fellow Black and other racialized women activists (Sundquist, 1995; Waters, 2001; Pavlish, 2010; Kroll, Yusuf and Fujiwara, 2010).

- Activists and social workers interested in engaging with social justice work must avoid the savior complex. The goal of Somali women activists is not about the inclusion of their marginalized identity and lived experiences within Canadian
mainstream society. Rather the aim is to decentralize the dominant narratives about Blackness and Muslimness. Mere diversity touted by Canadian multiculturalism leaves oppressive white supremacist structures intact.

- Be conscious of the ways in which neoliberal multiculturalism depoliticizes activism. Here, the respondents highlighted that when social justice ideas are enacted outside of organizations that are beholden to government and corporate funding’s, you can avoid the depoliticization inherent in liberal ideologies, where activism is rendered manageable and palatable.

- The importance of developing politicized partnerships and coalition building with other activist movements, such as First Nations. In particular as a racialized people living in a settler colonial land. Here, having divided agenda in the field of social justice limits the impact the Somali and other Black Muslim communities can have in their campaign against anti-Black racism and Islamaphobia.

The knowledge gained through this thesis writing process offered me a unique opportunity to reflect on first generation Somali Canadian women activists, the intersection of Blackness and Muslimness and the diaspora experiences of the Somali community. My hope for this research is that these insights I garnered will be valuable to Somali researchers, academics, social justice practitioners, regardless of their context. All I can offer as a researcher-activist is a reflection on the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women, by narrating these activist voices and by analysing and engaging with these narratives. I invite those who will read my work and engage in the practice to take into consideration the implications and value of this thesis.
Appendices

Appendix A – Informed Consent Letter for Participants

❖ To be presented on OISE letterhead

Dear (Potential Participant’s name):

Thank you for considering participating in my research project. I am currently enrolled in the Adult Education and Community Development program in the Department of Leadership and Higher Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). This research will comprise my MA thesis in that program, and the study will be conducted under the supervision of Professor Shahrzad Mojab. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information that you need to better understand what I am doing and decide whether or not to participate. Should you choose to participate in this research, only I the principal investigator and my supervisor, professor Mojab will have access to the data collected. Your participation is completely voluntary and, should you decide to take part, you will be free to withdraw from this study at any time up until its submission to my supervisor in March 2016.

My research project is titled: First Generation Somali Canadian women Activism, and will involve one-on-one interviews with approximately 6-8 participants. What, essentially, I am doing is speaking with Somali Canadian women, between 25-60 years old, who have been engaged in both formal and informal activism, whether it’s the grassroots level or at a more political participation. Ultimately, I’m hoping to determine how their activism has shaped their lives, the Somali community, influenced public policies and informed community workers in addressing socio-political marginalization, racism and Islamaphobia. For the purposes of this study, activism is characterized by engagement with the institutional mechanisms of the Canadian government, public institutions as well as the non-governmental sector. If you’re interested in participating, you should therefore be an activist that is or was regularly engaged in pertinent issues that impact the Somali community in Toronto. You may also be a frontline worker, member of a professional or political group, community volunteer, youth advocate or a municipal youth advisory council. Additionally, you may be engaged in social movements or other comparatively ‘informal’ political activities, but the focus of this study will be on your activism.

Your part in this research, if you agree, will be to participate in a single interview with me. This interview can be conducted in person at a location and timeline convenient for you. This interview will be audiotaped, with your permission. If I have your permission to audiotape and transcribe our interview, please initial below:
I grant the researcher permission to record and transcribe our interview

Unless you indicate otherwise, the transcript of our interview will be rendered anonymous. Additionally, you will be anonymous within any writing and publication(s) resulting from this research. You may, however, prefer to retain your true identity in any resulting publications, in order to be publicly recognized for your contributions to this study. If this is the case, simply indicate your desire to waive anonymity by initialing below:

I wish to retain my true name and identity in all writing and publication to this research

Should you change your mind later on the research process, you need only inform me of your preference for anonymity. In that event, these forms will be revised and your interview transcripts rendered anonymous by use of a pseudonym and through the systematic elimination of potentially identifying information.

Should you choose to proceed, our interview will be informal and will last no more than two hours. During this time, we will be engaged in an open conversation. At no time will you be evaluated or judged based on your responses.

Areas that I hope to touch on during our discussion include:

- The reasons you chose to engage in activism
- How has your activism disrupted socio-political convention or societal norms, and fomented social change
- What impact did your lived experience have on your activism
- What influences if any can your particular activism theoretically help foster a more critical multicultural perspectives and progressive discourse about race, gender, religion and class within a Canadian context
- What can second and third generation Somali Canadian women and youth learn from your past and/or present activism

The raw audio of our interview will be stored on a password-protected computer, which only I have access to. As well, any documents containing potentially identifiable information about you — including type of activities or organizations and so forth that could connect you with your assigned pseudonym — will be encrypted. All raw audio files and identifying codes will be destroyed one year from completion of this research project, or by March 2016—whichever comes first.

Once again, please note that you would be free to withdraw from this study at any time, until a draft of my research findings has been submitted to my supervisor (i.e. winter
2016). Should you choose to withdraw before then, you may request that the entire transcript of your interview be destroyed and any insights related to our conversation omitted from the study. Otherwise, previously collected data will be retained for use in the project. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any interview question you are uncomfortable responding to. You may also withdraw from the interview itself at any point, without consequence.

If you are interested, I will make every effort to share preliminary aspects of my research findings with you and you will have an opportunity to provide feedback. If you initial the box below, I will email you a summary of my initial data analysis (i.e. a ‘white paper’) in winter, 2016. I will welcome your written comments on this paper and, should you choose to share your observations with me, I will make every effort to adjust my analysis accordingly. Should you wish to receive this summary, please initial below:

I would like to receive a summary of the results of the study

Ultimately, you will also have access to the final report, which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection and which can be accessed electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository (T Space) at:

https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944

While you will not be financially compensated for your participation in this project, potential benefits which you might derive include: (1) an opportunity to reflect critically on your own socio-political activism as first generation Somali Canadian women and their modes resistance to systematic barriers and social marginalization, and (2) an opportunity to contribute to research that will provide important insights on how to foster a scholarship that provides a broader and complex knowledge about first generation Somali Canadian women. Any potential harm stemming from your participation in this research is exceptionally limited. The research itself poses no apparent risks, and interviews are unlikely to touch upon sensitive or overly personal subject matter.

Furthermore, you will not be judged or evaluated and at no time will you be at risk of harm. As such, at no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a principal. Additionally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. Finally, in the event you agree to participate in this research and meet the principle investigator at a convenient location, you will be compensated with a token / bus fare.

Should you have any questions or concerns about my research, or the enclosed information, you can contact me directly at 647-528-9204 or Hodan.mohamed@utoronto.ca In addition, please note if you have questions, complain about how you have been treated as research participant in this study, or concerns about
your rights as a prospective research participant or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

The University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics  
Email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca  
Phone: 416-946-3273

Should you choose to participate in this project, please return one signed and dated copy of this letter to me and keep the other for your records.

Thank you for your kind consideration,

_________________________________ (Researcher Signature)

_________________________________ (Printed Name)

_________________________________ (Date)

Hodan Ahmed Mohamed  
647-528-9204  
Hodan.mohamed@utoronto.ca  
3101 Weston Road  
Toronto, Ontario  
M9M 2Z9  

Professor Shahrzad Mojab  
416. 978. 0829  
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252 Bloor St. West  
Room 7116  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 1V6

To Be Completed by People Choosing to Participate:

I have read through this document. Therefore, I understand and am satisfied with the explanations offered; I feel that my questions have been addressed; and I agree to participate in the ways described.

_________________________________ (Participant Signature)

_________________________________ (Printed Name)

_________________________________ (Date)

❖ Please keep a copy of this letter for your record
Appendix B – Interview Guide

Information about these interview questions: Although far from exhaustive, this list provides a reasonably good idea of what the researcher hopes to cover in one-on-one interviews with research participants. Interviews will, however, be open-ended and relatively non-directive. Because of this, the wording of these questions is likely to evolve.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself: How old are you? If not born in Canada, how long have you lived here?
2. How would you describe the nature of your activism?
3. Do you see yourself as an activist? What role do you identify within the Somali community or the wider society?
4. Why did you choose to engage in activism, whether its informal or formal socio-political participation?
   a) What are some values or advantages to activism?
   b) What do you see as some limitation or disadvantages to activism?
   c) How can activism bring about social and political progress in your opinion?
   d) How do you respond to criticism about activism, as one that does not necessarily engage in formal political process or distrusts the status quo?
5. How does your peers, community members or people in your life receive your activism?
6. How has your activism shaped your perception/conceptualization of self as Black Muslim women?
7. What can second and third generation Somali youth learn from first generation Somali women activists?
8. What are some of your lived experiences or critical observation that has contributed to your activism?
9. A lot of dispersed research speaks about the legal struggles of first generation Somali Canadians, in particular Somali women. One that is rift of immigration battle, barriers to access adequate resources, affordable housing, racialized discourse that has stigmatized Somali youth, notwithstanding the dislocation experienced by them due to racism and Islamaphobia. What are your thoughts on these multiple issues facing the community?
10. Existing research indicate that the immigration and settlement experience of first generation Somali women is primarily racialized and Islamized. Case and point, some scholarly work have demonstrated the experience of Somali women with settlement, employment, education and so forth, reflect on Canada’s failed multicultural policy, because it ignores the Intersectionality of race, gender, religion, settlement and class. This in turn affirms oppressive legal and societal practices that invisibalized Black Muslim women-interlocking form of marginalities that inform their daily life. To what extent do you agree / disagree? What experience have you had with these sorts of identified issues?
11. I am assuming not everyone who had these interlocking forms of marginalities alongside you has gone to become an activist as you now are. What do you think accounts for your response to these experiences, insofar as it is a unique one?
   a) Would you be as engaged as you are if not for your lived experience or the struggles your parents and/or family members and Somali community?
   b) How do you think someone in a position different from yours (e.g. with more/less socio-politically active family or community member) might have been differently impacted by these multiple marginalities?

12. How do you think we can learn from the activism of first generation Somali Canadian women, from a historical context and in term of the relevance of their work in the community and academic spaces?
Appendix C – Recruitment Emails

To be circulated by the principal investigator directly to prospective research participants and their networks.

Subject line: An invitation to participate in a study about first generation Somali Canadian women activism

Dear ______________________

I am writing to you regarding a study I am doing on first generation Somali Canadian women. This research is part of my MA thesis in the Adult Education and Community Development program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

I am looking for 25-60 year old Somali Canadian women who identify as activists, reside in Toronto and are engaged in pertinent socio-political matters to participate in my study. Approximately, 6-8 participants will take part in a single one-on-one interview with me at their convenience. Essentially, these interviews will be designed to speak with Somali Canadian women between 25-60 years old, who have been engaged in both formal and informal activism, whether it’s the grassroots level or at a more political participation. Ultimately, I’m hoping to determine how their activism has shaped their lives, the Somali community, influenced public policies and informed community workers in addressing socio-political marginalization, racism, violence and Islamaphobia. For the purposes of this study, activism is characterized by engagement with the institutional mechanisms of the Canadian government, public institutions as well as the non-governmental sector. If you’re interested in participating, you should therefore be an activist that is or was regularly engaged in pertinent issues that impacts the Somali community in Toronto. You may also be a frontline worker, community organizer, and member of a professional or political group, community volunteer, youth advocate or a municipal youth advisory council. Additionally, you may be engaged in social movements or other comparatively ‘informal’ political activities, but the focus of this study will be on your activism.

The interview will be informal and will last no more than two hours. During this time, the principle investigator and participant will be engaged in an open conversation. At no time will participants be evaluated or judged based on their responses.

If you are interested in learning more, please see the attached ‘letter of consent’ and/or contact me with any questions whatsoever at Hodan.mohamed@utoronto.ca or 647-528-9204. I would love to hear from you! Moreover, please feel free to disseminate this invitation to any other potential participants you think might be interested. Please note, I
will not inform anyone of your participation and — should you choose to proceed — you may withdraw from this study at any time, no questions asked.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon,

Hodan Ahmed Mohamed

To be circulated by administrators of various email list serve to their members on behalf of the researcher

Subject line: University of Toronto study about first generation Somali Canadian women activism

Dear _____________________________________

Hodan A. Mohamed, a University of Toronto Student, has contacted us about a study she is doing on first generation Somali Canadian women. This research is part of her Master of Art thesis in the Adult Education and Community Development program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

Hodan is looking for 25-60 year old Somali Canadian women who identify as activists, reside in Toronto and are engaged in pertinent socio-political matters to participate in her study. Approximately, 6-8 participants will take part in a single one-on-one interview with Hodan at their convenience. Essentially, these interviews will be designed to speak with Somali Canadian women who have have been engaged in both formal and informal activism, whether it’s at the grassroots level or at a more political participation. Ultimately, Hodan is hoping to determine how their activism has shaped their lives, the Somali community, influenced public policies and informed community workers in addressing socio-political marginalization, violence, racism and Islamaphobia. For the purposes of this study, activism is characterized by engagement with the structural mechanisms of the Canadian government, public institutions as well as the non-governmental sector. If you’re interested in participating, you should therefore be an activist that is or was regularly engaged in pertinent issues that impacts the Somali community in Toronto. You may also be a frontline worker, community organizer, and member of a professional or political group, community volunteer, youth advocate or a municipal youth advisory council. Additionally, you may be engaged in social movements or other comparatively ‘informal’ political activities, but the focus of this study will be on your activism.

The interview will be informal and will last no more than two hours. During this time, the principle investigator and participant will be engaged in an open conversation. At no time will participants be evaluated or judged based on their responses.
If you are interested in learning more, please see the attached ‘letter of consent’ and/or contact Hodan with any questions whatsoever at Hodan.mohamed@utoronto.ca or 647-528-9204. She would love to hear from you. Please note, Hodan will not inform us (or anyone else) of your participation and — should you choose to proceed — you may also withdraw from her study at any time, no questions asked.

Sincerely,

_____________________________
Dear Dr. Mojab and Hodan Ahmed Mohamed,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "First generation Somali Canadian women activism"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: July 3, 2015
Expiry Date: July 2, 2016  Continuing
Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB’s delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe REB Manager
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