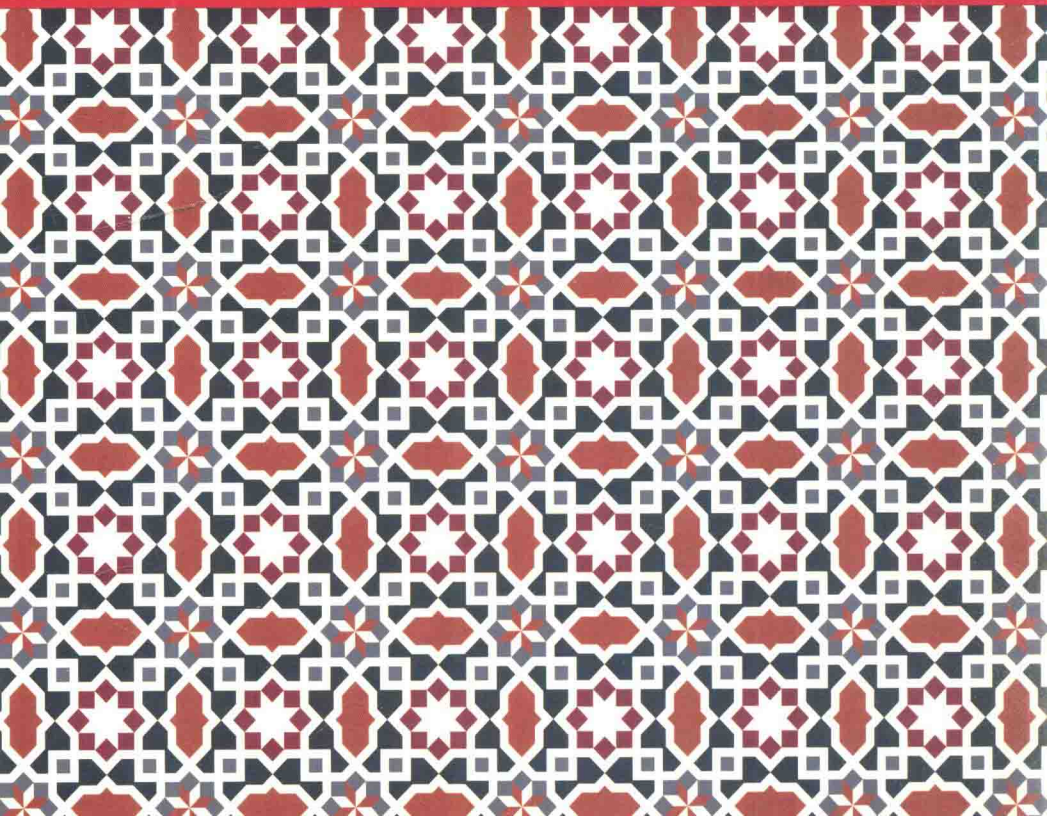


Jasmin Zine, ed.

# ISLAM IN THE HINTERLANDS

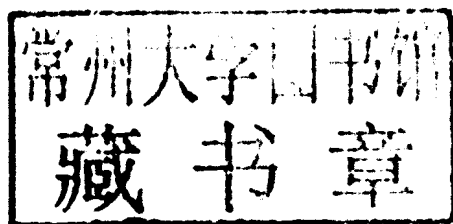
MUSLIM CULTURAL POLITICS IN CANADA



# ISLAM IN THE HINTERLANDS

Exploring Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada

Edited by Jasmin Zine



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## Acknowledgments

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This book emerged from a desire to map the field of Canadian Muslim studies by bringing together timely and relevant scholarship that helps us to understand the various ways that Muslims have been affected by the post-9/11 era of imperialist wars, draconian domestic-security policies, and media sensationalism, which have led to racial and religious profiling as well as to other challenges that shape their everyday lives. This book is dedicated to Muslims who have brought Islam to the hinterlands and who, despite the hardships they left behind and the new ones they encounter, have claimed a space where the tenacity of their faith and their spiritual resilience have allowed them to enrich this landscape with their presence.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this book for their wonderful scholarship, for their inspiring activism, and for their patience, support, and collaboration during the process of putting together this collection.

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Last but not least, I present this work as a legacy for my sons, Usama and Yusuf, who inspire me to do work that is close to my heart.

Wasalam/peace,  
Jasmin Zine

# ISLAM IN THE HINTERLANDS



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# Introduction

## Muslim Cultural Politics in the Canadian Hinterlands

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JASMIN ZINE

This book emerges out of a need to map new understandings of the Canadian Muslim diaspora as a site of struggle, contestation, and change. Muslim communities have become increasingly salient in the social, cultural, and political landscape in Canada. This has been due largely to the aftermath of 9/11 (which is this book's starting point) and the racial politics of the ongoing "war on terror," which has cast Muslims as the new "enemy within." The narratives of citizenship, nationalism, and security have become inextricably linked in public discourse and policy making in ways that disproportionately target Canadian Muslims as potential threats to public safety and compromise their civil liberties. Driven by media sensationalism, narrow and limiting constructions of Muslims are commonly purveyed, reproducing Orientalist archetypes of illiberal and anti-democratic foreigners that test the limits of Canadian multiculturalism. Islam has become a permanent feature in the Canadian hinterlands, and Muslim cultural politics have become prominent flashpoints in the social and political landscape.

Increasingly, Muslims figure prominently in contemporary public debates that shape our national consciousness and public policies, from the Maher Arar case, security certificate detainees, and the arrests of eighteen Muslim males in Toronto on alleged charges of "home-grown terror," to racial and religious profiling, Ontario's debates over *shar'ia* (Islamic law) tribunals, and Quebec's questions of "reasonable accommodation," its banning of Islamic headscarves and face veils, and its xenophobic "citizen's codes."

Although these issues dominate media attention, other experiences that shape and impact the lives of Canadian Muslims rarely make headlines, such as migration, settlement, education, access to jobs and resources, poverty, racism and Islamophobia, institutional and organizational development, social-movement building, political resistance, and negotiations of theological pluralism.

The Canadian Muslim diaspora is a complex, contradictory, and hybrid space filled with a mix of liberatory possibilities and productive tensions occurring within and against certain oppressive social and political conditions that create the terrain for a distinctly "Canadian Islam." Islam in Canada has been a highly generative site for new epistemological and ontological positionings. Beyond sectarian orientations, there are new movements toward "moderate" or "progressive Islam" that have gained currency and have spearheaded controversial moves such as female-led prayers and encouraged the promotion of gender equity within religious sites. More gender-conscious forms of mobilization occurred as secular and faith-based Canadian Muslim feminists organized around the widely debated proposal for shar'ia-based arbitration in Ontario. There are also new cultural drivers shaping the Muslim presence in the Canadian national imaginary. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) groundbreaking comedy series *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, created by Canadian Muslim filmmaker Zarqa Nawaz, has catapulted Muslims into primetime television and the national consciousness in new and challenging ways.

Despite the widespread interest and dynamic social and political engagements relating to Islam and Muslims in Canada, there has been little attempt to document and address Muslim cultural politics within Canada. This collection provides a space to construct multiple readings of Islam and Muslims in the Canadian diaspora through a variety of empirical and theoretical contributions to this field. As an entry point into these discussions, I want to map some groundwork on which the contributions in this collection must be read by articulating some broad political, cultural, and empirical frames that shape the contours of the Muslim presence in Canada. I want to briefly reflect on the social, political, and cultural foundations of the discussions in this collection, which are anchored in questions of diaspora, nation, citizenship, and multiculturalism. These are increasingly sites of contestation in the social, cultural, and political landscape in Canada and are being shaped by the global dimensions of neo-imperial wars and the ruptures between secular modernity and "postsecular" religious politics, social formations, and insurgent forms of identity.

## The Canadian Muslim Diaspora

"Diaspora" is a contested signifier. Although the term is rooted in the often violent historical ruptures that lead to exile, displacement, migration, and reformations of communities outside their places of origin, in its most current and perhaps most common usage, it describes postmodern migrant communities that have resettled outside their ancestral homelands due to a variety of social, economic, and political factors. Many of these forces stem from the imperialist, neoliberal foundations of globalization and the dislocations caused by its upheavals. Moghissi and colleagues (2009, 3) note that the term "diaspora" has come to refer to "populations of refugees, migrants, guest workers, expatriates, and the exiled and self-exiled." This new reality means that there is no longer a single narrative for transnational migration and settlement that result in the re-rooting of migrant communities, cultures, and identities in adopted homelands. However, what remains consistent – whether or not the context of migration is forced or voluntary – is the fraught process of reinventing the narrative of "home" and recapturing feelings of familiarity and belonging, the absence of which creates deep social and psychological tensions that can be difficult to reconcile.

On the other hand, a fact often overlooked when Canada's multiple immigrant diasporas are heralded as a multicultural success story is how this story of the nation serves to obscure the realities faced by Aboriginal peoples, who have been further displaced by their presence. The exclusion, isolation, and geographic marginalization of Aboriginal communities in their own ancestral homelands have created a forced diasporization that is muted by celebratory notions of multiculturalism that conveniently overlook this violent history (see also Moghissi et al. 2009). It is an inconvenient truth in the grand narrative of multicultural pluralism that the diasporas of early white European settlers permanently displaced Aboriginal populations from their homelands in Canada and elsewhere. Postcolonial histories are thus rewritten to exclude the memory of violent conquest and imposition, and the notion of diaspora remains untainted by this history.

As generations adapt and acculturate over time, more hybrid social and cultural formations develop that transform both the diasporic and the dominant culture. Yet this plurality and cultural interpenetration occur within unequal relations of power. The incorporation of immigrant groups occurs through their insertion into hierarchal relations of racial, ethnic, and class-based privilege that relegate most of these groups to positions of subordination and marginality (see also Moghissi et al. 2009). These cleavages mark the fault lines between belonging and disavowal and define the space between

citizens and outsiders. Cultural dissonance that occurs from residing within these liminal spaces can result in romantic longings for the homeland, yet these attachments are believed to compromise loyalty and kinship within the adopted society. Diasporic communities are derogatorily labelled “ethnic ghettos” and “insular enclaves” – evidence of the failure of multiculturalism and a justification for reviving more assimilationist models of social integration. The “vertical mosaic” of Canada has been forged on this unequal footing, which continues to privilege the diasporic histories, cultures, and conquests of white settlers, thereby positioning indigenous and immigrant communities as subordinate national subjects through their “exaltation” (Thobani 2007).

Muslims in Canada have a longer history than one might imagine. The genealogy of Muslim migrants can be traced back to the arrival in 1854 of a Scottish family – James and Agnes Love and their newborn son. According to Hamdani (1997), James Love, named after his father, was born in Ontario in 1854. He was the eldest of eight children. The youngest one, Alexander, was born in 1868, one year after the Canadian confederation was formed. Lorenz (1998) tells the story of the arrival of the first Arab immigrants in about 1882. Many of them, mostly young men, came from Ottoman Syria fleeing conscription into the Ottoman army. Most of these early migrants were Christians, but a few were Muslims. Most of these wayfarers settled in the East, but a few headed west and arrived at the most remote outposts of Canada’s western frontier. In a rare historical narrative of Muslims during this period, Lorenz (1998, 28) relates the story of early Arab migrants who came as peddlers and pioneers:

“The Syrian peddler was something of an institution in most Western settlements,” wrote Gilbert Johnson. “Sometimes on foot, with a pack on his back and a case of trinkets and smallwares in his hand, but more often with a horse and a light wagon in summer, or with a sleigh in winter, he travelled the prairie trails on more or less regular routes ... His arrival often provided a welcome relief from the monotony of pioneer life.”

Such stories narrated by Lorenz shed light on the early foundations of the Muslim presence in Canada. One of the first pioneers with any recorded history was Salim Sha’aban. He was born an Ottoman subject in 1880 and arrived in New York as a twenty-year-old, eventually making his way to Iowa in 1908. He peddled goods on foot and later on horseback until he had earned enough to return to Lebanon to find a bride in 1910. Two years later

he returned with the hope of finding greater prosperity in Canada. Leaving his wife and their first child behind, Sha'aban set his sights on Alberta, where he built a homestead. His wife's journey is recounted in the passage below as a story of passion, endurance, and perseverance:

For the young Arab woman who landed, tired and bewildered, at the port of Montreal, a long train trip across the prairies still lay ahead, followed by more travel by horse and wagon. The railway link to Edmonton had been completed in 1904, and agricultural settlement existed only in a band 50 kilometers (30 miles) wide on each side of the single railway line. Beyond that, the great prairies were still the land of the Cree, Assinaboine [sic] and Blackfoot. The winters could hardly have been less welcoming: One 1907 blizzard drove the mercury down to 48 degrees below zero (-55°F). Yet Larry Shaben, Sha'aban's grandson and a leader of today's Alberta Muslim community, recalls that his grandmother, who lived to be 99, was "fiercely passionate" about Canada, and called it "a wonderful country." (Lorenz 1998, 29)

By 1901 Canada's Muslim community had grown to 47 members, who settled in Alberta and Saskatchewan. By 1911 there were 1,500 Canadian Muslims, most of them Syrian and Turkish migrants, many of whom worked on the construction of the western railways (Abu-Laban 1983, Hamdani 1997). According to Lorenz (1998, 29),

By the late 1920's, a handful of Muslim families were scattered throughout Alberta, earning their livings as fur traders, mink ranchers and, shopkeepers. Shaben, now in his 60's, recalls that when he was growing up in Endiang there was only one other Muslim family in town, and his grandparents "knew every Muslim in Alberta."

By the early twentieth century, governments were enforcing policies of racial exclusion in order to stem the flow of Asian immigrants. Abu-Laban (1983) reports that when the First World War broke out, many Turkish immigrants were classified as enemy aliens and sent back to their country of origin. As a result of these policies, Canada's Muslim population remained relatively small between 1911 and 1951. The 1931 census recorded only 645 Muslims – a figure that had grown to perhaps 3,000 by 1951 (Abu-Laban 1983, 76). After the Second World War, a time when the economy was shifting from wartime to peacetime production, Muslims began entering Canada

as skilled labourers. By the end of the twentieth century, Muslims were the largest non-Christian religious group in Canada, having surpassed the Jewish population in 1996 (Hamdani 1997).

Presently, Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada. According to an Environics report based on the 2006 census, there are 842,200 Muslims in Canada comprising 2.6 percent of the population. With a steady growth in population size and a diverse ethno-racial mix of cultures from South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Continental Africa, and the Caribbean, the Canadian Muslim community is a heterogeneous ethno-racial population that is even further distinguished along sectarian lines. Although there is a predominant Sunni Muslim community in Canada, there are prevalent Shia, Ismaili, Druze, and Sufi communities in the larger diasporic makeup. The challenges of pluralism that affect Muslims in Canada are therefore internally as well as externally driven. Ideological differences are often pronounced and create schisms among community groups and representatives that sometimes take oppositional stances in important community debates, such as the shar'ia tribunals (see Chapter 2). The Muslim community in Canada is far from homogeneous demographically and ideologically despite the essentialized representations and narrow conceptions that commonly shape perceptions of who Muslims are, what they believe, and how they behave.

### **Muslim Social, Cultural, and Economic Politics in Canada in a Post-9/11 Context**

Since 9/11 greater attention has been paid to how Muslims are integrating within Canada. Much of this interest is driven by the fear that social and cultural isolationism could lead to possible "sleepers cells" of jihadi extremists threatening public peace and safety. The case of seventeen Muslim youth and one Muslim adult arrested in 2006 on alleged terror charges was a flashpoint for fear of "home-grown" terror (see Chapter 10). The idea that Canadian-born Muslims could be involved in potential threats against the nation was unsettling to many. In trying to make sense of these arrests and the threat of the "enemy within," public discourse often turned to the question of values. A 2006 public opinion poll revealed that 65 percent of Canadians were concerned that too many immigrants were not adopting "Canadian values" (Adams 2007, 94).<sup>1</sup> The reasoning followed, then, that the misguided Toronto youth had been deprived of access to "true Canadian values" that would have bound their allegiance to the state and prevented any other form of identification that had the potential to divide their loyalty.



Adopting “Canadian values” was touted as the antidote to the threat posed by those who manifest more questionable ties to citizenship and the nation. These irreconcilable citizens were constructed as “anti-citizens” who threatened to unsettle the narrative of Canada as a peaceful and benevolent nation (see Chapter 1). Muslims at large were seen as residing outside of the common framework of “discursive citizenship” based on a set of shared national values and were therefore in need of “cultural rehabilitation” through the inculcation of Western values. These troubling narratives persist in the ongoing contestations surrounding Muslim cultural politics in Canada that this book seeks to explore.

Despite public concern over the integration of Canadian Muslims, an Environics survey of 500 adult Canadian Muslims conducted between 2006 and 2007 collected interesting data on how Canadian Muslims view their identity and their sense of belonging and satisfaction within Canada. Reporting on these findings, Adams (2007) notes that although about 90 percent of Canadian Muslims were born outside of the country, a vast majority articulated a strong sense of attachment to Canada. It was reported that 94 percent said they were proud to be Canadian, a figure that matches the national average of 94 percent (161). Of those expressing pride in being Canadian, 73 percent acknowledged they were “very proud.” Even more recent newcomers living in Canada fewer than five years expressed a high level of national pride: 73 percent reported being “proud” to be Canadians, and 54 percent were “very proud.” Immigrants who had resided in Canada fifteen years or more had the highest expression of pride as Canadians. In this category, 99 percent reported being “proud,” and 88 percent were “very proud” (161). Also, according to Adams, Muslims noted that freedom, democracy, and multiculturalism were the sources of their pride, which was consistent with what Canadians at large reported feeling. These findings demonstrate that far from being isolationist, Muslims in Canada feel an allegiance to the nation and a sense of pride as Canadians. This outlook, however, does not preclude their right to be critical of the nation and its policies or to assert claims for the recognition and accommodation of their own values, beliefs, and practices. All too often when immigrant groups express dissent or are critical of the conditions of their adopted homeland, they are met with claims of disloyalty or ungratefulness. When they advocate for inclusion and recognition of their cultural beliefs and practices, they are seen as threatening the cultural integrity of Canada and are confronted with the “when in Rome” argument. Therefore, although a significant number of