

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Nation, Citizenship, and Belonging: Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada

The Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS) held its fifth annual Canadian Regional Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, at Wilfred Laurier University (WLU) on 21 May 2009. The Muslim Studies Option Program Committee and the Department of Religion and Culture at WLU cosponsored this event, and Jasmin Zine (WLU) and Meena Sharify-Funk (WLU) were the cochairs. The Tessellate Institute, a Canadian Muslim think tank, coordinated and cosponsored the keynote panel.

The theme, “Nation, Citizenship, and Belonging: Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada,” brought together academics, emerging scholars, and community activists to explore critical questions about the space in the middle where engaged Muslim Canadians stand. In her opening remarks, Sharify-Funk identified that space as being located on an isthmus between the realities of object discrimination and the potentialities of citizenship. She remarked that this conference sought to ask the difficult questions about whether Muslim Canadians can engage the challenges and move beyond the internal contradictions that inherently shape Muslim cultural politics.

The opening plenary session discussed the debate on faith-based arbitration, arguably one of the more controversial issues to face Muslim Canadians in the last five years. Coordinated by Katherine Bullock (University of Toronto and AMSS vice president) and chaired by Carol Duncan (WLU), the panel brought together voices with empirical data to respond to Premier Dalton McGuinty’s 2005 decision to end the Shari`ah law debate with “one law” for all Canadians. Annie Bunting (York University) analyzed the myths and misunderstandings of Canadian family law, where “community mediation” is misconstrued as arbitration and vice versa. Anna Korteweg (University of Toronto, Mississauga) argued that the coverage of this debate in Toronto newspapers between 2003-05 restricted Muslim women’s agency to challenge and resist public perceptions of the debate. Returning to Bunting’s distinction between mediation and arbitration, Chris Cutting (WLU) empha-

sized that the new amendments do not imply that such arbitration no longer exists. Speaking about private contracts and imam mediation, he discussed the numerous ways that community advocates and organizations continue to represent the voices of vulnerable Muslim women in particular in the absence of formal arbitration rights. Building on Cutting's premise, Julie McFarlane (University of Windsor) explored why Muslim Canadians even aspire for faith-based arbitration and the dynamic ways in which imams apply the Shari`ah.

After this, participants divided into two concurrent sessions with two panels in each. Nadeem Memon (University of Toronto [UT]), opening the first panel, "Diasporic Ruptures and Possibilities: Education, Youth and Identity," addressed the theme of youths and education by examining the types of Islamic schools (full-time and supplementary) that Muslim Canadians support and how those schools are informed by Islamic ideologies and perspectives. Sarfaroz Niyozov (UT) then shifted the analysis to teachers who teach Muslim students in public schools, arguing that the discourse of multiculturalism must move toward recognizing the historic and contemporary contributions of all Canadians. The final panelist, Paul Nesbitt-Larking (Huron University College) attempted to chart the experiences of Canadian Muslim youths in London, Ontario, under three broad responses: mistrust, retreat, and dialogic engagement.

The second panel, "Arab Canadian Migration, Transnationalism, and Integration in a Globalized World," began with Jenna Hennebry's (WLU) focus on the complexity of Arab immigration and integration in a globalized media environment where prevailing media representations of Arabs and the Arab world might conflict with Arab immigrants' own images. Bessma Momani (University of Waterloo/Centre for International Governance Innovation) presented some trends in Arab Canadians' media consumption and civic participation, suggesting that the decision of some of them to opt out of the Canadian media may actually limit their understanding of Canadian affairs and hinder their ability to organize around issues affecting their communities. Andrew Thompson (Centre for International Governance Innovation/Balsillie School of International Affairs) examined the human rights versus security debate, arguing that they are not mutually exclusive.

Yasmin Jiwani (associate professor of communication studies, Concordia University) delivered the luncheon keynote address: "Doubling Discourses and the Muslim Other." She began by acknowledging her complicity as a settler in the colonization of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. After

locating herself, she elaborated upon the notion of “doubling discourses,” positive and negative representations of peoples deployed by hegemonic state interests. She posed the following question: “How do we position ourselves as critical consumers of the media and make judgments about positive and negative representations of ourselves or others?” In the case of Muslims, Jiwani explained, doubling discourses tend to construct the “good” Muslim as a Muslim who is secular or, alternatively, as a Muslim who practices Islam privately; the “bad” Muslim is a fundamentalist.

Jiwani explained that these doubling discourses tell Muslims in the middle how to act and how not to act: “At one extreme end we are terrorists and at the other extreme end we are native informants. How should we be so that we are at neither extreme?” The middle, she said, is very normative and responsive to the hegemonic call to behave and internalize a docile notion of citizenship, which is conditional because the state can situate a Muslim on either side of the divide irrespective of how she/he acts. She pointed out that the need to be in the middle is attached to a need to belong and is generated by insecurities associated with being at either of the extreme ends. In our need to hold on to our place in the middle, we become our own policing agents. Jiwani left the attendees with two questions for further consideration: “How can we tell stories that are not constrained by management of difference?” and “How do we tell our stories from a place of non-coercion?”

The afternoon concurrent sessions included a panel on “Liberalism and Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada.” Asma Bala (University of Waterloo) opened by asserting that privileging particular Muslim voices that are aligned with liberal conceptions of civil liberties marginalizes dissenting, often less influential voices that represent Canadian Muslims. Ali Albarghouthi (WLU) employed the story of Prophet Shu`ayb to question contemporary conceptions of *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform). The final paper, presented by Rory Dickson (WLU), questioned the limits of multiculturalism when the hijab becomes a contested, “otherizing,” and marginalizing symbol of religious practice.

The second panel, “Gender, War, and Performativity: Canadian Responses,” featured Shahnaz Khan (WLU), who examined the centrality of Afghan women’s rights to NATO’s military involvement in their country. Somaya Sami Sabry (University of Western Ontario) examined how contemporary Muslim Canadian artist Sofia Servando Baig uses the performative space to re-imagine Muslim women as active agents and to challenge the limitations of prevailing Orientalist and stereotypical discourses. Zine

discussed how Muslim women are reconfiguring the Canadian national imaginary in debates about the limitations of multiculturalism, the boundaries of citizenship, and “good” versus “bad” immigrants.

The conference closed with an opportunity for attendees to meet and engage with the work of well-known Canadian Muslim activist Zarqa Nawaz. Known mainly as the creator of CBC’s “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” she spoke about her journey in developing the idea of Little Mosque through challenging internal community contradictions and external acts of discrimination that shape the Muslim Canadian experience. Through an analysis of four short films that she wrote and directed and that served as a catalyst for “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” Nawaz’s presence illustrated the realities of the discourses, assumptions, and trajectories explored throughout the conference, all of which emphasized the interconnectedness of nation, citizenship, and belonging among Muslim Canadians.

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