

**Atlantic Metropolis Centre ~ Working Paper Series  
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**DISCOURSES OF CITIZENSHIP AND COMMUNITY:  
ARAB IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND THEIR NARRATIVES OF HOME AND  
BELONGING IN HALIFAX, NS**

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**2008**

**Working Paper No. 13  
Série de documents de recherche 13**



**Centre Métropolis Atlantique  
Atlantic Metropolis Centre**

**The Atlantic Metropolis Centre's Working Papers Series**  
**Série de documents de recherche du Centre Métropolis Atlantique**

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# **Discourses of Citizenship and Community: Arab Immigrant Women and their Narratives of Home and Belonging in Halifax, NS**

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## **Abstract/Résumé:**

Drawing on narratives of seven Arab immigrant women in Halifax, Nova Scotia, this paper investigates the personal and gendered dimensions of migration and citizenship using a postmodernist feminist lens. In the aftermath of 9/11, a study challenging orientalist portrayals of Arab women as victims of patriarchy and members of a homogenous community is timely in the Canadian context. As my study demonstrates, citizenship and patriarchal experiences are more complex than generalizable, mediated through the women's everyday negotiations of gender and power dynamics at household, 'community' and state levels. Home and belonging are neither tangible nor easily measurable, but multifaceted and ongoing experiences.

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## **Keywords/Mots-clefs:**

**Citizenship, immigration, Halifax, identity, home, belonging, Arab immigrant women.**

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## Introduction

On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2007, the *Globe and Mail* featured an article titled, “How Canadian Are You?” The article, based on a statistical study recently conducted by Dr. Jeffery Reitz and Dr. Rupa Banerjee, sampled the responses of 40,000 Canadians. In order to find out how Canadians feel about their integration experiences in Canada, the study divides the population into “Blacks”, “South Asians”, “Chinese”, “Whites” and “Other Minorities”. Measuring belonging against a presupposed standard of ‘Canadianess’, the authors conclude from gathered statistical evidence that, “Visible minority Canadians...feel less Canadian [than their white counterparts]” (Jimenez 2007). Although Reitz and Banerjee (2007) rightly suggest that integration and belonging are not simply overnight experiences for many visible minorities in Canada, many questions about their findings were left unanswered: For example, what does it mean to speak of ‘belonging’ and ‘culture’ in academic and political discourse? Are understandings of ‘Canadianess’ (statistics notwithstanding) the same for everyone? What does it mean for a diasporic subject in Canada to identify as South Asian or as White? Finally, where does ‘Middle Eastern’, one of Canada’s most rapidly expanding immigrant groups<sup>1</sup> fit into the picture, assuming that it occupies the category of “Other minorities” in the study?

By slicing up the Canadian population into homogenous and static categories of South Asian, Black, Chinese and, ‘Other Visible Minorities’, Reitz and Banerjee’s study obscures the complex historical, political and personal construct behind such labels, whilst skimming over the gendered dimensions of belonging. Perhaps on a more in-depth level, the study could have benefited from asking: what are the localized and geographically distinct experiences of different cultural groups in Canada? And how do these experiences differ in a large metropolitan city such as Toronto, in comparison to a much less populated second tier city such as Halifax, Nova Scotia?

While quantitative studies are important and indeed, valuable in exposing the broader demographics and processes which occur on a magnified scale, my study of Arab immigrant women in Halifax supports a more contextual approach towards theorizing identities. In support of Stuart Hall’s argument that “identity declares not some primordial identities but rather a positional choice of the group with which they wish to be associated” (2000:220), I introduce my discussion on the premise that belonging can neither be accurately quantifiable nor neatly defined by continent or race as a final point of departure.

Postmodernist literature has challenged the notion of fixed origins. I argue that identity is not only a complex phenomenon for subjects who live in multiple worlds (such as migrants and travelers) (Appadurai 1990; Brah 1996), but identification is also a highly fluid and ongoing process, further complicated by those whose attachments and lives extend beyond the borders of the nation (Glick-Schiller and Fournon 2001). Anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to a phenomenon of ‘transnationality’ to show how migrants’ lives often transcend state borders as overseas obligations, attachments and loyalties compel individuals to negotiate multiple worlds and sometimes even citizenships. In the context of a Post-Fordist global political economy, flexible production systems and a more widespread circulation and exchange of goods, capital and people, migratory flows have intensified to a point where legalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2005).

conceptions of citizenship and 'national identity' no longer hold the same currency as they used to.

Additionally, in the past few years, anthropological and feminist literatures have made a substantial contribution to acknowledging the gendered affects of globalization and the feminization of labour on the lives of migrants and their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Sassen 2000; Kofman and Raghuram 2006; Mahler and Pessar 2001, 2006). Gender is not only an important medium for understanding how migration is enacted by families and individuals, but understanding how gender intersects with age, ethnicity, class and geography permits a more complex examination of concepts such as integration, citizenship and culture, while potentially opening up a route to less essentialist discussion of migrant identity (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 2006).

Despite the abundance of literature on immigrant women in Canada, surprisingly little has been written on the gendered experiences of Arab immigrant women in the Canadian context. With the exception of Baha Abu-Laban's (1980) earlier documentations of the first waves of Arab migrants to Canada, most research has tended to approach issues related to migration in Canada by focusing more broadly on 'Muslim communities in Canada' (Dossa 1999; Gibb & Rothenberg 2000). Moreover, with the exception of two recent studies (Abdelhady 2006; Hamdan 2007), little has been written on the actual changes and experiences of Arab immigrant groups in Canada since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 - an event which has drastically reworked popular and national discourses of security, immigration and images of the Middle East in political and media representations (Abu-Laban 2002; Hunt and Rygiel 2006).

Drawing on postmodernist feminist perspectives on identity, the findings presented here are selected from a study conducted for a recently completed graduate thesis. Although I specifically focus on the women's narratives of home, community and belonging in this paper, given my objectives in unearthing the complex realities of Arab immigrant women in Halifax, my study also sought to answer these additional questions: how did migration change gender dynamics? What were the different barriers and opportunities posed by migration given the participants' diverse social, gender, class, ethnic and economic locations?

Moreover as is discussed in greater detail in this paper, I was also interested in asking: how did the women's connections to others in the local and international context shape their experiences of home? In what ways did the women construct, conceptualize and negotiate notions of community, family and citizenship? And finally, in the context of post September 11<sup>th</sup> where migration is as much about finding acceptance and political security as it is economic strategizing, how can the narratives of women such as those in this study further help us to conceptualize and enrich ongoing debates on diversity and citizenship in the Canadian context?

## **Methodology**

In order to meet the study's objective of capturing the lived experiences of immigrant women, qualitative and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants. Interviews took place at the participants' workplaces, homes, language schools, and at the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) where I spent a few weeks volunteering during the summer.

A semi-structured interview guide was useful for keeping an open eye towards emergent themes in the narratives, while using open-ended questions allowed more room for a conversational dialogue between the participants and myself. Although the purpose of conducting the interviews was to allow the participants to narrate their own experiences of migration and settlement, I was equally interested in drawing out themes of particular relevance to this study. For example, what significance did intersections of class, gender and age play in the women's narratives? And how should a researcher frame these issues as questions during an interview? For instance, in the context of migration the question of class becomes fairly ambiguous: income levels are not only apt to change when one migrates, but so can one's social status. As Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) explain, it is often easy to muddle the different meanings which become attached to class and status. Moreover, these social positions can simultaneously differ from where one is located at the present moment to the perceptions of those left behind (ibid).

Rather than make generalizations about a sample of women sharing citizenship, religion, class, race or age group; my intent was to leave the selection process open to a diversity of immigrant experiences and backgrounds. However, the small sample of this research by no means indicates that the findings are representative of all women of Middle Eastern origin. On the contrary, part of the study's objective was to shed homogenizing representations by focussing on lived experiences to reveal some of the inconsistencies and contradictions which attach themselves to the labels 'Arab woman', 'Arab community' and 'immigrant woman'.

Although I have used the term 'immigrant woman' liberally throughout this paper, tendencies to conflate the term with women of visible minority status, or women whose second language is English makes the term problematic<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, because 'immigrant woman' is regularly used in migration and transnational literature, I also employ the term while recognizing the differences between the legal and social dimensions of 'immigrant woman'. Tastsoglou and Miedema best define this concept:

An immigrant woman is a person who has acquired permanent residency status in Canada. This status provides her with many of the same rights as Canadian citizens. However, her social status is another thing entirely. [Moreover] the term "immigrant woman" is socially constructed and rooted in the economic and legal processes of our society, which in turn reflect sexist, racist and class biases (2000: 207-208).

In order to participate in this study, it was important that the participants could identify with the following criteria:

- first generation/foreign born immigrant women
- of Middle Eastern background<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that immigrant women do not have to be of visible minority status. As Miedema and Tastsoglou (2000:207) have explained, in the Maritimes in particular, the majority of immigrant women have typically arrived from European backgrounds.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this research I used 'Middle Eastern'/'Arab' as broad geographical or cultural markers, referring to people who self-identify or maintain ancestral/familial connections

- aged between 18-55
- current residents of Halifax (minimum of 2 years).

### *The Participants*

Although living in the Middle East prior to Canada was not a prerequisite for my selection process, each woman still held legal citizenship from an Arab country and had spent a considerable amount of their lives in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq or Egypt. For privacy and confidentiality purposes, I have replaced the women's real names. I refer to them here as Leila, Hala, Aisha, Farah, Najat, Yasmeen and Zahra. Five of the women interviewed entered Canada as Family Dependents/Spouses of their husbands, whereas only two women had entered Canada as Principal Applicants. Moreover, in terms of social class, five of the seven women I interviewed came from upper to middle class backgrounds, and two were from lower income families.<sup>4</sup> Although for various reasons, none of the women were employed during the time of the interview, five of the women had had some form of post secondary education training, and two women had obtained their PhDs overseas and were actively searching for employment. Conversely, all of the women's spouses were employed and acted as breadwinners of the family.

Generally, the amount of time spent in Canada varied widely with each participant. One of the participants, Hala, had lived in Halifax for thirty years, another participant, Leila, had lived in Canada for ten years, while the remaining five women had spent an average of two to five years in Canada. Two of the seven women and their families had acquired Canadian citizenship, and the other five held the status of permanent residents. As mentioned previously, participant selection was not based on the women's citizenship status, but rather on whether they could generally be identified as 'immigrant women'<sup>5</sup> and whether they associated themselves with the Middle East.

Perhaps as a substitute to employment and as a way to become familiarized with Halifax, almost all of the women were either attending Adult ESL classes for newcomers or undertaking educational and employment programs at MISA while their husbands were at work. Such institutional spaces not only provided neutral meeting spaces for our interviews, but also gave the women an opportunity to break from their household tasks and interact with other men and women who were also new to life in Canada. Most of the women still felt that they were undergoing a remarkable transition in their lives and shared mixed feelings about their current situation in Halifax. In most cases, the early days of settlement in Halifax were marked by pronounced feelings of loneliness and homesickness, not to mention feeling greatly out of place due to language barriers.

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to the region. I encouraged participants to describe how they personally identified with the region rather than using official citizenship status as a selection criterion.

<sup>4</sup> See Methodology section for clarification of how class was determined. It is important to emphasize that social status and social class are not mutually exclusive. While some women came from financially comfortable and professional backgrounds some experienced a shift in their social status during the settlement process. This was similarly the case for the women with lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

When I spoke to the women about their experiences, many articulated concerns related to everyday matters such as where to find the right housing, which schools to send their children to, where to buy *Halal* meat, which bus services to use, where they could attend *Salat al Jumaa*, and so on. Such seemingly simple and perhaps mundane details should not be underestimated in their ability to affect the women's comfort levels in their new surroundings. Family and were seen as vital sources of information and support during these initial periods of settlement.

While all participants had unique personal histories and diverse narratives, they also shared similar gendered experiences as mothers and caretakers of the family. As first generation immigrants to Canada, it became apparent during interviews that most women were strongly connected to family overseas and regarded family and 'tradition'<sup>6</sup> very highly. All of the women were married, lived in a nuclear family household and had children. Moreover, with the exception of one woman who was a non-practicing Christian, all of the women identified as Muslims and wore the *Hijab*<sup>7</sup>.

Religion played an integral part in the ways the women identified themselves in Canada, the messages and values they communicated to their children, and in the ways they established ties with others in Halifax. My study found that household and work arrangements were often propelled by the women's strong sense of duty and obligation to their roles as mothers and wives. Indeed as part of the family's settlement arrangements, most of the women assumed care-taking roles within the household, while attending various language classes and settlement services during their "spare time". Moreover, all of the women in this study, except for Hala were unemployed. However, the prioritization of employment and the allocation of household tasks cannot be attributed to one single factor, but rather were determined through various issues, such as the spouses' adoption of the role of breadwinner, regional labour market dynamics, and differential access to information between the women and men.

To place the participants' lives into greater context, it is useful to briefly refer to some of the different ways in which patriarchal traditions from the Middle East interplay with religion and gender. The construction of women as nurturers and caretakers of the household within patriarchal settings has been documented by numerous feminists and social scientists (Kibria 1990; Moghadam 1993; Joseph 1996). Within Middle Eastern societies in particular, notions of womanhood and masculinity are often entangled with religious ideologies both on the household and societal level. Islam for example, "...privileges patrilineal bonds and enjoins men to take responsibility for the support of their wives and children," (Moghadam 1993: 109), while encouraging women's roles as 'good mothers' at home. However, it is important to keep in mind that the religious and patriarchal expectations can differ substantially by community, region and country and that the Middle East is an extremely politically and culturally diverse region (Kandyoti 1988; Lazreg 1990). As Edward Said (1978) has demonstrated in his landmark study *Orientalism*, literary works and media rooted in western colonialism have shaped scholarship which misconstrues the region as homogenous and uncivilized. Within this scholarship Arab women are often presented as exotic and passive victims of patriarchy –

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<sup>6</sup> Here I refer to 'tradition' in terms of how the participants conceptualized and talked about it during our interviews – usually spoken of in the sense of maintaining cultural and religious practices as an Arab or Muslim.

<sup>7</sup> Islamic head covering for women.



imagery which is still prevalent in mainstream media representations of Arab women (Zine 2006). Although it was beyond the scope of the study to thoroughly tease out the nuances of the women's social contexts prior to migration to Canada, it is important to add that individual backgrounds and personal histories ultimately had unique affects on the women's circumstances in Canada and that women were active decision makers during the migration and settlement process.

Moreover, my study found that patriarchal and religious traditions do not stay the same once the women have migrated, but are adjusted and continually renewed in light of changing circumstances introduced by the settlement process. By adopting a culturally specific and gendered lens on patriarchy, migration and settlement, my study attempted to paint a more nuanced and complex picture of the women's day to day realities, as well as their narratives of inclusion and exclusion as immigrant women of 'visible minority status' living in Canada. The research found that in the midst of new responsibilities, shifting social norms and economic circumstances incurred through migration, a reworking of household divisions of labour and relationships between the women and their spouses during settlement is necessary. Throughout these changes, some of the women spoke of the challenge of seeking out and establishing a community in a new country, the set backs they felt because of language barriers, and feeling burdened with different responsibilities

In the following sections, I discuss how the women's diverse orientations to notions of home, belonging and community in Halifax puts to test the idea that 'ethnic minorities' sharing similarities along linguistic, religious or geographical origins can necessarily serve as a basis of unity or a ticket into any one community. Rather, as proposed by anthropologists such as Cohen (1985) and Baumann (1999), the idea of community itself should be the subject of scholarly scrutiny if one is to properly unearth the inequalities of power, the tensions and the affiliations which may exist along intersecting lines of gender, class, ethnic and religious differences. As Baumann (1996) has argued in his ethnography of Southallian members of the South Asian diaspora in the UK, divisions and connections which span across different communities are relational and can change over time, as does one's sense of place and belonging. In similar fashion, rather than viewing identity as a one-stop process, I espouse Hall's view that, "rather than speaking of identity, we should speak of identification and see it as an ongoing process." (Hall 1992: 122).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Although the following narratives provide glimpses into the participants' feelings about their place and sense of home in Halifax, it should be expected that their feelings and circumstances, affiliations and contacts can certainly change over time.

## Locating Home & Finding Community: Halifax & Beyond

*There is an internal landscape, a geography of the soul; we search for its outlines all our lives. Those who are lucky enough to find it ease like water over a stone, onto its fluid contours, and are home. Some find it in the place of their birth; others may leave a seaside town, parched, and find themselves refreshed in the desert. There are those born in rolling countryside who are really only at ease in the intense and busy loneliness of the city. For some, the search is for the imprint of another; a child or a mother, a grandfather or a brother, a lover, a husband, a wife, or a foe.*

—Josephine Hart, 1996.

As Hart's quote has eloquently expressed, how a person conceives of home is contextual, personal and unique to an individual's lived experiences. Furthermore examining questions of 'belonging' and individual narratives of home provides us with insight into the cultural dimensions of migration. Such narratives can politicize the experience of dislocation and location (Brah 1996) while offering the potential to engage theoretical discussions with the more personal and substantive realms of citizenship (Tastsolougou 2006; Yuval-Davis & Werbner 1999).

Certainly, there is a difference as Brah suggests, (1996) between feeling at home and calling a place home. For most women in this study, 'home' could not be mapped to one location, but rather as Brah (1996) has suggested of diasporic subjects, the women were ambivalently located at a crossroads of belonging. For some women, the country of origin was a place that could stir up nostalgic memories and longing for loved ones. In other instances, reaching out to others in Halifax with whom the women could share and recreate their memories of the homeland was a crucial source of comfort and feeling more at home; the diversity of these women's experiences challenge the notion of a fixed Arab identity.

Depending on the geographical scale which one speaks of as 'home', a variety of different responses, memories and imagery can be conjured. When I asked Aisha where she felt at home the most, my question was turned around to me as Aisha replied: "I am not sure, what do you mean by home? Home the nation, the *bayt* [household] or the community here or in Yemen?" Aisha's question was an important cue to myself as the researcher that 'home' could be experienced on more than one level. As Brah reminds us, it is more useful to view home as an experience which can cross "territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries" (1996: 197). Therefore, it is important to conceptualize home as a malleable and oftentimes political *ideology* that is easily taken for granted to mean one thing (as I was guilty of doing). After giving some thought to Aisha's question, I replied, "home as in where you feel you belong the most, or where you feel the most comfortable [pause]; on any of those levels" to which Aisha replied:

Well...um...I don't feel like I am completely comfortable here nor do I feel fully comfortable in Yemen, I mean its half and half. I mean the lifestyle here is a lot better, but I miss my friends and family over there in Yemen. So you can't really say

that one is better than the other... Maybe one day I will find my mid point of happiness! [laughs]. But one thing I am sure about... is that I feel very far from calling myself a Canadian right now. I don't know why, maybe because I don't have the official status yet of being a Canadian. I think that I won't feel completely Canadian until a few more years, and when I get the citizenship maybe it will feel better. I still feel like an immigrant right now; still strange to this country.

Aisha's liminal state of belonging captures well the dilemmas and ambiguities which constitute the lives of those who inhabit multiple worlds. No longer does Yemen stand as a place which Aisha can call home, although her memories and personal ties keep her linked to Yemen as a place where she once belonged and still connects with on various levels. While life in Canada is much more economically sound and stable, Aisha's comment indicates that she still feels like an outsider in Halifax.

However, legal status alone does not necessarily serve as an explanation for the dynamics of belonging and inclusion/ exclusion, rather it is the symbols and meanings attached to Canadian citizenship which are for Aisha what marks one's 'Canadianess'; or rather, 'Canadianess' is everything which Aisha feels she has not yet attained as a newcomer. Even though the idea 'Home' for Aisha is at present something to strive for, it lacks a concrete geographical location or definition. Shifting between her identity as a Yemeni and as an immigrant Muslim and Arab woman in Canada, Aisha is still searching for her place in the world, or "her mid-point of happiness" as she puts it. Indeed, defining home in a cosmopolitan world poses a challenge for many migrants. As Brah asks:

When does a location become home? What is the difference between 'feeling at home' and staking claim to one's place as one's own? It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of a place as home. As postmodernist theorists have argued, this can be both an unsettling and rewarding experience (1996:196).

Similarly, as a displaced Iraqi, Najat explained (very beautifully and poetically, I thought) in her own dialect of Arabic how the idea of home and citizenship can mean more than what is written on your passport. As Najat explains, home is a feeling and a consciousness rather than merely a status. While a homeland may be deeply ingrained in one's psyche and diasporic identity, Najat's case shows that returning on a permanent basis or even visiting can be far from reality. Although much of what Najat told me may be lost in translation, it is nevertheless possible to capture a sense of the emotion in her response:

...To me home is the roots and the tendrils, it's always alive, in your memory, and that's how we stay connected: through memory, through storytelling, by keeping our traditions. When you remember your childhood, playing with your friends and cousins, even the smell of a food or a dish that your mother used

to make, that's why I love cooking the same food sometimes... Or the day you got married... that's the day your family is extended and you become part of a new home... So there are many things that remind you of home. There isn't a good way I can explain it to you, but that's what it is. The only way I can keep it alive is through stories, and passing these stories to my children. I hope maybe one day, my children will tell their stories to their own children. As they pass it on, from one generation to the next, they will always remember where we came from, and that's how the life is completed. Like a circle, our stories go back and forth as we are born and grow old and have our own children.

For those who have undergone multiple migrations, or those who are “twice, even thrice migrants” (Bhachu 1996), orientations to the host communities and the homeland can significantly differ in comparison to first time migrants. Another participant, Leila, had lived in Germany, Saudi Arabia and Syria before she arrived to Halifax. Leila explained that she had little emotional connection to Syria, although both of her parents were raised and born there. Rather than identifying herself through ancestry or ethnic background, Leila rejected hyphenations or ethnic markers, and instead insisted that she be identified as a Muslim, and above all a Canadian:

Well you know what; I don't really feel that I belong to a specific country at all. I feel Canadian actually, I have an Arabic background, but the main thing is Canadian... with a little bit of Arabic, German and what else? Saudi Arabia... I don't really feel attached to Saudi Arabia. I don't belong there at all... *at all...* That's why, well actually when someone asks me what's my home country, the only place that I can say is in Canada. It's the only place that I feel that I fit, and I feel very comfortable here. I feel even though I have a big family in Syria, I don't really know them. I know my friends here and the few of my relatives who are here, I feel that here is my home, no matter what. I don't think that I would be able to live in Syria at all, unless if I go for a while and I know I'm coming back to Canada, but I don't feel Syria is my home, I feel that Canada is my home.

What Leila demonstrates in the latter quote is how citizenship is something which extends far beyond legal recognition and is also deeply embedded in identity politics and one's sense of cultural belonging. While actively claiming her Canadian citizenship, Leila also defines what it is to be Canadian in her own way. Moreover, the above statement provides an excellent example of how cultural origins do not necessarily translate into a longing for return to a homeland. Although women such as Leila, who inhabit multiple worlds, can be pressured to identify with dominant discourses of identity which demand a specific allegiance to one culture or background, we can see that citizenship can indeed be a terrain of contestation and constant negotiation.

As Hala who has lived in Halifax for almost thirty years explained to me, “I feel comfortable in Canada now, but we are still different here, you know, as Lebanese we are

different – we just think differently”. While Hala felt that she belonged to a tight network of friends and family in Canada, there are perhaps dominant discourses of being Canadian which she does not quite identify with. This does not suggest that Hala’s Lebanese background is in tension with her Canadian identity, nor does it suffice to simplify the matter by hyphenating Hala into a Lebanese-Canadian. What matters is how Hala *can* claim Canada as home and still maintain a strong identification with her Lebanese identity.

Theorizing belonging from the vantage point of diaspora, as in the case of Hala and Leila, challenges the idea of individuals possessing fixed national and cultural ‘origins’ (Brah 1996). As demonstrated from the standpoint of women like Leila and Hala, who have lived in Canada for over a decade, it is possible to live in a place for long periods of time, but still maintain a connection to more than one geographical region and history. Classical assimilation models which assume that immigrants’ differences are gradually diffused into dominant society capture very little of these complex realities. This certainly begs a broader discussion of how discourses of belonging and national identity play into public and political discussions of integration (Li 2003). As Li (*ibid*) has demonstrated, very seldom is the term integration examined for the discursive meanings which make the term such a contested one. Moreover, it is important to ask: who defines the terms of integration in public and political discussions? Perhaps the notion of ‘successful integration’ is becoming too easily interchangeable with ‘assimilation’ as migrants are expected to establish ties and participate in communities beyond their ethnic backgrounds, as indicated by Reitz and Bannerjee (2007).

It is important to acknowledge that finding a sense of community is never an overnight experience. Tastsoglou and Miedema explain in their study of women’s integration experiences in the Maritimes that for newcomers, “making new friends, learning the language, and the idiosyncrasies of a new society is a slow...and time-consuming process” (Tastsoglou and Miedema 2000: 88). Indeed, what consistently emerged in my participants’ narratives of wanting to belong is that finding community and acceptance is not always an easy feat. Sharing a culture or religious background as some participants revealed, is not always a guaranteed entry into a community. Furthermore, successful integration meant a host of different things for each participant. For example, while some women I spoke to just wanted to find acceptance among other Arabs in the local community, others hoped to improve their fluency in English so as to be able to communicate freely with everyone around them.

### *Finding a Way In: Community in Halifax*

For those participants whose families remained overseas, reaching out locally to draw in distant relatives and friends as ‘fictive kin’ (Kibria 1990) was an important medium for establishing a sense of community and support. It was thus quite common during the interviews for the women to refer to their female friends in Halifax as ‘sisters’.

During an interview with Farah at her home, we were interrupted by a distressed phone call from one of Farah’s friends – another woman who had just immigrated to Canada. I listened as Farah comforted the woman by offering to visit her home and help her with the cooking that evening. Afterwards I commented on this brief interjection between Farah and her friend, she simply replied, “well... she is like my sister here, we must help each other, because when you don’t have your family to help you in a new

country, you need others.” Similarly, Hala told me that she often made an effort to reach out to others who were newly arrived to Halifax, explaining that, “...because we went through the same thing, we know what its like, so we wanna help others in the same situation.”

While there was certainly a sense of community and collective identity emergent through some of the women’s narratives, (especially those who had lived in Halifax for longer periods of time) others I spoke to felt less welcome or unable to place themselves within a particular group or community. Considering how settlement is an ongoing process for newcomers, such feelings of displacement do not come as a surprise, rather they challenge notions of ethnic minorities as insular, cohesive and relatively homogenous groups. Turning the question of why newcomers to a host community feel welcome or unwelcome, on its head, it is instead necessary to ask what constitutes membership in any particular community, assuming that ‘community’ is the vehicle through which individuals congregate and establish ties.

As many academics have demonstrated, the logistics of community are complex and littered with contradictions. In the sense that community and nation is ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1990), examining how the boundaries of community are demarcated – whether through ethnicity, class or religion – uncovers how power and hierarchy also operate on numerous intersections to exclude or include others (Barber 2006). With this in mind, Cohen suggests not all members necessarily agree on where the lines should be drawn, “community is a boundary-expressing symbol...As a symbol, it is held in common by its members; but its meaning varies with its members’ unique orientations to it” (Cohen 1985: 15).

I do not intend to suggest that all communities lack cohesion or shared visions, nor is it implied that the term ‘community’ should be disbanded altogether in academic and political discourse. Indeed it has been proven that community and ethnic associations sharing a collective consciousness can serve as important political platforms and mouthpieces for airing identity issues publicly, establishing group claims and strengthening feelings of belonging (Baumann 1996; Miediema and Tastsoglou 2000). At the same time, oftentimes the politicization of identity, when poised as a community or ‘ethnic’ concern, can ultimately mean that minorities engage in a reification of culture by reproducing wide-sweeping claims about group identity, whether in advancement of civil rights, or to further a cause by pronouncing a specific agenda or ideology (Baumann 1996, 1999).

Although I have pointed out the ambiguity of the term ‘Middle Eastern community’ at the start of this study, I nevertheless decided to use the term during interviews to see how the participants would respond to the concept: Would their narratives perpetuate certain stereotypes of the so-called Arab community? What could their social experiences and networks reveal about the landscapes of belonging in Halifax and abroad? To answer these questions, I start with the example of Yasmeen, who as was without doubt struggling the most with regards to her migration to Halifax. When I asked Yasmeen whether she felt there was a Middle Eastern community in Halifax, she replied:

Middle East Community? What do you mean by Middle East community? They told me here there is a Middle East community, but I don’t found that. There are many Syrian people, many Lebanon people, many Iraqi people, but they are

not friendly with the Egyptian people. We met a couple at the kids' High school during the parents meeting. We were just introduced to each other. They took my phone number, I told them they can meet in one of our houses, my husband and her husband, but I did not hear from them. I think that they are not very friendly...but anyway, I found several people from Egypt here in Halifax, but I don't have a good relationship with them. *Maybe they are very busy, maybe they have been here for many years, maybe they have their own life- so I cant make a relationship with them* [my emphasis]. Here I have one of my friends she is a pharmacist from Egypt, but I meet her once a week because she works a lot, I knew her from before... There is only one woman I can call my friend, she is from Jordan and she is very friendly. And I feel she is like my sister here. She is the only woman I can talk to here... and *I wonder because she is Jordanian... she is not Egyptian, but I know now this does not matter* [my emphasis].

Yasmeen had lived in Halifax for little over two years, but her comment above reveals that she is still unsure about how to locate herself amongst other Arab groups living in Halifax. Nor can she conceptualize the scope of the local 'Egyptian community'. What is clear is that prior to moving to Halifax, Yasmeen had envisioned herself getting acquainted with others of Egyptian origin in Halifax but was disappointed to find that she could neither simply be 'counted in' nor find acceptance amongst others who were long time residents of Halifax.

Yasmeen's experience of dislocation within what she perceived *should have been* her community (neither a strange nor particularly surprising situation for those who inhabit multiple worlds; see Anthias 2000) offers an insight into how individuals and groups are able to demarcate and imagine the boundaries of group identity. An interesting contrast to Yasmeen, (though not intended to be generalizeable), is Zahra's experience. As previously mentioned, when Zahra arrived from Egypt five years ago, she was immediately taken under the wing of her sister-in-law. In fact, the sister-in-law was not only an important lead-in to meeting other women of Egyptian background, but was also influential in helping Zahra to decide who *not* to socialize with. As Zahra explained, gossip and judgment of others was what she wanted to avoid at all costs when choosing her friends (Aswad 1991; Meneley 2000). As Zahra explained,

I don't make friends with gossip women. My group is fine. When I came my sister in law told me who was not a good person to hang out with, she told me [switches to Arabic/Egyptian dialect], "Balash di, wa balashi di wa di" [translation "leave her alone, and leave her alone, and her"]... She told me this to protect me from gossip so that I would not have any problems later. Don't get me wrong, *we have problems with our group* [my emphasis] sometimes, but they are not major problems.

Researcher: *So tell me about your friends now, are you close to each other?*

Every Saturday I meet them. Each one takes a turn to make potluck in winter, at her home. In Ramadan every week or every weekend, [switches to Arabic] *niftar ma ba'ath* [translation: we break fast together]. In summer we go to the beach, go to park and make a barbeque. Here, one difference between here and Egypt, when I was in Egypt mainly women alone and men alone, here men and women sit together. My friends and me, we bring our husbands and celebrate special occasion. Like last New Years, we had such a great time, we booked a party in hotel, and there was a big dinner.

Zahra's sense of belonging in Halifax is mediated through the strong ties of support and friendship she has established with other women who share similar interests and backgrounds. On the one hand, the level of organization and connectedness demonstrated by Zahra's group provides a solid base for maintaining and reworking cultural traditions in Canada. Moreover, Zahra is now enjoying a new aspect of socializing which transgresses the traditional public and private spatial and gender divisions she was so accustomed to in Egypt, as she begins to interact with both men and women in her community. This further reinforces how migration can significantly shift gender norms within families and the wider host society, though not necessarily to the extent where gender expectations are reinforced as a mechanism of patriarchal control. Moreover, whereas Zahra mainly celebrated special events with family members in Egypt, she and her friends in Halifax have established unique ways of connecting to their homeland, reproducing culture in the local context and in forming bonds of support in the absence of kin.

What is interesting is how the boundaries of membership to Zahra's group appear to be clearly marked by their exclusive and distinct emphasis on sharing a religious and ethnic identity (that it, Muslims, Egyptians), and perhaps (more subtly implied), by economic class as well. Clearly from a well-to-do economic background, Zahra was not under financial pressure to find employment in Halifax. Thus not only was Zahra's free time permitting of her active involvement in organizing community activities with other women, but together, the women were able to mobilize resources and forge a distinct localized identity. During our conversation about community, I asked Zahra whether her group was involved in helping other Egyptian newcomers to establish footing in Halifax, to which she replied,

Actually, we are only 10 or 15 families here, and we try not to let too many people into our group... And we have enough anyway, all nice families, *kullahum muhtarameen* [They are all respectable]. We used to do this before....We formed the *Arabic Society of Egyptian Women*, but it didn't last because there was little commitment from certain women who we were reliant on and we ended up just disbanding the society. We organized our money together so that the society could help us with everything. If someone was sick we would give them funds for the hospital fees, sometimes if somebody had a connection to an Arabic speaking doctor, they would contact them to help explain about



an illness or make an examination...we even had some Arabic language classes for kids, and we stayed together as an official group for 3 years. But then we started to have some problems; some women who were running the group were beginning to make excuses and there wasn't enough commitment from them, bad organization...so, unfortunately, we gave up the society. Now we continue to do these things, but with a smaller group. It's just not under the formal title of the *Arabic Society of Egyptian Women*.

As with any 'imagined community', competing visions of community, power dynamics and petty rivalries are as prevalent amongst group dynamics as is solidarity and amicability. To use Cohen's (1985) terminology, the *symbolism* in Zahra's version of community was mediated through her interaction with a tightly knit group of families, who beyond sharing class positions and emphasizing a 'shared' cultural background, were also committed to helping one another.

While the multiplicity of associations and networks shared by the participants revealed a snapshot of some of the divisions which occur within and among Arab immigrant communities in Halifax, sharing religious and linguistic backgrounds (Arabic) was an important, if not the one commonality through which the women sought to establish their friendships. At first glance, it would seem that religion served as an instantaneous gateway for which the participants could find a community. However, religion or language was not always enough to coalesce into community, or transcend differentiations based on ideology and orientation, class and ethnicity (as Zahra's own group dynamics indicate).

It is important to stress that being Muslim for example, carries different meanings and is often ambiguously conflated with ethnicity. However, because Islam is one of the most widely practiced religion in the world, affiliation is also widespread and embraces a plethora of cultural and geographical origins. The ideology of a single Muslim diaspora (Sayyid 2000), or *Umma* – a globally united Muslim community – in theory transcends socially imposed racial, class and ethnic barriers. Although some academics such as Sayyid (2000) have discussed the liberatory potential for Muslims uniting under the banner of an *Umma*, current political divisions in Europe and the Middle East cast a very different reality which reveals ongoing tensions and conflict (Brah 1996; Hall 2000).

From what I could infer from our conversations, Leila used her political involvement to mobilize for the rights of Muslims and minorities in Canada. Of all the participants I spoke with, no one was more disapproving of the term 'Middle Eastern community' than Leila. Instead, striving for the *ideal* of a unified Muslim *Umma* was clearly embedded in Leila's language and everyday enactments of 'community'. As Leila explained:

Actually I am a person who believes that a community just doesn't consist of a specific race or a specific background. It has to be like, everyone, *like whoever fits in the group*, like if you have a group of friends from university. Does it have to be from a specific race? *It doesn't have to be from a specific race, it's just about people you get along with* [my emphasis]. So I

believe a community is a group of people who like to be with each other who like to help each other, and they extend their help to other people, and they include everyone. Other than that, its kind of racist [the term *Middle Eastern community*], I think – and I don't believe in that. I have many close friends here and I feel like they are my family, they are mostly Muslim but from other nationalities, Pakistan, even South Africa... other backgrounds. They are not Arabs at all, and I feel very, very close to them as I do to my mother, my aunt. If someone is in need or someone is sick or something like that, we try to help as much as possible. If someone is busy and they need someone else to take care of their child we are there for each other.

Leila's stance reflects a common predicament for minorities advancing their rights as a unified group (Baumann 1999). While claiming a unified identity is necessary for political mobilization, my interviews with others certainly did not indicate that being of a particular faith or identifying as Arab, as a woman or Canadian was necessarily a free ticket into any one community. As the previous three examples of Yasmeen, Zahra and Aisha demonstrate, while being Muslim was an important precursor for establishing ties with others, it does not necessarily predicate the existence of a unified Muslim diaspora in Halifax.

Indeed, as both Baumann (1999) and Hall (2000) remind us, the boundaries of religion and belonging are as malleable as ethnicity and its identifications, whereby carrying the label of being Muslim for example, can be just one aspect of a mesh of interconnected meanings which constitute relationships and attachments within diasporas. The above authors advise an equally cautious analytical use of religion and ethnicity to avoid blending into a singular misreading of culture. Instead, Baumann suggests that we develop a more rigorous analysis of how religious ideas transform through various shifts in political weather and points of history. Baumann vividly illustrates this argument by explaining that:

Religion is not some cultural baggage that is taken along on migration wrapped, tied, and tagged....The bearings of religious conviction and action will change as the users themselves change positions or see them changed in their new context... [Therefore] it is more appropriate to comprehend religion as a sextant, the instruments that sailors use to calculate their own position relative to a changing night sky (Baumann 1999: 78-9).

What the participants searched for in a community in meaning, scope and affiliation thus also varied substantially from one individual to the next as they narrated their individual experiences in Halifax. Contrary to liberal ideology which universalizes the experience of citizenship and community, critics argue that identification to any one community cannot be magically conjured through shared ethnicity or religion (Baumann 1999; Bhabha 1999; Hall 2000). Instead it is thus important to understand how identities are *associational*, shifting and in constant dialogue with the social positions which individuals and group inhabit (Hall 2000; Taylor 1994). Culture, thus remains a loose

canon of contradictions which can be universalized and reified by those who imagine and live it, but also contested and negotiated by the very same subjects.

### *The Politics of Being Muslim/Arab/Woman in Canada, Post-9/11*

"I am just hoping any girl with the *Hijab* does not go through what I went through,"  
—12 year old Asmahan Mansour after being banned from a soccer game in Quebec for  
wearing the *Hijab*  
(CBC Mar. 2007)

Since September 11th, 2001 the term 9/11 has come to mark an era of disquiet and instability for many Muslims and/or Arabs worldwide. In tandem, with but not directly a cause of the former events, European nations such as the Netherlands and France are struggling to come to terms with the rapidly changing landscapes of their national identity (Baumann 1999: 23). The past few years in particular seem to bear witness to a rising wave of conservatism throughout Europe, as governments begin to support heavy handed policies regulating 'culture' to address the growing tensions between minorities and the dominant society (Freedman 2006: 169). Moreover, with the U.S war on terror in full swing, policy and mainstream political discourse have gradually legitimized the culturally racist policies which target Muslims and other ethnic minorities under the guise of 'security' (Rygiel 2006; Barber 2006).

As a disciplinary tool and a mark of legality, Canadian citizenship policy makers can be instrumental in defining the political boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Although the originating ideology of Canadian multiculturalism was initially about celebrating and accentuating different cultures, there has been an increasing turn in political discourse towards 'managing diversity' (Barber 2006). It leads one to question what the 'culture' in multiculturalism stands to represent in relation to the debate on citizens' loyalties. Although Canada has not experienced the same level of ethnic tension and violence between and against minorities as its European and American counterparts, there is certainly no shortage of debate around the extent to which religious freedoms and diversity should be tolerated in Canada. Not surprisingly, Islamic practices have been touted as a central point of contention within such debates. For example the Headscarf Question or 'Foulard' Controversy (as it has been dubbed in France) continues to feature strongly in debates concerning "women's freedom" and equality; as well as how Canada's religious minorities should be accommodated.<sup>9</sup>

While academics and feminists have been divided on debates regarding the *Hijab* and Islamic values (for example) as forms of patriarchal and religious control, little heard is how Muslim women themselves feel about the issue (Lazreg 1988; Kandioyti 1994; Dwyer 1999). Even within feminist Muslim scholarship, there is generally little consensus about where exactly to draw the line between *Hijab* as a religious decree and the original intentions and meanings of Islamic text in reference to Muslim women's piety and duties to dress modestly (Ahmed 1992; Zine 2006). Although the practice of 'othering' Muslim women is not a new occurrence, the events of 9/11 have further reinvigorated stereotypes of Islam and women. Zine explains how since then, Muslim

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, the recent controversy in Quebec, where a young Muslim girl from Ontario was banned from playing a football match because she was wearing a Hijab – a supposed 'safety hazard' and violation of FIFA codes (CBC March 3, 2007).

women have been cast in a “limited narrative” whereby, “the representation of Muslim women’s bodies as signifiers of difference...[turns into] a form of ‘gendered Islamophobia’ (Zine 2006: 35). If anything, it appears that most criticisms of the *Hijab* are based on a lack of historical knowledge and awareness of the political, personal and social symbols such clothing carries for Muslims (Ahmed 1992). Perhaps it is partly this fear of the unknown and ‘mysterious’ which has led to a general anxiety in western countries towards the *Hijab* witnessed in debates about integration and the ‘reasonable’ accommodation of difference. Such discussions seem to persistently fall on the idea that migrants importing their ‘cultural values’ may threaten democratic values (Okin 1999). Most of the women I spoke to were proud to be Muslim and hardly gave the impression that wearing the *Hijab* was a source of confinement or patriarchal control.

As Dwyer (1999) explains in her study of young British Muslim women, residues of orientalist imagery still litter public opinion and media representations of the *Hijab* and veil in Britain as something which is mysterious, ‘exotic’ and different (one is reminded of Said’s *Orientalism*, 1978). Such misrepresentations can often blanket the complex and highly classed, gendered and personal associations which Muslim themselves women connect with this form of religious expression and above all, lifestyle. Undeniably, while the veil and *Hijab* have been used to shape political debates and legitimize patriarchal control over women’s sexuality, it is also important to remember that there have also been a growing number of cases in the Middle East where women have taken to voluntarily wearing the *Hijab*, and in some cases, the veil – as a form of collective mobilization and symbol of respect (Al-Ali 1999; Dwyer 1999; Aswad 1991). However, this does not intend to infer that the *Hijab* is only worn voluntarily as a radical statement; rather it is a way of life and of cultural importance to many Muslim women of different backgrounds (Ahmed 1992).

Aside from communication of the difficulties arising from language barriers, a few of the women in this study mentioned that they often felt ‘different’ because of their dress. Despite this, none of the women seemed to want to directly confront my questions: “Have you experienced any racism or discrimination in Halifax?” and, “Have the events of 9/11 changed your life?” Admittedly and perhaps rather naively, it surprised me to find that most participants did not want to discuss the subject or hastily replied that they had experienced no such thing in Halifax, but had ‘heard stories’ from others. Yasmeen for example who was the most dissatisfied with living in Halifax, replied, “How can I answer this question? I don’t know about these things, but I hear from some people it happen to them before... I don’t know Halifax for a long time, I have only lived here for a short time [2 years]”.

As Muslims most of the women I spoke to did not feel restricted from practicing their religion in Halifax and felt that they had few unpleasant experiences in terms of being treated differently because of their religious and cultural backgrounds. Tastsoglou (2006) has also documented similar positive responses among immigrant women living in the Canadian Maritimes. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ascertain from my interviews whether this was the case or not, for it could also be that where racism is more prevalent and in the open in some places, it is more discreet and less tangible in others. As some women I interviewed implied, this may very well be the case in Halifax. Leila, who was the most politically vocal and active person I interviewed, did not directly discuss any

personal experiences with racism, but instead chose to present a much more positive spin on the situation of Muslims since 9/11:

Researcher: Do you feel that the events of 9/11 changed your life for better or worse?

Leila: Actually [9/11] was a waking point, not just for Muslim community, its everywhere. What happened at 9/11 was not a Muslim act; it was not an Islamic act. Like, Islam is not a violent religion, whatever happened there... was very wrong, very wrong. But the problem is that people they started... uh... there are different people with different views, and they started to blame Muslims... but it actually gave awareness to other people and to others to research Islam. And lots of people actually started to understand what Islam is. They started to distinguish these acts from Islam itself. On the other hand there are ignorant people and they started to beat Muslims, and started to do stuff against other Muslims, which is not really justified.

Leila has been actively attending political rallies and is strongly opposed to Canada' ongoing support for the so-called "war on terrorism". However, when I asked Leila whether she felt that current events in the Middle East were affecting her sense of security, a rather complicated set of contradictory feelings emerged in Leila's answer. Perhaps as I implied through my question that Leila's identity was somehow more bound to the Middle East, I had touched on a nerve. In what follows, there is a tension which occurs between Leila's political claims of Canadian citizenship, versus her religious orientation as a Muslim citizen as she expresses her frustration in being unable to transcend her Middle Eastern background in the eyes of those from the so-called Canadian majority

Whenever I go out, people sometimes look at me, especially with the news and the media... they look at me and really think that I am related to that [conflicts in the Middle East]... whenever I go to a rally they would ask me, "oh, are you from *there*?" Like when I went to the rally for Iraq, they asked me "oh do you have family from there?" and I was like, "no, I am not from Iraq, I was born in Germany, but I am just here as a human being because I am against war". The other thing is that people, they stereotype me because of putting the Hijab. I know that if I was not putting on the Hijab, people wouldn't really recognize me as different, but because of the Hijab they will always tell me, "ahh, you're Arab,"... so its kind of like stereotyping from the other side, it's not from my side. I was born in Germany and I grew up there and I went to Syria for medical school... Even in Canada, whenever they see a Hijab they will tell you that you are an Arab. People don't understand that Muslims are not supposed to be only Arabs, it's just like, I guess, 20 or 30 percent of all Muslims are Arabs; so people don't really understand that. So when I am going for to protest the way the government treated Canadians in Lebanon [the past summer 2006], its not because I

am Arab, but because all Canadians should be treated the same, no matter where you are from and because I am against what the Harper Government, is doing so I will not support that.

Establishing equal footing in the eyes of dominant society as an activist and citizen is easier said than done, especially when one carries the visible symbols and markers of an 'ethnic minority'. As demonstrated in the text above and in Leila's previous rejection of a homogenous Arab community, Leila is clearly attempting to break down cultural stereotypes by challenging racist assumptions about Pan Arab Muslim women and *speaking as* a Canadian Muslim woman herself. However, emphasizing one's position as a Muslim, minority, woman, or what have you, while necessary for political mobilization (Baumann 1999), also undermines and contradicts Leila's efforts to speak simply as a Canadian without bearing the tag of 'minority' or Arab to follow. The discursive construction of Muslim or Arab as an oppositional identity to Canadianess is in essence what Leila seeks to avoid in her everyday language and interactions. Whether the stereotypes that Leila experienced above are intentionally racist or not, it certainly speaks to the way in which essentialist portrayals of culture can create an 'Other' and stagnate demands for equality and collective political action.

Leila sets an important example for the current landscape of debates about 'Canadianess'. By rejecting being labeled as an Arab and participating politically, Leila actively claims her citizenship rights and negotiates her own personal version of Canadianess. Similarly, Abdelhady explains in her study of Lebanese diaspora in the U.S, through their participation in local life, many of the Lebanese subjects interviewed, "...sought to move beyond traditional ethnic identifications...to fully participate in the host society's politics and social issues as unhyphenated subjects." (Abelhady 2006: 443)

Although there were no blatant acts of racism by the community/public at large spoken about by the women in Halifax (from what can be gathered through the interviews anyway), there *was* nevertheless a sense from the participants that they were being differentiated from dominant society. However, most were quite unsure how to articulate feelings of exclusion into a full discussion about discrimination. For example, Najat told me in hushed tones [while we were in a booked room in a settlement organization], "well, sometimes I feel people treat me a little differently – but I don't know if its because I wear the *Hijab*, or because they are just unfriendly people".

I wondered whether the hesitation to discuss racism was because it is less visible, or prevalent in Halifax, or perhaps, I wondered, was this tension due to the current political climate since 9/11? As a newcomer who is simply trying to settle in and find acceptance, or someone whose identity is so closely tied to a bundle of associations which remain on the tip of everyone's conversations of late: *The Middle East, Islam, War, Terrorism*, (and so continues the disheartening list); talking about such issues could be uncomfortable and awkward. On the other hand, most of the participants were willing to dismiss the occasional unpleasant experience as isolated incidents and most generally agreed that Halifax, and overall Canada, was one of the more accommodating places that Arabs and Muslims could live in.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In today's increasingly interconnected and globally integrated world, leaving home can be easy, but staking out a place to call one's 'home' rarely is. This has been reflected in the myriad of attempts by social scientists to conceptualize and unlock a concept of citizenship which captures the more global and personal dimensions of belonging (Goldring and 'transnational citizenship', 2001; Parrenas and 'global citizenship' 2002). At the same time, a quick glance at the trends in literature over the recent years finds a growing concern with the challenges introduced by globalized capitalism to theorizing migrant experiences. This has reinvigorated anthropologists and social scientists to re-examine questions of identity, belonging and home on many different levels. Indeed questions of belonging are ever more important in today's world. Some studies have demonstrated that although 'globalization' renders the borders and nation-state more permeable by capital, people and goods, the symbolism and imaginary of the border and national identity are nevertheless reinforced more than ever before (Rygiel 2006). This has been particularly true in light of the radical changes incurred by the events of 9/11 to the landscape of multicultural politics in western and immigrant receiving countries in North America. Questions about religious accommodation, security controls and the value of multiculturalism – while not new questions – are perhaps exposing the world to some of the dormant tensions in western liberal societies about the limits of neutrality.

In the midst of these controversies, the realities of Muslims and people of Arab origin have changed drastically. Islam and Middle Eastern geographies have become the focus of media attention and subject to many misrepresentations and conflation with themes of violence, oppressive patriarchal regimes and unrest. Indeed what has been underpinning many of the problems in the ways Arabs and Muslims have been conceived by popular western media is a tendency to reify and essentialize culture in the singular as 'Middle Eastern' or 'Arab' through reductive understandings of religion as homogenous and unchanging. A recent compilation by Rygiel and Hunt demonstrates (2006) that discourses since 9/11 have not been free of gender biases and cultural stereotypes. To draw up a more general picture, Muslim and Arab women seem to have been caught between this war on words and the conflicting ideologies of nations scrambling for power. Conceived as victims of patriarchal and religious ideology, Muslim and Arab women have been appropriated as political justifications for the management of cultural difference in western societies on the one hand, while serving the agendas of religious fundamentalisms and control on the other hand. Not only do these stereotypes polarize debates, but they assume sameness among Muslims and Arabs.

Whether Muslim, Canadian, Arab, or all of the above, it is important not to let go of the individual narratives in this picture. Rather, it is important to recognize that everyone has their own story to tell. Exposing and engaging in constructive dialogue with these varied narratives perhaps can provide ways of contesting the dominant narratives of global hegemonic powers.

By providing a more in-depth and timely investigation of the migration and settlement experiences of a small group of Arab immigrant women who live in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I have sought to challenge and break down essentialist portrayals of 'culture' and 'community' as fixed and unchanging by questioning and lending a voice to

those who live under these controversial labels everyday. My findings reveal that what in fact can be quantified by statistical data as a “Middle Eastern Community in Halifax,” actually overlooks some of the major divisions and differentiations among people identified as being of Arab origin, falling along lines of class, gender, religion, history and country of origin to name a few.

My research highlights and supports these following points that have broader theoretical relevance. First and foremost, we cannot rely on simplistic understandings of culture or religion as blanket statements for what Arabs and Muslims or for that fact, any other group, are or are not. Secondly, the complex ways in which the participants experience home and belonging challenges the notion of a legally and nationally bound citizenship and identity. As Hall (1992) has argued theorists must conceive of *identification*, rather than ‘identity’ as a constant process of adjustment rather than something engraved in stone. Contoured through our experiences of exclusion and inclusion, identity arises, “from a *lack* of wholeness which is ‘filled’ from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*” (Hall 1992:122).

In undertaking a qualitative level investigation of lived experiences, this research has supported an agenda which challenges essentialist portrayals of Arab immigrant women. However the small sample size of this study, while appropriate given the time limitations and goals of this study in seeking to examine issues on an in depth level, the findings I have presented cannot be representative of all Arab immigrant women’s experiences in Canada, nor should they be taken as that. Indeed, while this study fills a gap in Canadian feminist scholarship on the experiences of Arab immigrant women, a much larger sample would be needed to examine any emergent trends or patterns across Canada in order to substantiate any general conclusions about the Canadian context. The following points are recommendations for further research in this area:

Future research on this area still faces the obstacles of bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, while staying true to the particularities of individual experiences, power dynamics and broader social processes. The topic of migration has become a highly interdisciplinary topic of research which has been enriched by a diversity of perspectives from the social sciences. Drawing equally on the insights of qualitative and quantitative research methods would allow a study such as this one to draw out larger scale patterns of belonging and citizenship while maintaining an interest in the dynamics of social relations on an in-depth level. Such a deliberate synthesis of research methods would require increased funding and extending the durations of ethnographic research. Such a collaboration would provide quantitative research with more substantial grounds to engage with a critical application of theoretical terms such as citizenship which moves it beyond a statistical valuation, while qualitative research would be better able to methodologically substantiate in-depth data.

In addition to this, a greater focus on gender which includes the experiences of both men and women, would do well to capture some of these aforementioned complexities of migration on a more in-depth level. While there has been a great deal of talk from feminist scholars of making migration studies more gender specific, this particular area is still under construction and off to a slower start, especially in terms of examining how masculinities are reoriented through migration. Furthermore, locating research beyond the place of residence, to the country of origin would provide a useful way of capturing the transnationality of migrant experiences. This practice, coupled with



ethnographic research documenting how migrant experiences change over time would provide valuable tools for moving beyond one-time snapshots of settlement, to more nuanced illustrations of ongoing processes of change and adjustment which can still occur years after migration has taken place.

Finally, I also suggest that more research is needed to explore the ways in which television and media representations of Arabs and Muslims since 9/11 are perceived by those who carry those labels themselves. Theorizing and debating the misinformation and stereotypical images produced at a heightened levels since the events of 2001 have been widespread and brought about important discussions about some of the injustices which are occurring under the guise of a 'War on Terrorism'. However, it is far too simple to leave out the voices of those who are being discussed. Instead, social scientists who are supporting those who are labeled as marginalized and minorities, can all too easily slip into a romantic view of the 'subaltern', which assumes that those who are targets of these stereotypes are necessarily interested in challenging hegemonies and changing their social circumstances. I myself was somewhat taken aback when I asked Hala, one of the participants how she felt about the conflict which took place in Lebanon in 2006. Contrary to what I expected, Hala commended the Harper Government and explained that she was supportive of Canada's role in the Middle East. This was in complete contrast to Leila, another participant who was politically active and outspoken about the current Canadian Government. Instead of brushing aside these discrepancies in opinion, the ambiguities and contradictions of everyday experience should be further welcomed, not rejected in our attempts to deconstruct essentialisms within academic circles and in our day to day realities.

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