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**IS PUNK *HARAM*?:  
*TAQWACORE*, RESISTANCE AND  
MUSLIM YOUTH IDENTITY IN CANADA**

by

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic Muslim identity in the West is increasingly conceptualized 'as being "under siege", especially in a post 9/11 context. This paper examines some of the complexities of identity formation and belonging as experienced by Muslim youth in the current political climate in Canada. However intense and antagonizing this social and political climate may be, I argue that there is room for dissenting and subversive reconfigurations of a Muslim identity that resists the eviction of Muslims from full belonging and citizenship in Western society. This paper explores this possibility by focusing on Muslim youth identity formation in the context of *Taqwacore*, a Muslim punk scene popular among some second-generation youth. Representing hybrid identities for Muslim youth, *Taqwacore* creates the space for creative self-expression and subversive challenges to impositions from both the Muslim community and the mainstream Western culture.

Key Words: Muslim youth, racialization, identity formation, *Taqwacore*

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For my mother and father

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## PREFACE

I first encountered *taqwacore* in the fall of 2007 during my years as an undergraduate. I was browsing the Internet looking for potential paper topics for two courses I was enrolled in that semester, Discourses of Dissent and Cultures of Globalization. By chance, I came across a review about a novel entitled; *The Taqwacores* which was self-published by author Michael Muhammad Knight in 2003 and later published by Autonomedia in 2004, about an Islamo-punk house. The most captivating element of this discovery was realizing that this novel influenced some Muslim youth to create an actual Muslim punk scene. When I started researching this cultural phenomenon, I was lucky to find a few Internet pages with information on both the novel and the subculture. There were a handful of sites that offered the synopsis of the novel. In addition, a couple of YouTube videos of some live performances and MySpace band pages were also circulating. At the time, there were only a couple of articles in newspapers or music magazines had been circulating. Years later, when I did my routine *taqwacore* search on Google, I came across fifty plus pages containing information about the novel, bands, author, movie, documentary, commentary and more. What happened in just a few years? Why the massive shift in interest and coverage?

The proliferation of web pages and interviews clearly signifies an increased interest in understanding and demystifying *taqwacore* as well as its adoption as a form of expression of identity. In many of the interviews with *taqwacore* participants, there exists a refusal to identify or quantify what *Taqwacore* actually represents. They claim that it is not a unified “Muslim punk rock” group or movement but simply a bunch of kids and friends “doing [their] thing” and supporting one another. Their resistance to being pigeonholed into pre-packaged moulds to be

bought, sold and consumed and more importantly, usurped by the pitfalls of popular culture and its demands is understandable. It is not easy, however, to dismiss the fact that something significant has happened in the collective and individual consciousness of Muslim or non-Muslim youth that are either directly or indirectly affiliated with *taqwacore*. Even in my recognition of the importance of this scene, I still cannot quite place my finger on *what* exactly is so moving, inspiring and most of all *relieving* about *taqwacore*.

This current study is, for all intents and purposes, an exploratory and academic one. This reality makes me very self-conscious and cautious about my endeavour because I want to avoid the criticisms associated with the disconnected view from the academic ivory tower. The knowledge produced in relation to “objects” of study is not always representative of what is actually occurring and being lived “on the ground”. Knowing this, I will not pretend to be an academic who pretends to understand this subculture better than those who live and breathe it on a day-to-day basis. This is not my purpose. In some ways, I am trying to demystify my personal experiences of growing up in a bicultural and religious household and feel that the plight, anger, concern and hope that exists within *taqwacore* speak to my experience as an “in-betweeners” in a truly profound and creative fashion.

My aim is to unpack and explore, as informed by conceptual and theoretical tools available in the literature and from *my* perspective, the soulful creativity that resides in this scene and the power that exists in claiming a frustratingly suspect identity. On that note, let my explorations and ruminations begin.



## INTRODUCTION

*I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoos, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.*

-Salman Rushdie<sup>1</sup>

If Rumi was a *homo*<sup>2</sup> and Muhammad a *punk rocker*<sup>3</sup>, does that mean that there is actually room for *riot grrrls*<sup>4</sup>, *mohawked Sufis*, *straightedge Sunnis* and *Shi'a skinheads*<sup>5</sup> to claim and assert their identities as young Muslims? Welcome to the world of *taqwacore*. A world that flirts with the transgressions between Islam and punk rock and which forces one to pay attention to this new identitarian eruption. *Taqwacore* began as a fictional account of an Islamic punk house<sup>6</sup> and eventually led to the creation of an actual musical subculture. If, as they say, necessity is the mother of all inventions, then this subculture, comprised of primarily second-generation Muslims, was born out of the urgency and necessity they felt to halt the potential for self-loathing, to combat the racialization of their ethnic backgrounds and the need to reposition their relationship with Islam and Western culture. The ideas and sentiments informing

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Kraidy 2005, p.116. Used by Kraidy to preface a chapter entitled, "Structure, Reception, and Identity: On Arab-Western Dialogism". This quote is taken from Rushdie's novel *East, West: Stories* (1994), describing a scene in "The Courter" where the narrator, a sixteen year old young man from Bombay who is studying in England, chooses to acquire his British citizenship. This scene is meant to highlight the troubles associated with "inbetweenness".

<sup>2</sup> Song title from the album "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay" by "The Kominas"

<sup>3</sup> Fictional song from "The Taqwacores" novel

<sup>4</sup> Began as an underground Feminist Punk movement in the early 1990s

<sup>5</sup> Various subject-positions outlined in the novel *The Taqwacores*

<sup>6</sup> This novel is an account of the happenings of a house inhabited by various young Muslims who are each involved with a punk related subcultures (some characters are into hardcore punk, ska, skate punk etc.). Yusef, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, attends a nearby university and rents a room in this house and guides the reader throughout the events that take place in the punk house; as it is the meeting point and party hub for both the residents of the house and their friends.

*taqwacore* emerges from the cracks resulting from the collision between these two worlds, and is infused with a sense of urgency that is aimed at redefining the central nodes of power in Islam and Western society. This is achieved by the unrelenting questioning of authority, deliberate transgressions and the adoption of a general “punk rock” attitude as a vehicle for transformation and self-definition.

Huq (2006) notes the influential nature of youth culture and its engagement with musical genres on identity. She states that, “pop potentially offers the possibility of escaping one’s circumstances and reinventing identities” (4). This is a notion that clearly applies to the themes embedded in negotiations and articulations of identity in the *taqwacore* subculture. Appadurai applies a more politically oriented level of analysis to cultural movements by asserting them in relation to their service to national or transnational politics and further characterizes them as “counernational” and “metacultural” (cited in Murthy 2010, 185). In this discussion, such cultural movements are seen as a, “conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics” (ibid). In the case of the youth culture this study focuses on, these cultural movements are related to Islamophobia<sup>7</sup> and the racialization of Muslims in the West which have affected individual and group ‘cultural’ identities (Murthy 185).

If one looks at the political climate in which *taqwacore* has been born, we find that it is directly related to Islamophobia and racialization Muslims have faced in recent years. Most of the literature on Islamophobia and racialization of Muslims in a post 9/11 context focuses on U.S domestic and foreign policy and developments in several European countries. It is my contention that despite Canada’s international reputation as a multicultural, peace-keeping nation that

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<sup>7</sup> I use this term in conjunction with Zine’s (2006) definition, in which Islamophobia is understood as the, “fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and domination” (cited in Hamdon 2010, p.33)

honours and defends differing cultural values and traditions, Canada has an equal partnership in the unfavourable construction of Muslims. It is important to challenge Canada's reputation as a benevolent immigrant receiving country, or more importantly its image as a multicultural nation. Such oft-cited accomplishments ignore the realities of Canadian life and politics. It is therefore one of the goals of this paper to explore the current political climate and the effects this may have on Muslim youth identity formation. This paper will investigate the unfavourable political and social conditions that lead to the Muslim youth to feel "under siege". Despite the racializing, and othering the Muslim youth experience, it is important to note that the power of state mechanisms to control and dictate one's identity is not absolute. The power to subvert, reclaim and re-fashion a suspect Muslim identity is possible and it is demonstrated by the actors associated with *taqwacore*.

Over the course of the last three years, I have been observing and mapping the ways in which participants in *taqwacore* negotiate, perform and draft their unique and subversive subjectivities. I have engaged both directly and indirectly with the materials that inform the basis of my analysis. Examples of this include reading the novel *The Taqwacores* and others written by Michael Muhammad Knight; visiting the websites of *taqwacore* bands; and reading online articles and interviews with both the author of the novel and band members. Other activities that I participated in included assisting a screening of the documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* in October 2009, and attending a *taqwacore* show at a local Toronto venue that same evening. Even though these endeavours were not originally undertaken with this research project in mind they have influenced my decision to write about this topic and helped with my observations and knowledge on the topic.

I have divided this paper into three broad themes that will assist me in discussing how Muslims get constructed in Canada and how *taqwacore* succeeds at resisting this endeavour. The first section will outline the historical and political context of racialization and Islamophobia in Canada and the consequential creation of the racialized Muslim citizen. I will do this by paying particular attention to this phenomenon in the *Québec* context. Although Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments have manifested themselves across Canada, I would argue that certain recent developments in Québec have led to the heightening, exaggeration and crystallization of these sentiments. I then engage in a historically grounded account of the racialization of Muslims in the same context and discuss its implications on social inclusion and belonging. The second section of the paper explores transnational and diasporic subjectivity in relation to identity formation among second-generation youth and the power of cultural productions that reflect their identity. This is done by discussing the significance of ethnic media productions in the exploration and communication of identity and broadly situates these themes in the Canadian context. The final section discusses the precarity of belonging and identity politics in *taqwacore* and explores how this movement contributes to the creation and subversive declaration of alternate identities. I do this by focusing on characters and the fictional account of *taqwacore* in the novel *The Taqwacores*. I also focus on some actual lived manifestations of *taqwacore* by analyzing the thematic content of interviews and song lyrics and exploring how these artefacts negotiate the larger political reality I explore in the opening portions of this paper. Finally, I focus specifically on the emergence of one particularly subversive subject position in the novel; Rabeya the ‘*burqa* clad riot grl’ and discuss how this figure resists certain imposed identities and exemplifies the power and pleasure of reclaiming ones identity.

# **I. EXCLUSIONARY POLITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MUSLIM OTHER**

## **Safeguarding the State and Ensuring the Loyal Muslim “Subject”**

It is argued that the 1990s and the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have witnessed a right-wing conservative backlash and a renewed concern for social cohesion and national security in Western countries (Labelle 2005). From this perspective, global migration has been perceived as a challenge to traditional notions of state sovereignty and national identity (Nairn 2003 and Sassen 1996 cited in Blad and Couton 2009). Officially, the adoption of Multiculturalism is explained in terms of the effort to recognize the ethno-cultural diversity that exists within Canadian borders<sup>8</sup>. This policy is also popularly understood to be designed to, “improve race relations, promote affirmative action, mitigate communal conflict, recognize difference, encourage good citizenship, support national cohesion, foster social integration and enjoin cultural assimilation” (Karim 2006, 267). However noble this initiative may seem, it has not been without its critics from the political right and the left. To this day this policy is criticized for intensifying the erosion of a unitary national identity (Kymlicka 1995); or for being a model that is incapable of adequately integrating newcomer populations (Karim 2006). The sentiments and anxieties behind both criticisms have been exacerbated and heightened post 9/11.

Embedded within official multiculturalism are notions of tolerance and whiteness. According to Bannerji (cited in Arat-Koç 2005, 40), this notion rests upon, “posing ‘Canadian culture’ against ‘multicultures’”, a concept that deploys a sense of who the “real” Canadians are,

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<sup>8</sup> An alternate conceptualization of Multiculturalism is employed in another section of this paper which situates Multiculturalism in relation to Interculturalism. This is done in an effort to demonstrate how popular discourses in Québec perceive Multicultural policy as, “a cultural bulwark against Québec nationalism” (Nugent 2006, p.10) which, I argue, strengthens the desire to protect and promote a French-Canadian public sphere.

as opposed to the ethnic and marked categories of difference that the white settler/host society “graciously” chooses to tolerate on their own terms and conditions. Or more specifically, relates to non-white and ethnic subjects as, “national objects to be moved or removed according to white national will” (Hage 1998 cited in Arat-Koç 2005, 39).

In the Canadian context, Muslims form a significant portion of the religious minority in the country, accounting for nearly half a million of Canada’s residents<sup>9</sup>. The normative basis of multiculturalism and the assumption that host a multitude of cultural groups can coexist without a hierarchy of cultural affiliations emerging is seriously challenged, not only by the presence of a large Muslim population, but by the general presence of difference. Following the Second World War, Canada’s postwar economy marked the “opening-up of Canadian immigration policy” (Kelley & Trebilcock 1998, 311) which resulted in a period of admission of immigrants from diverse cultural and national origins.

More specifically, the source countries of immigrants have shifted significantly since this era, which has resulted in a shift from “North” to “South” source countries. Despite the significant shift that has occurred in the countries from which immigrants are coming, “Southern” immigrants continue to be discriminated against through a number of different practices. Some practices include the issue of credential recognition; under-employment; being forced into precarious work situations; lack of culturally and linguistically sensitive settlement services (Reitz 1995), or even day-to-day discrimination. The problems are related to the fact that the “Southern” countries from which these migrants originate from are forever colonized in

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<sup>9</sup> Government of Canada. *Summary Table Population by religion, by province and territory (2001 Census)*. Ottawa: 2001. Web. 16 Sep 2010. <<http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/demo30a-eng.htm>>.

the Western imaginary as deficient and of lesser value and are not regarded as 'equal' (Mehta 2010, 181).

In terms of challenges to and changes in multiculturalism, one of the important developments recently has been the redefinition of Canadian identity and national belonging that occurred in the post 9/11 context. Razack (2008) accurately points out how, "a particular kind of nation state comes into being, as does a particular kind of national subject" (6) as she describes how the anti-Muslim racism in the post 9/11 period contributes to a national desire to, "safeguard their values from fundamentalist Muslims" (ibid). Consider the treatment of Sunera Thobani's keynote address at a women's conference in October 2001. The nature of this speech was critical of U.S foreign policy and encouraged feminists to intervene and play a role in resisting U.S imperialism and militarism. The controversy and reaction that ensued reveals the precarity of national belonging for racialized subjects in Canadian "multicultural" context by confirming the "pre-existing implicit boundaries of a white national identity and belonging". The case has served as, "a litmus case that helps to make sense of the disciplinary boundaries of "Canadian" identity in a period of crisis and change" (Arat-Koç 2005, 33). The attacks on Thobani by the media and some politicians carried a, "disciplinary message as to the nature and boundaries of political legitimacy" in Canadian society (Arat-Koç 43). An example was made out of Thobani in order to serve a general message for the Canadian public. The treatment of Thobani by conservative politicians and the media demonstrates the consequences questioning of and dissent to the redefinition of Canadian identity in the post 9/11 period as identical with American or "Western" ones. Although this represents one high profile incidence, it is still symptomatic and representative of the negative treatment of Muslims that has grown in the post Cold-War period. Karim (2000) contends that the identification of Islam as a global threat is not a new

phenomenon and has its roots in a, “post-World War II assessment” where, “communism and Islam were seen as being the principle forces ‘contending with the American idea.’” (120). Islam resurfaced, “as a principal boogeyman” nearing the end of the Cold War with the overthrow of the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi of Iran in 1979 and the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 (ibid 121). This construction of Islam as a major threat and potent enemy has been arguably heightened in the post 9/11 context.

Such attitudes have been crystallized with additional dimensions in the Québec context and have been the cause of intense debates around the limits of tolerance and inclusion. The following section will explore the soundness of exclusionary practices and anti-Muslim sentiments in Québec. The following section will further explore the tenability of such exclusion considering the increasing numbers of Muslim populations being admitted into the province.

### **Interrogating the Parameters of the Québécois Nation: Is There Room for Plurality and Diversity?**

In the context of globalization, Québec finds itself trying to balance its desire to grow and thrive economically by attracting immigrants to the province without compromising its self-identification as a distinct nation. In an effort to accomplish this task, the province of Québec has successfully obtained control of its immigration policy and has adopted a philosophy of interculturalism<sup>10</sup> as a state-building strategy in response to the Canadian government’s adoption of a multicultural policy. The intercultural model is clear in the assertion of the French language

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<sup>10</sup> Interculturalism is used to refer to Québec’s, “officially pluralist approach to managing immigration and resultant pluralism” (Blad and Couton 2009, p.651). This is further articulated by the authors as they explain, “The distinction between multiculturalism....and interculturalism is the fact that specific traditional ethno-cultural norms (in this case the linguistic and cultural norms of Québec society) serve as the dominant social context into which migrants must integrate.” (p.651-652). This model is adopted in an attempt to respect ethno-cultural diversity in Québec; however, “it does so with the explicit understanding that a singular cultural tradition will serve as the official discursive medium.” (ibid).



as a dominant discursive medium in the public sphere, while simultaneously attempting to honour and accept the plurality of ethnicities in the province (Blad and Couton 653).

Interculturalism involves an ambiguity regarding the degree to which diversity of newcomers would be accepted. On the intercultural model is very clear about who dominates cultural and public life. The shift from source countries of immigration from the North to the South has further exacerbated the emphasis on how cultural and public life is defined in Eurocentric terms and it has resulted in the construction of Muslims as second class citizens in Québec. Between 1998 and 2007, immigrants from North Africa constituted one of the most significant sources of immigrants for the province of Québec<sup>11</sup>. This is important to note, since the religious background of these newcomers is primarily Muslim and source countries include Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. As source countries for immigration shift from “Northern” source countries to “Southern” ones, there are fears that immigration is altering the cultural and religious fabric of Québec society. This new reality is inevitably testing the extent of Québec’s self-proclaimed openness to diversity. With this change it can be argued that there has also been a rise of what Dunn et al. (2007) identifies as the ‘new racism’. The notion of ‘new racism’ deviates from an older conception because it is not grounded in a biological or colour based racism. Dunn et al. elaborate by stating:

This is a form of racism where individual (and group) rights are confined on the basis that a cultural group’s ways of life are judged as nefarious, or on the basis that a cultural group does not fit or belong within the society as defined by a protagonist. (566-567)

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.micc.gouv.qc.ca/publications/fr/recherches-statistiques/Presence-Québec-2009-immigrants-admis1998-2007.pdf>

It is my contention that this brand of “new racism” in Québec is directed specifically at the Muslim population. This has been reflected in the sentiments and discourses that arose during the debate on “Reasonable Accommodation” in the province.

### **Reasonable Accommodation or an Intolerant Hierarchy of “Reason” ?**

In January 2007, guided by the impulses of fearful and intolerant citizens, Hérouxville published a code of conduct for its citizens, named the “Hérouxville Standards”. Hérouxville is a small, ethnically homogenous town of approximately 1, 300 inhabitants located in the region of Mauricie (Nieguth and Lacassagne 2009, 2). This region, located between Montreal and Québec City, was the strongest support base of the *Union Nationale*, a “nationalist, conservative, clerical” political party that dominated Québec politics for the first half of the twentieth century (ibid 2).

Reflected in the Hérouxville Standards was an attempt to draft a collective identity based on blatant Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments and exclusionary notions of who belonged within the nation. For example, rules against stoning of women, “killing women in public beatings, or burning them alive” (ibid 4), expressed common stereotypes associated with gender inequality in Islam (ibid 4). In the months following the code of conduct citizens in the province of Québec were forced to carefully examine the “limits” of religious and cultural accommodation in Québécois society. The discussion in Québec culminated in what can arguably be described as an intensely polarizing and intolerant debate on Reasonable Accommodation that took place from the autumn of 2006 through the winter of 2007 (Wong 2009, 138). Was the Hérouxville affair simply an isolated incidence, or was it symptomatic of a larger issue embedded in Canadian and Québec society? I would argue that this is an important case to understand how

racialization of Islam functions in larger Canadian society. The Hérouxville incident, along with the extended debate on Reasonable Accommodation, tested the limits of acceptance of non-white and non-Christian citizens. The dominant discourse of reasonable accommodation was thinly veiled as being guided by liberal democratic principles aimed at upholding individual rights and championing gender equality. From the start, the debate was framed in a way that problematized the existence of non-Québécois cultures in the province and presented cultural practices other than Christian and French ones as a threatening the collective Québécois identity (Nieguth and Lacassagne 2009).

The dominant discourses that emerged during the debate on Reasonable Accommodation were xenophobic aimed at containing cultural difference at the margins of Québec society, especially as it relates to Islam. The debate on Reasonable Accommodation reflected Québec's desire for "preferred type" of newcomer within provincial borders. As Jiwani states, "The preferred immigrant fits the mould of the reasonable person.....believes in the system....leaves his or her culture behind. He or she is the model minority." (cited in Wong 2009, 142).

Ultimately, the discourses engaged during the debate aimed at dictating and constructing the desirable immigrant. This is primarily due to the nature of the national project that has been undertaken in the province since the Quiet Revolution and the recent exacerbation of the racialization of the Muslim faith. The values and attitudes developed during the Quiet Revolution which includes individual rights and freedoms and secularism were guided by ideals embedded within the Enlightenment paradigm which have served to delegitimize non-white and non-Christian groups and individuals. What is problematic is the refusal to view the aforementioned victims of racialization in Québec as individuals worthy of benefitting from the Enlightenment values. This is a result of the notion that national identity in Québec firmly constructs Whiteness

as the bastion of the Québécois identity and as the ideal standard according to which all others are measured.

This suggests that accommodation practices are only extended to “model immigrants” who are willing to speak out against the “barbarism” that exists within their “backward” cultures. This puts pressure on the Muslim population and forces them to consider the compatibility of their faith with living in Québec society. Only after they have pledge loyalty to Québécois culture can they begin to benefit from the opportunities that ensue; opportunities that can only be accorded if minorities subjugate their ‘native selves’ and comply with the dominant French society. In this view, this notion of immigrant responsibility to Québec is supported by the intercultural model because its primary goal is the creation of a French cultural and linguistic public sphere. But who is really responsible to whom? Mookerjea (2009) would argue that, “a society of immigration such as ours has obligations to new immigrants” and “there are embodied limits to the changes people can be reasonably expected to live through in the process of immigration, since so much else of their lives is being transformed” (193-194). The debate that took place in the province truly exhibited the lack of understanding of the ‘Other’ in Québec society.

In theory, one can argue that this issue only operates at the level of public opinion and has no bearing on actual conditions of equality and opportunity. For example, the charter is there to protect the rights of Québec citizens, and to a certain degree these rights have been upheld. In September 1994 a young woman was expelled from school for wearing the *hijab* (Barnett 2008) and in February 1995 the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse du Québec*, concluded that public schools were obliged to accept Muslim girls wearing the *hijab*, provided that this religious expression, “did not constitute a real risk to personal safety or

security of property” (ibid). Furthermore, the Commission stated that prohibiting the headscarf was contrary to the Québec Charter and was a violation of both freedom of religion and the right to education. Despite such legal decisions, people in Québec keep on coming back to the same debates. We might ask, what is it about headscarves that is so threatening? Why the need for citizens to debate such religious symbols? Even though immigrants are selected by the provincial government based on their professional qualifications and French language proficiency, their negative reception can be explained through the racialization that takes place in the context of Québec nationalism and interculturalism.

Lloyd (2007) argues that, “racism is located in relations of domination and oppression and operates through mutually reinforcing relations between public opinion and the political class...” (344). Recent political discourses in Québec are in line with the enduring desire of Québec nationalist politics to control the terms of inclusion in Québec. A prime example of this is Pauline Marois’ proposal of Bill 195, the Québec Identity Act, and more recently Québec’s proposed Bill 94<sup>12</sup>. The primary proposal of Bill 195 was the accordance of Québec citizenship based on the mastery and proficiency of spoken and written French and appreciation of Québec culture<sup>13</sup>. The province of Québec has constantly tried to gain control over immigration, and succeeded, and this political party’s rhetoric and policy goals directly reflect the reasons for wanting such control.

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<sup>12</sup> Proposed legislation that bars Muslim women from receiving or delivering public services while wearing a *niqab* or any other garment that fully covers an individual’s face.

<sup>13</sup> Québec. *Bill 195 Québec Identity Act*. Québec: Québec Official Publisher, 2007. Web. 20 Nov 2009. <<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/eng/38legislature1/projets-loi/publics/07-a195.htm>>.

## **The Creation of the (non)Citizen: How Does it Feel to be a Problem?**

In his, "Of Our Spiritual Striving", W.E.B Dubois poses a fundamental question to his fellow African-Americans. He asks, "How does it feel to be a problem?" to be, "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (Dubois orig. 1903/1994, 1-2). While this question was posed in direct relation to the African-American experience, there is no denying that its import can be transposed onto the experiences related to the racialization of Muslims in contemporary society. I invoke Dubois as a starting point for my analysis because his work critically identifies the erosion of self worth and the denigrating effects of "Othering." Dubois' work has influenced a large body of knowledge aimed at developing a broader and critical understanding of the construction of race and its material implications and directly addresses the conflict that many Muslims in Québec are forced to face. Somehow, the notion of being a Muslim in the Western world has been constructed as a clash between two opposing systems of belief; that of the modern, liberal West, juxtaposed with the barbaric, pre-modern Easterner. The perceived incompatibility between the beliefs of Muslim citizens and that of the Québécois has been transformed into a common sense idea that permeates all facets of life in the province and has been the source of much tension and conflict in recent years.

In Québec, especially during the debate on Reasonable Accommodation, there has been over-representation of visible signifiers of Islam, namely, *hijabs*, beards and minarets (Karim 2000, 61-63). These symbols have been constructed as sites of struggle and contestation at various moments in Québec politics. What is significant in this process is that such Muslim symbols are rendered problematic and are constructed in a way that engenders and instils what

Dubois identified as an acute awareness of “being a problem”. It is worth exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the racialization process and address how this has developed in relation to Islam in the Canadian context.

### **Strangers within the Nation: The Racialization of Islam in Québec Society**

Silverstein (2005) traces the racialization of immigrants back to the construction of immigration as a process that poses a threat to state-building and that needs to be monitored. He also outlines the concern of nation-states as a result of postcolonial migration and the obsession that has ensued over questions of national unity and the problematization of transnational ties engaged by such migrants (364). This, “postcolonial racialized landscape” is a result of various legislative and societal initiatives guided by privileged members of Western society and presents substantial obstacles to the postcolonial migrant. One main operative in this postcolonial landscape is the racialization of immigrants and newcomers, a process that is defined by Silverstein as, “the processes through which any diacritic of social personhood-including class, ethnicity, generation, kinship/affinity, and positions within fields of power- comes to be essentialized, naturalized and/or biologized” (364) . While this definition of racialization is not grounded in biological racism, it still underscores the salience of race as a concept and racism in everyday life, especially in the life of a visible minority or newcomer. Silverstein argues further that this structural persistence exists in the, “racial, racist and racist discourses and hierarchies” (365) and that the perpetual racialization of immigrants occurs within this paradigm which tends to categorize immigrants along a “colour line”.

One feature of the racialization of religion that is most important is the fact that it aims at delegitimizing non-Christian faiths by conflating racial and religious features as constituting mutually exclusive marked categories (Joshi 2006, 211). Joshi further explains this phenomenon

by inserting the racialization of religion between the blurred boundaries of these two categories, race and religion. In this process, a distinct set of phenotypical features comes to be associated with a particular religion or other social traits. What is extremely problematic about the racialization of religion is the heightening of ethno-religious inequality of minority groups and the disguised or naturalized nature of such oppressions (212). The invisibility of such discourses is enabled by the circulation of homogenous and undifferentiated view, marked by phenotypical features, of members belonging to a particular group and the conflation of the individual with the group.

This process is an intensely political one that aims at inscribing ideologies of nationalism onto the bodies of such men and women represented as barriers to nation building therefore legitimizing attempts to integrate and assimilate these racialized bodies (Silverstein 2000, 27). These racialized bodies, in the case of Islam, take the form of dark skinned bearded men alongside veiled and oppressed female subjects. The continual perpetuation of these images functions via the, “repeated use of certain kinds of mass images, particularly those of crowds and group prayers” (30). The circulation of these images is aimed at ignoring the diversity that exists within the Islamic community with the intention of constructing the image of a mass or group threat in need of containment. Such images and narratives are widely circulated in the mass media and only further exacerbate this “Othering” process that is detrimental to the social integration of Muslims in the West and the persistent view that, Islam poses a threat for national reproduction and the state wide effort to control the symbolically laden immigrant body (27).

The racialization of Islam in Québec may have manifested itself during the debate on reasonable accommodation; however, this process is rooted in an historical context that precedes the debates by three decades. An early example of the essentialization of Islam in Québec can be



traced back to the educational curriculum during the 1970s, wherein stereotypes of the “TV Arab” were circulated freely in relation to Third World struggles (Helly 2004, 1). While such textbooks presented Black or Third World liberation struggles in a favourable light, the Arab struggles for independence were denounced as, “radicalism, anti-Westernism and even fanaticism” (ibid). Other incidences that have contributed to the racialization of Islam in Québec include; a Montreal parents’ committee rejecting the inclusion of an Arabic language course in 1988 on the grounds that, “The teaching of Arabic is only the first step of a broader strategy, then it will be the Koran” (5), furthermore, these dissenting parents announced that Arabs should remain in their homeland and that they are simply defending their quality of life and values. In March 1991, parents of a Muslim student requested that Muslim values be included in the curriculum, a request that was supported by Article 5 of the 1988 Law on Public Education and Article 41 of Québec’s Charter of Rights. However, resistance from parents belonging to other faiths was enough to prevent this request (ibid). Another incidence that represented the Muslim community as having values that threaten Québec society occurred in 1994-95 when 12 students were facing expulsion from school for wearing the *hijab*. This incited a great debate in Québec and seamlessly incorporated the notion that practices associated with Islam promoted gender inequality and enforced a certain level of barbarism that was anti-thetical to the white Catholic liberal-democratic values of Québec. Paradoxically, this dominant discourse employed during the debate completely ignored the fundamental rights of these young women. The fact that Québec’s educational system has played an integral role in the racialization of its own citizens is very disconcerting.

The deployment and promotion of such negative stereotyping in these contexts have been particularly troublesome because of the significant level of legitimacy educational institutions

bear and the capacity they have to influence those in attendance. Such specific examples represent a larger issue embedded within Québec society; that of a crisis in equal citizenship and belonging. Promoting social inclusion should be the aim of any self avowed liberal democracy; however, what are some of the obstacles that prevent this from fully developing in the province of Québec? Such are the issues that will be discussed in the following section.

### **Implications of Racialization for Social Inclusion and Belonging**

Exploring the concept of social inclusion provides a useful starting point for understanding and discussing the question of belonging. According to Saloojee social inclusion is concerned with ensuring that, “all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society” (2003 ix). It “reflects a proactive human development approach to social well being that calls for more than the removal of barriers or risks” (ix). It can be argued that policies aimed at recognizing diversity, such as multiculturalism, only go so far and merely advocate tolerance, not acceptance, of diversity. Social inclusion attempts to go one step further and validate the commonality of lived experiences. It is geared toward conferring recognition upon individuals and groups; encouraging human development; promoting involvement and engagement among the community; bringing communities closer together via shared public spaces; and ensuring the material well-being of those in the community (ibid). The racialization of Islam, coupled with the treatment of Muslims as suspects for terrorism severely limits possibilities of engagement and belonging. They delegitimize Muslim-Canadians’ political participation, undermining the credibility of their opinions, their right to criticize and the right to dissent.

For social inclusion to function in a manner that promotes equality, unity and social cohesion, one must address the power structures and historical processes that continue to

reproduce cultures of oppression (1). The intercultural project was established in Québec as a response to the multicultural policy in Canada. Multiculturalism is perceived in Québec as having been developed as a strategy to deter Québec nationalism by placing the Québécois orientation on an even keel with other existing ethnicities and nations within the country (Nugent 2006). Compared to multiculturalism, interculturalism is seen as, “more integrative and republican, forged around a common socio-cultural project” (ibid, par.10). However it is imperative to ask whose “socio-cultural project”? This model is anchored within a framework that solely aims at securing the domination of Francophone culture above all, which is a project that is incompatible with social cohesion and has the potential to marginalize, rather than honour, cultural and religious plurality in Québec.

Saloojee notes that racism is a form of social exclusion that has very serious implications for citizenship and inclusion. He elaborates by stating, “the link between social exclusion and citizenship...hinges...on the degree to which individuals from racialized or marginalized communities encounter structural and systematic barriers and are denied or restricted from participating in society” (2). What does this imply for Muslim citizens in Québec? The barriers and discrimination faced by Muslims in Québec are significant. For example, in 2001 questionnaires inquiring about hiring practices of visible minorities were distributed to 197 employers in Québec City (Helly 4). Out of the nineteen respondents, thirty-five percent admitted to refusing to hire an “Arab”. Additionally NGOs committed to the integration of visible minorities have reported an increase in requests by employers not to refer “Arabs”. Individuals who can be recognized for their Muslim heritage and Arab descent are among the top three categories of people experiencing hardship finding employment in the province (ibid). Such discrimination is exercised under the pretext that Muslim employees will not participate in

the “life of the company” and potentially make unrealistic demands on employers. Barriers to employment are significant, especially since class mobility has enabled the deracialization process (Silverstein 2005, 365) in the past, in the cases of Italian and Irish communities.

The social and political efforts to marginalize and racialize Muslim citizens are clear. This is a project that has manifested itself in the disciplinary measures of Canadian politics, as was the case with Thobani’s speech. Such an endeavour has a history of at least thirty years and been crystallized in the Québec political and social climate during the debate on Reasonable Accommodation. The social and political implications of racialization and marginalization are very significant for Muslims in Québec. However powerful these processes are, their power is not absolute because within these processes lay the capacity of individuals to resist such marginalization. Such is the intended desire of this paper; to demonstrate the creativity that exists in resisting racialization in the ways Muslim youth negotiate their contested identities.

## II. DETERRITORIALIZED SUBJECTS: CONTESTATIONS FROM THE MARGINS AND THE CREATION OF PLATFORMS OF DISSENT

### Re-Constructing the Fragmented Self

Second-generation Muslim youth in the West are currently being characterized as, “youth under siege” forced to navigate their bicultural selves in an environment of increased suspicion and surveillance (Zaal et al. 2007). Zaal et al. further argue that Muslim youth have been abruptly evicted from the, “moral community of psychological citizenship”, which has rendered these young people highly suspect, thereby placing them under intense scrutiny, similar to the social function of a Foucauldian Panopticon<sup>14</sup>(164). The “psychological internment” for Muslims that followed 9/11, (cited in Arat-Koç 2005, 37) underscores the precarity of national belonging for non-white citizens and highlights how the boundaries that dictate such belonging are used as disciplinary discourses to establish or reinstate political and social control upon these unwanted subjects in the Canadian nation. Keaton (cited in Mehta 2010, 194), underlines the critical importance of linking identity politics with social institutions in order to understand and demonstrate how such institutions inform and contribute the maintenance of the status quo. This is especially important in this context because it offers an integrative lens and perspective on the interrelatedness of Muslim identity formation to the political context.

It is imperative to highlight the relationship between the identity formation of Muslim youth and the political contexts within which it is taking place since such youth rarely see

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<sup>14</sup> The Panopticon (“all seeing”) was proposed as a prison model by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) which functioned as a round-the-clock surveillance mechanism. Its design ensured that no prisoner could ever see the ‘inspector’ who conducted surveillance from the privileged central location within the radial configuration. The prisoner could never know when he was being watched and this mental uncertainty would prove to be a crucial instrument of discipline. Foucault’s application is a metaphorical one used to, “refer to the spaces and structures in which people begin to monitor themselves even when they are not being watched” (Zaal et al. 2007, p.164)

themselves reflected in state sanctioned ideals of national identity and belonging. However, the same evacuation and absence can also be argued to function in more intimate social circles, such as that of the family or the cultural and religious diaspora in Canada. The risks involved in challenging expected roles are clear: exclusion from either national belonging or rejection within your community. At the same time, the desire to assert the self can lead to creative expressions of identity despite the “disciplinary discourses” that constantly attempt to reinstate order. This paper explores how psychological exclusion, limited civil liberties and internal community pressures intersect and contribute to the identity formation among Muslim youth, especially those who exist on the margins. Such an exploration on identity formation is possible as theorists begin to conceptualize modern societies as fractured and decentralized and therefore giving way to a variety of subject positions to emerge (Giddens cited in Hall 1992, 251-252).

While state sanctioned attempts to fix the Muslim identity have been aggressive and contributed to a shift in the consciousness of Muslim youth in the West, the power to set the parameters of this subjectivity is not absolute. Stuart Hall suggests that one positive feature of these types of dislocation resides in the unhinging of stable identities and the possibility for new articulations and subjects (Hall 1992, 252).

Hall argues that people gravitate to cultural margins, to the local, when faced with the global. This return to the “local” results, in a “revolution of culture” (cited in Prickett 2006, 4), wherein identity is no longer conceived of in essentialized terms, but rather as a construction that is open to fluctuation and change (4). Hall further articulates this point by explaining how the confluence of national myths, globalization and the dialectical character of identity coalesce to produce “cultures of hybridity” (Hall 1992, 266):

Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging that are not fixed, but poised, *in transition*, between different positions; that draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and that are the product of those complicated crossovers and cultural mixes that are increasingly common in a globalized world. It may be tempting to think of identity in the age of globalization as destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its “roots” or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization. But this may be a false dilemma. (265).

Instead of subscribing to the “false dilemma” between a return to “authenticity” versus being usurped by homogenizing global forces, another possibility exists wherein identities cut across a multitude of histories, places of origin and traditions.

Since it is no longer operable to conceive of identity in essentialist terms, Bhabha (1994) argues that it is crucial to theorize culture and identity through, “processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (2), since it produces these “third spaces”; which enable the construction of self-hood. More specifically, these “third spaces” are theoretically rich and important because it is from these spaces and margins that young Muslim youth in this context express their cultural hybridity in all of its complexity in an attempt to “decolonize their identities” (Mehta 2010). This perspective succinctly and intuitively captures the various contributing factors to the identity formation process, especially as it is enacted within the *taqwacore* subculture.

### **Voices from the Margins: Diaspora, Media and the Power of Imagination**

Diasporic media plays a crucial role in connecting peoples across the globe and building networks along national, cultural and religious lines (Hirji, 2006). Especially in the case of Muslim diasporic media, however, this site of cultural reproduction is highly contested and rife with debates related to national unity, Canadian sovereignty and political and cultural loyalties. The debate over ethnic media is divided along two broad concerns and observations; ethnic

media is viewed as a tool that facilitates ethnic cohesion and cultural maintenance while also serving as a vehicle that assists minority integration into the larger society (Karim 2002).

The concept of diaspora is anchored in over 2500 years of history and is traditionally understood in terms of dispersal from a “homeland” through (Georgiou 2007). However, the current reality of cultural mobility, aided by the accelerated development of international communication technology (ICTs), has opened up theorizing on what constitutes a diaspora and diasporic activity in an era of increased transnational ties that are both real and imagined (14). What has developed recently is a more relaxed conceptualization of diaspora that takes into account that, “transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims” especially considering that diasporas can now, “in an age of cyberspace....be held together or re-created through the mind... and through a shared imagination” (Cohen cited in Georgiou 14).

Postcolonial theorists characterize diaspora as a politically charged analytical category by highlighting that it is no longer defined by fixed blood relations, but rather by hybrid agents engaged in decentralized cultural formations that sustain real and imagined connections across various communities and countries of origin. In the recent literature, the concept of diaspora has been introduced as a social category that destabilizes myths and national narratives of the host country and reveals the discriminations and inequalities still operating within Western nation-states (Georgiou 15). The diaspora is also conceptualized by some as involving potent agents standing in opposition to dominant global and national power structures. In this light, diasporas are characterized as, “the empire striking back” (Karim 2006) and as powerful agitators on the national scene.



Bhabha (1994) suggests that marginalized immigrants in the diaspora operate in a 'third space' from which minority intellectuals construct innovative expressions to combat their marginality. This space is conceived as, "distinct from the hegemonic public sphere...and allows for a high order of creativity and cutting edge modernity" (Karim 231). Appadurai's (1996) contributions to the understanding of transnational cultural spaces further articulate the dimensions of this "third space" by incorporating the role of 'imagination' and media technologies in the creation and dissemination of cultural artefacts within this realm. Appadurai deterritorializes the participants in the creation of a new public sphere. He also frees the concept of imparting and receiving knowledge from the economic base within which it is traditionally situated. Instead, electronic media, in the context of migration and displacement of peoples, contribute to a "theory of rupture" (173). This theory considers the way media encourages "the work of imagination" as they offer, "new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" (173). According to Appadurai, electronic media provide resources for self-imagining and link it to the practice of everyday life. In this sense, self-imagining and drafting your own subjectivity is linked to a wider political project via something as simple as "the everyday". The role of imagination fills the theoretical blind spots of previous theorists who could have never fathomed the nature of migratory practices that have exploded in recent decades, the close relationship they share with mass media, and especially the effect this has on the re-conceptualization of the public sphere.

For Appadurai, the mingling of electronic media and mass migration create discursive spaces where new forms of imagination can occur. A lot of emphasis is placed on the role of imagination because it is seen as a potential vehicle for political transformation. The vanguards of this politicized transnational public sphere are the diasporic communities that have truly

engaged their sense of “imagining” in a variety of different ways. Some have “imagined” a new life for themselves in Canada, a process that was facilitated by electronic media such as, telephones and the Internet, others engage the roles of imagining by seeking and using electronic media as a way of maintaining ties with the “homeland”, thereby creating new communicative and interlinking spaces.

Appadurai envisions a global network of “deterritorialized” viewers that engage electronic media for pleasure, and in doing so, are creating their own subjectivities. This process is primarily a virtual one. It does have material implications, however, in the ways people appropriate media and fashion the uses to their own ends. The different uses of electronic media by diasporic communities subvert dominant modes of ideology and this is significant because a sense of agency and resistance is produced by various engagements with modern media technology. This is possible because one’s subjectivity as a “deterritorialized viewer” will not force them to become disengaged, but prompt an active engagement with the tools needed to express their complex transnational affiliations and identities. How can a member of the Tamil diaspora community in Canada, for example, not concern themselves with the politics back in Sri Lanka? Or how about the Palestinian diaspora, how is it possible for them to tune themselves out when it comes to issues of international policies and relations that are directly linked to their homeland? These diasporic communities are very much connected to the political and social fabric that interlocks us, no matter where we find ourselves on the map, because what matters more is not *where* you rest your head at night, but which thoughts, concerns and desires you carry with you throughout the day. This may be interpreted as contributing to a decline in Canadian national cohesion. In the case of racialized minorities, however, one can argue that it is

more important to have minorities engaged and participating in the public sphere in any way they are comfortable doing so.

The impetus of diasporic communities to carve out their own space and build their own transnational linkages is attributable to, what Appadurai sees as the role of imagination. I contend that this is only the first step in the process toward self-determination and representation. The creation of and engagement with ethnic media are manifestations of such imaginings and they are innovative vehicles in the formation of a counter-hegemonic “third space”. The realm of ethnic media is also rife with contention and is a site of intense debate. The goals of ethnic media are seen as serving two contradictory purposes: promoting cultural preservation and providing minority communities with the programming and information they require to interact and integrate into society.

The presence of ethnic media in Canada has been constructed as a threat to national cohesion. The fear that “foreign” media will erode the Canadian nation and its sovereignty is an untenable position for Canada to take, as doing so would mean complete disregard for multiculturalism and pluralism in the country. Critics contend and view diasporic media as, “indicators of immigrants’ and minorities’ unwillingness to integrate into their host country” (Hirji 127). This contention is based on a highly circulated myth of national purity and cohesion that is disrupted by the diversity of newcomers. This threat to sovereignty is especially conceived of in relation to politicized groups, or racialized minorities, whose customs and values have been constructed as threats and foreign (ibid).

In light of the false presumptions and critics of ethnic media, it is imperative that one understands the significance of engaging with ethnic media and the significance of creating one’s own cultural productions. According to Husband (cited in Karim 2002), ethnic media is essential

because it is an outlet that accords minority groups the fundamental and basic right to communicate and more importantly, the right to be heard and understood. In this light, ethnic media is imperative for social inclusion and should be viewed as a bridge to the host society, not as a barrier to integration. Hirji argues that this consideration is especially compelling in understanding the Muslim diaspora, a group that has suffered increased marginalization in Canada, especially since September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Muslims in Canada are currently a community under siege whose transnational identities, “get discussed as a way to interrogate and question their loyalties to the “nation-state” in which they are living” (Arat-Koç 2006, 216). It is argued that this process re-codifies immigrants as transnationals whose allegiances are subject to suspicion and state intervention. In the context of developments post 9/11, there has been a re-nationalizing of politics and a “white nationalism” that confirms privileged citizens’ place in Western civilization (217). Due to the complex process of racialization and vilification, Muslim communities are suffering challenges in self-identifying themselves and imagining their community as being an integral part of the Canadian fabric.

The current challenges for Muslims in Canada to positively define their identities highlights the importance of creating platforms from which diasporic or newcomer identities can be expressed, both to demystify, and perform these identities in all of their complexity. This forces one to approach identity as a, “politics rather than an inheritance...as fluidity rather than fixity, as based in mobility rather than locality and as playing out these oppositions across the world” (Ong and Nonini cited in Arat-Koç 2006, 219). Treating identity as a politics, as opposed to an inheritance, underscores the importance of having a platform from which you can speak and the importance of dissent in expressing and participating in the active recovery of one’s politicized identity. The next section will demonstrate how this is enacted within the *taqwacore*

scene. The importance of examining this musical subculture is evident in the fact that *taqwacore* appears to respond to the growing hybrid identities of young Muslims in North America and forces one to pay attention to the experiences of “misfits” within an already marginalized community. The narratives and appropriation of Islamic signifiers that exist within *taqwacore* indicate a complex lived reality that is successful in combating such an intense racialization project. In addition, they also speak to other political projects linked to gender role deconstruction, nationalism and hybrid identifications.

### III. *TAQWACORE*: RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSION OF IDENTITIES

#### *Taqwacore* as a Creative Response to Racialization

*Taqwacore* represents one of the more interesting and dynamic sites of second-generation transnational activity. This engagement with religious and secular symbols and the creative subversions of identity present in *taqwacore* provide a creative response to the racialization of the Islamic community. Engaging a highly suspect identity, as opposed to masking it, has facilitated the self-expression, dissenting views and self-definition of young Muslims in the Western context, while also forcing both Western and Muslim audiences to reflect on the socially acceptable ways in which this can be achieved. This section of my paper will explore the hybrid explosion of identities within *taqwacore* in relation to multiple cultural productions that have flourished in this subculture. I will begin this section with an introduction to the novel *The Taqwacores* and briefly discuss the dynamic and fictional subject positions and the ways in which they challenge preconceived notions of who constitutes a Muslim. I will then discuss how this piece of fiction has led to the creation of a new music scene and explore how the negotiations, attitudes and performance of these Muslim youth are linked to broader conceptualizations of hybridity and the complexities associated with second-generation identity formation. This will be done by engaging some of the artwork, lyrics and interviews circulating on the Internet. Finally, I will conclude my analysis by paying particular attention to what I consider to be the most interesting identitarian eruption in *taqwacore*; Rabeya the fictional *burqa* wearing feminist in the novel. This final section will explore the contradictory significations of the veil and how the dominant discourses surrounding this practice can be creatively challenged.

## “Journey to the End of Islam”<sup>15</sup>? Testing the Boundaries of Identity

*Taqwacore*, *taqwa* referring to an Islamic concept of love and fear for Allah and *core* denoting a musical subgenre of punk rock, originated in a novel entitled *The Taqwacores* written by Michael Muhammad Knight. *The Taqwacores* is an account of a fictional Muslim punk scene in Buffalo, New York. It is comprised of a host of misfits that consider themselves Muslims, irrespective of the fact that they engage in very un-Muslim activities, such as drinking, getting stoned and sleeping with *kufr*<sup>16</sup> girls. This clever title perfectly represents the fusion of cultures and trespassing of boundaries that is prevalent in the music scene. Therein lays one of the first attempts at enacting the anti-essentialist politics so deeply embedded within *taqwacore*. One of the first dissensions that comes up within the novel is the questioning of a just, pure and right vision of, and identification with, Islam. Knight eagerly begins to paint a dissenting portrait of Islam within the first couple of paragraphs, which describe a scene of a young hawked out punk that is praying on a cardboard pizza box, surrounded by passed out drunks. As he faces the *qiblah*<sup>17</sup>, his image forces the readers to face their own presuppositions of what a Muslim is supposed to look like. Knight further articulates this through Yusef, the protagonist of the novel, as he writes,

I stopped trying to define Punk around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren't so far removed as you think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way...You cannot hold Punk or Islam in your hands. So what could it mean besides what you want them to? (7).

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<sup>15</sup> Book Title by Knight

<sup>16</sup> Arabic for non-believer/ infidel

<sup>17</sup> The direction of the Kaaba (Mecca), to which Muslims turn and pray

Piety and submission are often associated with those who practice Islam. It is very difficult to imagine how elements of punk rock can possibly mingle with the pious nature of the faith, but *taqwacore* is not afraid to fuse minarets and mohawks and somehow, it actually has the potential to work. However, this does not mean that this union is not without its tensions. *The Taqwacores* is filled with powerful images that continuously challenge any hierarchy of believers that exists. However, the book never presents itself as a utopia. It explicitly deals with this hierarchy of Muslim identities that prevail in the religious community. For example, Umar, the straightedge character in the novel constantly praises himself for being a true believer since he does not drink, do drugs or engage in premarital sex and he often clashes with the other members of the household. Umar is the closest to being a “perfect” and practicing Muslim and Knight uses this righteous character to challenge certain Islamic practices. This occurs when the reader finds Umar praying behind Rabeya, a homosexual, or by simply continuing to live inside that punk house.

What is more interesting than the scenarios in the novel is the degree to which the novel has resonated with the lived negotiations and experiences of young Muslim youth. Knight is credited for single-handedly spearheading what would eventually become the *taqwacore* punk scene. He has inspired several young Muslims to create an Islam they wanted to practice, one that would marry their faith with their love of punk music. Some of the more popular *taqwacore* bands include Boston’s The Kominas, San Antonio’s Vote Hezbollah (whose name is intended as a sarcastic joke), Pakistan’s Dead Bhuttos (in reference to American punk band the Dead Kennedys), and finally, Vancouver’s Secret Trial Five, an all girl band whose name alludes to five Muslim immigrants in Canada who were arrested and detained as terrorism suspects without being charged with any specific crime. The Secret Trial Five is fronted by Sena Hussain, a



Pakistani Canadian from Vancouver. Sena decided to start the first all-girl *taqwacore* band after discovering The Kominas and has since produced music with very political messages in response to Canadian and international policies as they relate to the Muslim diaspora. Most of these band members are born in Canada or the U.S and are from either South Asian or Middle Eastern descent and nearly all of them explore the troubled sentiments that accompany being a young Muslim in a post 9/11 world.

### **Agency and the Rejection of “Cultural Scripts”**

The significance of *taqwacore* resides in second-generation Muslim youths’ urgent need to belong. Instead of integrating into the conventional musical landscape, participants of the *taqwacore* scene remain at the margins, both musically and ideologically. Because of their unique positioning as both Western and “Other”, members of this scene are engaged in a two pronged battle over their identity. On the one hand, they continue to challenge mainstream portrayals of Muslims as radical fundamentalists with their liberal “in your face” appropriation of Islam while simultaneously resisting internal demands, from family and community members, dictating the “right” way for Muslim youth to practice and represent their faith. Instead, *taqwacore* appears to be concerned with creating a platform from which a distinct hybrid identity can be expressed. Even though these participants never see themselves as anything other than Canadian, the racialization of the group to which they belong has contributed to their perceived underrepresentation in relation to Canadian nationhood and their sense of otherness. They are deterritorialized not in the traditional sense that their parents are, but in a postmodern and fragmented fashion in which they face simultaneous rejection by Canadian society and their

parents' homeland. They draw loose connections between these two worlds and actively engage with their politicized identities as young Muslims in a post 9/11 world.

In his study of second-generation Arab youth in Montreal, Paul Eid (2007) identifies what he considers to be the limitations associated with a boundless conception of agency when negotiating religious and ethnic identities.

“...although children of immigrants have the power to shape contextually the contours of their ethnic and religious selves through cultural innovation and *bricolage*, this power is not boundless. The religious and ethnic identity “scripts” they write for themselves are continually submitted to the majority group for social validation.”(47).

*Taqwacore* engages in a rejection of seeking approval for any cultural scripts it entertains. What exists is the exact opposite of such validation and constant approval seeking. In keeping with poststructuralist and postmodern visions of individual agency, every time a member of this subculture are called upon by the dominant group to behave according certain norms, a conscious attempt is made to halt this process. This resistance and redefinition of what being a Muslim constitutes is an innovative and expressive response to the perceived oppressions associated both with the dominant Islamic and Western discourses as they relate to their identity formation. This notion of resistance echoes Foucault's (1978) conception of power which sees it as decentralized and therefore as available to be seized and subverted at any given moment. Such acts may not be the norm for second generation Muslim youth. They are however, ever present in both the fictional and actual world of *taqwacore*.

*Taqwacore* is important because it caters to the “other” Muslim kids and gives a voice to the disenfranchised. Hoodfar et al (2003) assert that Muslims have adopted three coping strategies in response to the heightened awareness of their “Muslimness” post 9/11. These

strategies include dissociation, escape and self-assertion (xii). She describes the latter coping mechanism as an outcome of frustration with unjust exclusion. It is negotiated by Muslims by declaring their presence via the adoption of veils for women, the Palestinian scarf or growing a typically Muslim beard for men (ibid). *Taqwacore* endeavours to accomplish the same goal and yet the self-assertions and representations within this subculture are rejected by mainstream Islam. This appears to be a fundamental contradiction because the ontological desire to assert and identify the self is evident in both processes. However, the socially acceptable ways of accomplishing this visual self assertion are quite stringent and organized along what is considered adequately 'Islamic' (wearing the *hijab* in a traditional fashion) and 'non-Islamic' (wearing the *hijab* with band patches on it).

In an online interview with *taqwacore* fan, Sabina England, a young deaf, punk, Muslim playwright, expresses sentiments of rejection and concerns for belonging. This dissatisfaction is primarily grounded in the imposed burden placed on the Muslim community to adopt "acceptable" behaviours. She asserts, "Muslims around here would rather act like a model minority and don't really want to rattle anybody's chain" (Butt 2007, par. 6 & 8). It is these feelings of marginality that infuses *taqwacore* with meaning and represents, "the OTHER 'angry Muslim kids' who wanna get drunk and say a huge big 'fuck you' to the Muslim population" (ibid). This statement from Sabina is interesting on two levels. Firstly, it speaks to the frustration associated with the pressure to follow a pre-scripted version of Islam from a second-generation point of view. However, on another level, such hostile remarks may be the best thing that can happen to Islam because it reveals the fraudulency underlying the concept of a "Muslim model minority" in a post 9/11 context. Consider Puar and Rai's (2004) contention that such a subject position has been adamantly denied to this group since 9/11 and that, "the model minority status

*Where do I point to blame  
When men scatter like moths  
There's no time for 99 names  
Midst the noise and clamor  
How'd I get here from a land  
with long Monsoons?  
In Lahore it's raining water  
In Boston it's raining boots<sup>22</sup>*

This excerpt depicts an identity that transcends physical boundaries by pointing to the singer's dual affiliations in Boston and Lahore. This passage is simultaneously critical of his treatment at the hands of Americans and his reluctance to turn to Islam in a time of peril, as there is no time to recite the 99 names of Allah as he is getting beaten by the flood of boots from the straightedge<sup>23</sup> kids in the Boston music scene. Clearly, this is an identity that is defined in relation to its exterior environment and therefore is constantly in motion.

Gillespie recognizes the limitations of conceptualizing an identity that is free-floating and self-selecting and not anchored to one place in particular, as the spatial limitations of space have been reconfigured in an era of globalization (cited in Prickett 4 ). This is a limitation that should be taken seriously before declaring the absolute agency that is involved in identity formations and ruptures in *taqwacore*. On the one hand, the lyrics themes and content within the subculture are firmly rooted in place, whether it is in reference to the "homeland" of their parents, or in relation to the national and local contexts that the youth currently live. The notion of place, delimited by physical boundaries is present. However, the activity of choosing or rejecting

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<sup>22</sup> Excerpt from the song "Par Desi" off the *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* album by The Kominas

<sup>23</sup> Subculture within hardcore punk which began in the early 1980s and advocates a drug, premarital sex and alcohol free lifestyle

affiliations is also a powerful theme in this subculture. More specifically, what is being enacted is the lived reality of hybrid identifications and experiences.

Hybridity is a highly contested concept, with multiple meanings and applications. The most relevant conceptualization characterizes hybridity as, “a subversion of political and cultural domination” (Bhabha 1994 cited in Kraidy 2005, 2). *Taqwacore* is emblematic of this endeavour as it aggressively attempts to “speak truth to power” by questioning Islam, by questioning the state and by helping the youth to define their own politics and religion that are liberated from the dominant discourses that subjugate them. Interestingly enough, no one in the *taqwacore* scene has branded themselves or the movement as “hybrid”, and yet, the concept of hybridity applies so well to the case. These individuals do not choose to contain themselves within a safe form to express their difference. They do so on their own terms and are not averse to saying controversial things about their faith, Canada and world politics. In doing so, they may or may not realize that their cultural productions may empower other youth towards an alternative politics that questions power relations in their communities and the larger society.

### ***Burqa Clad Riot Girls and the Undoing of Orientalist Imaginings***

The veil is arguably one of the most theoretically contested and politicized symbols related to the racialization of Islam. The veil has come to replace the earlier obsession with “harems” and *hammams* (El Guindi 1999, 10). It is an eroticized symbol that is being conflated with other Islamic symbols, like the crescent, in the West. During the process of de-colonization, especially in the context of the Algerian struggle for independence, the veil, argues El Guindi, was rid of its purely traditional dimension. This is especially telling in the context of the Algerian liberation movement when the veil was elevated from a symbol of tradition to a symbol

of resistance (172). This is possible because the veil “is a complex symbol of many meanings” and exists, “as a symbol of resistance against the legacy of foreign occupation” (172-173). Because the veil has represented to colonial powers the inferiority of Muslim society, in the postcolonial Arab imaginary the veil came to symbolize the recovered dignity of native customs (Hoodfar cited in Eid 2007, 57). This is the case because the image of the woman’s body has frequently been conceptualized as a, “battlefield where the cultural struggles of postcolonial societies were waged” (Odeh in Eid 57). The postcolonial narrative is present in the subversion of the veil in *taqwacore*. At the same time, however, this subculture pushes this notion in a new direction. Consider the following images and how differently they communicate and respond to the colonial/neo-colonial condition. The first image being a colonial postcard from the 1950s and the other image is *taqwacore* band, The Kominas’ album cover.



162. - SCENES et TYPES. - Femme Arabe avec le Yachmak.  
SCENES and TYPES. - Arabian woman with the Yachmak.

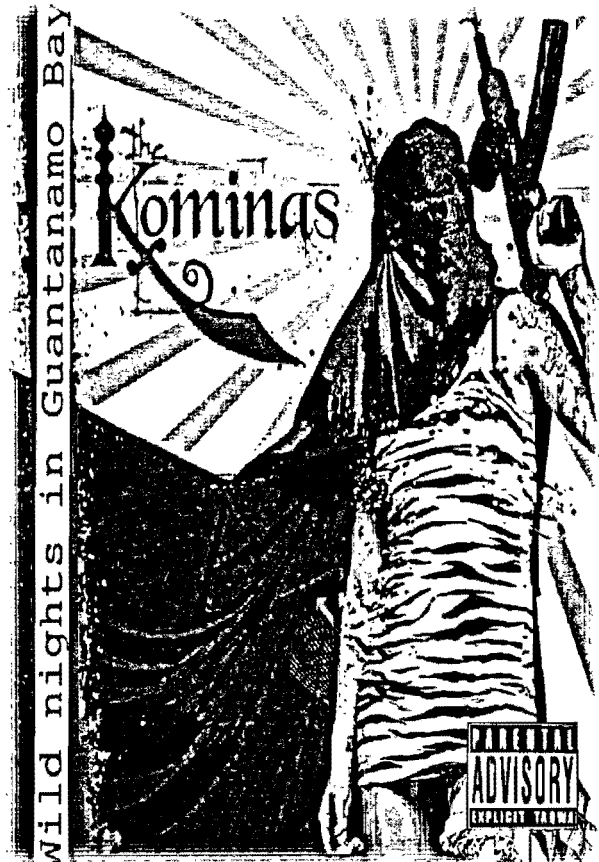


Fig.1 Colonial Postcard of Arabian Woman from the 1950s <sup>24</sup>

Fig.2 'The Kominas' album, *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay* <sup>25</sup>

While the veil in *taqwacore* appears to resonate with such colonial narratives, the political project behind the appropriation of the veil is not geared toward a “recovery” of any sort. When attempting to understand these images one must ask, what is being exposed in these images? How is the narrative different? The image of the colonial postcard depicts a perverse image of a veiled woman whose eyes are fearful and her breasts are on display to please or tantalize the dominant white gaze. The postcard is a violent image that represents a brutal

<sup>24</sup> "Arabian Woman with the Yachmak." *thenonist*. Web. 09 Apr 2010.  
<<http://thenonist.com/images/uploads/pstcrds7.jpg>>.

<sup>25</sup> The Kominas. *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*. March 2008, Self-Released Album.

asymmetry between the vulnerable and sexualized object that is being looked upon and the powerful and omnipotent gazer. Mulvey's observations on the gaze (1975) can also be applied to this asymmetry as she states, "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions...by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning." (44). Although, the cover of 'The Kominas' album, "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay", figures a *burqa* wearing woman the story being told is quite different. This image portrays a woman whose veil is being split open by a gust of wind. However the tone of the photo is a stark contrast to the postcolonial postcard. This woman is armed, literally and metaphorically with the necessary tools to combat the oppressive colonial gaze. What is exposed is not a bare pair of breasts that are waiting to be fondled by the colonizer. Instead what is represented is a tattooed, AK-47 toting defiant and confident subject, striking back at the empire indeed. Both are an attempt to subvert traditional dress, but the aims, contexts and effects are tremendously different, one being made into an accomplice of the colonial project, while the other is a direct resistance to such an undertaking. This is a clear example of the reappropriation of the "Euro-Christian gaze" discussed by El Guindi (1999), a theme that is forcefully present throughout *taqwacore*. What is achieved is a visibility of a different kind, a complete reconfiguration of this visible marker.

This notion of visibility leads to another interesting discourse of dissent that emerges in the book, that of the body or more specifically the female body in Islam. It challenges Islam and adoptions of the veil in a very direct and visceral manner. *Taqwacore* is a deliberate distortion of Orientalist imaginaries that circulate regarding women in Islam. This deliberate transgression can be interpreted as a means of self-expression and of a new and creative means of expressing and



manifesting the contradictions that exists within dominant discourses related to Islam, women and the West. In recent years, some young Muslim women have adopted patches of punk bands on their *hijabs* and *burqas*. Veils and headscarves are supposed to be pious symbols representing a subdued and restrained self, however, there is nothing remotely subdued about flashing a “Dead Bhuttos<sup>26</sup>” patch on one’s headscarf. More importantly, this represents a new image of resistance, one that does not completely imitate the underlying “whiteness” associated with the punk movement. Instead, it appropriates the themes of resistance and rebellion present in punk rock and literally fashions them in very personal terms.

The trope of the body is very prominent in *The Taqwacores* and within the actual subcultural scene. Study of the veil, however, has focused exclusively on women and femininity. Veiling and masculinity is viewed as an “anomaly” (El Guindi 117). The way the veil is performed throughout the novel and in real life performances by male participants, is framed by this anomalous framework of “proper veiling techniques”. What emerges, however, are loose “queer assemblages” (Puar 2005) or “queer terrorist” bodies that challenge regimes of representation associated with the veil. What is interesting about these visual manifestations of rebellion is the fact that it is taken up by both female and male participants in the scene. This “anomaly” is expressly enacted by the way the veil is taken up and performed in real life performances by male participants. Such creative applications include *taqwacore* fans, male and female, moshing in *burqas* and using them as onstage props. What emerges is an invitation to complicate identity and gender politics by “performing” and “playing” with such norms and representations. Such fluidity challenges regimes of representation associated with the assumed

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<sup>26</sup> *Taqwacore* band name

rightful wearer of the veil and can be examined in light of Judith Butler's (1991) notion of identity and performance which underline the troubled nature of identity categories (308). Especially relevant to the engagement with the veil in *taqwacore* is Butler's point that "if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting....it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories" (ibid).

In the novel, male subjects are constantly attempting to position themselves in relation to practices and rituals that surround the body. Present in *taqwacore* is the representation of the body as a site of contestation. Yusef, the protagonist, is constantly questioning the proper Islamic way to treat your body. Asking if women should cover up; whether one should indulge in alcohol and certain drugs; debating whether he can get away with his masturbation on the holiest day of the week; and wondering how Allah would view Umar, the righteous follower, since his body is covered in tattoos, which are after all *haram*<sup>27</sup>. Each of these concerns are addressed by Rabeya in an incredibly defiant manner and present many opportunities that challenge the reader's notion of the "right" way to treat oneself and adhere to Islamic principles. In one instance, Yusef is invited into Rabeya's room for the first time and is very uncomfortable with this encounter. Yusef notes the feminist slogans decorating her walls, the punk albums lying around and begins flipping through a *Qur'an* at the top of one of many book piles in the room, only to discover some misogynistic passages blacked out with a quintessential punk weapon; a black marker. The scene is scripted in a way that highlights the Islamic subtext subverting the prescribed relationships between men and women. Rabeya's character and the description of her social space (her bedroom) gives the author a perfect opportunity to address the contradictions in

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<sup>27</sup> Forbidden, sinful

gender relations. What emerges is a reflection of Foucault's (1978) observation of the power/pleasure nexus discussed in relation to regulating unproductive sexualities and the pleasure that is derived from fleeing and evading this power. Riveting examples of this subversion of "unproductive sexualities" are plentiful in the novel. These include Yusef pleasuring himself on a Friday, the holiest day of the week, while wearing a *burqa* and ejaculating inside of the body covering; Rabeya performing oral sex on stage at a punk show while enveloped in her *burqa* and then lifting her *niqab* and spitting the bodily fluids at the audience. These may be extreme examples of expressions of hybrid identity negotiation, but they are representative of the "pleasure" in subverting the perceived sexual controls that both Islam and the West attempt to exert over the Muslim body. While such scenarios are purely fictional and entirely blasphemous, they may indicate a major shift that might be taking place in the imagination of some Muslim youth.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore some of the ways young Muslims in diaspora are responding to the way their Muslim identity has been constructed as a threat to Western societies and states. The paper specifically focuses on a subculture, *taqwacore* that actively resists, reclaims and redefines the parameters of this suspect identity. In developing my analysis, I have explained how anti-Muslim sentiments in Canada have been crystallized in the province of Québec, in the last three decades and more recently during the debate on Reasonable Accommodation in 2007. The most problematic development in the political context that I focus on is the intense racialization of Islam and how this contributes to the delegitimization of Muslim citizenship. Implications for social and political belonging and inclusion are significant as they dictate the parameters of admissibility for non-white minorities in Québec as framed by the politics of Québec nationalism and the politics of securitization post 9/11.

However bleak and dire the current political and social climate may appear to be, my goal has been to highlight the possibilities that exist to confront and challenge the realities of this climate. I have identified the cultural phenomenon of *taqwacore*, popular among some second-generation Muslim youth, as a powerful vehicle for combating the epistemological violence by mainstream culture which defines expressions of Muslim identity as unreasonable and threatening. Active participants in *taqwacore* truly embody the creativity that resides in outwitting Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslims post 9/11. They represent the diversity and resilience of culture and the ability of its participants to self-define themselves, even in the face of adversity and deep-seated racialization. The localities from which these participants engage with self-definition and this form of ethnic media represents the cracks and spaces “in-

between", or 'disjunctures', as Appaduri (1996) likes to call them, for it is in these hybrid moments that the most interesting cultural expressions exist.

What is of particular interest in this subculture is the resistance to the mechanisms of racialization that attempt to fix Muslim identity in essentialized terms. In the case of *taqwacore*, for example, the diverse backgrounds of the participants are directly engaged and expressed by the incorporation of instruments indigenous to their cultural heritage in the form of song lyrics and styles of dress. What is most interesting is the way that the incorporation of visible signifiers related to Islam is done in a way that attempts to engage and confront "racial signifiers" that attempt to assign their identities. This notion of claiming and redefining one's identity was only partially explored in this paper, as done in a mostly theoretical fashion. Future research can endeavour to more fully understand how this unique identity formation reflects the broader complexities of nationhood, belonging and hybridity by directly engaging and communicating with members of *taqwacore*. In doing so, the theoretical and interpretive components of this paper can be corroborated or even perhaps refuted by gleaning data, conducting interviews and participating more directly with the *taqwacore* scene and its participants.

In conclusion, *taqwacore* represents one of the more interesting and dynamic sites of second-generation Muslim youth activity. The enormous creativity found in this scene in controversial cultural productions is a direct response to the racialization of the Muslim community and the scepticism with which Muslims have been treated by the mainstream Canadian society and the state in recent years. Even though it is too early to observe what the impact of this subculture would be in terms of social integration, it is safe to say that *taqwacore* has had a positive impact through facilitating self-expression, dissenting views and self-

definition for young Muslims in the West. The levels of subversive engagement with both Islamic and Western perceptions of women, religion and identity are complexly intertwined in *taqwacore*. Such subversive engagement represents the power in, what I have earlier identified as, a new identitarian eruption in confronting the eviction of Muslims from citizenship and belonging in the West.

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