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Where is the Place for Muslim Feminists? Placemaking in the Ruptures of the North American Academy

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Where is the Place for Muslim Feminists? Placemaking in the Ruptures of the North American Academy

Abstract

This reflection explores both solidarities and ruptures in feminist placemaking at the National Women's Studies Association 2023 soon after October 7. As Palestine had become a source of tension and critical reflection in many feminist spaces, this collective of Muslim feminist scholars also found it to be a source of transnational and intersectional solidarity work. This piece is written by tenured and untenured Palestinian, South Asian and Black Muslim feminist scholars as a model of feminist praxis challenging individual knowledge-making and redefining collective care.

Keywords

Muslim women, National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), Palestine, racism, transnational feminism

Where is the Place for Muslim Feminists? Placemaking in the Ruptures of the North American Academy

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Abstract: This reflection explores both solidarities and ruptures in feminist placemaking at the National Women's Studies Association 2023 soon after October 7. As Palestine had become a source of tension and critical reflection in many feminist spaces, this collective of Muslim feminist scholars also found it to be a source of transnational and intersectional solidarity work. This piece is written by tenured and untenured Palestinian, South Asian and Black Muslim feminist scholars as a model of feminist praxis challenging individual knowledge-making and redefining collective care.

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Our essay begins with this question: As mainstream North American feminism has embraced intersectionality, queer theory, and transnational feminism, where is the place for Muslim feminist placemaking? Do Muslim women still “need saving” as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) suggested in response to Laura Bush? Or is Muslim feminism still seen as an oxymoron? Or do only model minority Muslim feminists have a place at the feminist table?

As an informal collective of Muslim feminists who convened at NWSA (National Women's Studies Association) soon after October 7, 2023, we asked this question. We looked around and wondered where the place for us was and whether we belonged here. We found each other in reluctant eyes and informal disruptions. It was the first NWSA conference for many of the Muslim feminists who would then go on to help form the Muslim caucus at NWSA. By sharing our reflections here, we hope to explain why it seemed the right time, and finally the right place, to do so as we navigate our place in both North American feminisms and the North American academy.

When we think of Western feminists, many still picture the works of white feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler. But for Muslim feminists, this focus on white women's embodiment narratives highlights the chasm between mainstream feminism and lived experiences of Muslim women. Instead, Muslim feminists have relied on the writings of feminists on the margins: Black, Chicana and Indigenous women. We learned intersectionality from Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins. We learned about the importance of our voices from Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Nawaal El Saadawi, Amina Wadud, Suad Khabeer, and Sara Ahmed. We grappled with the unrelenting nature of colonial violence from Audra Simpson, Eve Tuck, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. We value them but does the North American academy value feminists in hijab, Black Muslim feminists, and Palestinian feminists? The academy does not see them and undermines their work and perspectives.

In this piece and in our subsequent conversations, we reflect on the space we have created for ourselves in the ruptures at NWSA. Much of this coalesced around two significant moments during the 2023 conference. First, when our group of Muslim feminists filled the room in solidarity with Palestinian scholars Wafaa Hasan and Besan Jaber, who spoke passionately and urgently about Arab, Palestinian, and Iranian women in the face of western feminists. And secondly, when we all came together to reflect and reconnect over dinner at a Palestinian restaurant in Baltimore, a radical act of community when other NWSA participants were at a pro-Palestinian protest downtown.

The movement towards this nascent solidarity had begun the night before. Crenshaw was delivering the NWSA keynote and, on the stage not a word was uttered about the relentless mass murders of Palestinians and the unfathomable experiences of women under siege. It was a disappointment coming from the Black feminist who first defined

intersectionality, and the organizers for curating the silences. It was not until the pre-recorded video of Angela Davis was shown at the end of the event that the word Palestine was even spoken. This striking omission and afterthought politics guiding the engagement with Palestine had sparked the convening of a circle of conference-goers in a space made available by NWSA for “conversations.” However, that discussion was led by non-Palestinian scholars, and [the statement made by Feminists for Justice in Palestine](#), which called out “the leadership’s betrayal of Palestine solidarity,” and was printed and shared among conference-goers, was not directly addressed.

Many of us left this uncomfortable gathering feeling out of place as if there were many self-appointed allies but no real sense of community. As the group disbanded, we encountered Wafaa outside the room. She shared her uncertainty about attending NWSA not only in the wake of the Feminists for Palestine action, but more acutely, as the constant stream of information from Gaza broke the news of more and more deaths in her intimate circles. Wafaa spoke emotionally to a small group of racialized women who had gathered around her, talking about the toll the days had taken on her and her loved ones and it was clear in that moment just how urgent her work on Palestinian women is, especially at this time.

The next morning, Pakistani American scholar Asmaa Malik proposed that we cancel our panel on gendered representations of Muslims, which was scheduled for the same time as Wafaa and Besan’s panel. We wanted to support and center Palestinian feminist voices and make our presence known not only for Wafaa and Besan, but for the rest of the NWSA attendees. With a room overflowing and all seating real estate called for, a session slotted as another paper panel turned into a plenary in front of our eyes, running well past the allotted time and captivating a type of engagement rarely seen in academic forums. We listened closely and rose to our feet when they were finished, all of us coming up to express our gratitude to the panelists, our arrival as a collective punctuated with each tight hug. Wafaa was moved to tears and the white allies in the room who were called in during the presentation were forced to reckon with our enthusiastic support.

This solidarity was also unique because of the internal racism within and outside of the North American Muslim community, including anti-Black racism but also anti-Palestinian discrimination. Within our own Muslim communities persist racial and ethnocultural divides manifesting as material barriers to substantive and sustained

solidarities. But somehow at NWSA, we were able to form some semblance of a community and find a place for us. But we are not naive that these ruptures and tensions don't exist even within our feminist spaces. Yet an understanding formed that solidarities are not devoid of rupture, awkward moments, and uncertainties – but in the tension and stress points, placemaking opportunities show themselves.

That evening, a group of conference-goers—including ones we were critiquing — loudly announced they would attend the protest in downtown Baltimore. We asked the two Palestinian scholars in our group: “Should we also go protest?” One of them who had just engaged in deep emotional labor to call out white allies on Palestine in a previous panel replied: “I need to eat.” Our group of Palestinian Muslim feminists, South Asian feminists, Black Muslim feminists and Arab Muslim feminists decided to gather at Zaatar over shawarma and hummus and to other-affirm each other.

The atmosphere felt warm, and we felt grounded as if we had known each other for years. We were all moved by the solidarity that we experienced from Muslim feminists of different ethnicities and racial backgrounds. We shared stories, laughed, and thanked each other for standing with one another. We got to know each other. We awkwardly discussed the place of our piety in our feminist ideologies, navigating internalized forms of self-doubt. We reflected on ‘the Muslim’ category in relation to ‘the Feminist.’ We talked about ways to meet up, collaborate, and continue the bountiful conversation.

Where is the place for Muslim feminists in the North American academy? The place is being built right now in the ruptures, not by individuals but through a collective, just as we write this reflection as a collective. Basarudin et al. (2023) recently wrote,

While all ideas are collective, the academy—and the humanities as part of the larger academy—rewards individual scholarly production. Decentering the standpoint of the individual, sole knower, we engaged in a mode of collaborative knowledge production that enabled us to refract our memories and lived experiences through a wide range of transnational feminist ideas.

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Dr. Wafaa Hasan has published on topics such as: Islamophobia in Canada; globalized Islamophobia; contemporary trends of globalization in the Middle East; relations between Arab-Canadian leaders/organizations and the Harper government in Canada; Palestinian childhood in Canadian literature; global practices of resilience in displacement in her co-edited book *Countering Displacements: The Creativity and Resilience of Indigenous and Refugee-ed Peoples* (U of Alberta Press, 2012).



Besan Jaber

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An independent scholar and activist with over a decade of experience in development, journalism, and education, Besan Jaber worked and consulted for various local and international organizations, including Takatoat, IRC, and ARIJ where her work has focused on gender and social justice. Besan's interdisciplinary research combines critical theory, feminist theory, ethnography, studying solidarity movements, transnational feminisms, and Palestinian literature. Her notable works include publications on ethnographic journalism (Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2020) and women's organizing in Jordan (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021). She presented at

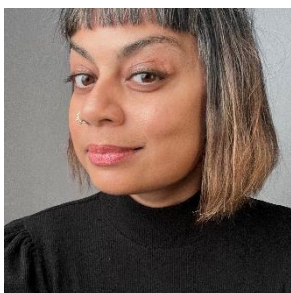
the NWSA 2023 Conference on the politics of transnational feminist solidarity and recently gave talks on Palestine as a feminist issue.



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Dr. Ali specializes in race, racism, and racialization, particularly in Anti-Blackness and Gendered Islamophobia. Her expertise lies in critical Muslim studies, Black studies, and arts-based research methods. Beyond academia, Nadiya is deeply involved in community work and passionate about public scholarship. Over the past two years, Nadiya's public scholarship has involved over two dozen consultative engagements and facilitations on anti-Blackness and anti-Islamophobia in the Greater Toronto Area.



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Asmaa Malik's research examines how journalistic practices and media representations impact nondominant communities in North America. She has studied portrayals of niqab-wearing women in Quebec media, as well as the role of social media and news in Pakistani diasporas and is currently researching the experiences of Muslim journalists in Canadian newsrooms. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including *The Walrus*, where she has written about the erasure of Palestinian narratives in western media and racial surveillance in neighborhood social media groups.



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Dr. Ternikar's research and publication areas cover transnational feminist food studies, critical wellness studies and American Muslim women. Her most recent scholarship includes a book on Intersectionality and Muslim American women, articles on yoga (*Race and Yoga Journal*), modest fashion (*Fashion Studies Journal*), and halal food (*Critical Food Studies*). She is on the board of ASFS (Association for the Study of Food and Society), and WOCLP (Women of Color Leadership) at NWSA.