

# **Bodies, Identities, & Intersections**

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## “Existing Outside of the *Lines*”

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SHELINA ADATIA (SHE/HER)

A Brown body is what you see,  
not the internal conflict deeply rooted within me.  
My identity as a Canadian Muslim should be a source of pride,  
but how can I honour it when I'm fearful of the racial divide?  
As you judge me, ever so slowly with your eyes,  
your silence speaks volumes of your guise.  
As a Brown-bodied female navigating academia,  
I am both an expression of diversity and a source of adversity.  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

As a child, I was often reminded to ‘stay inside the lines.’  
Now, wish as I may, this advice is no longer meant for colouring cartoon outlines.  
The message, however, remains the same: stay within your confines.  
You claim that my voice matters,  
but when I gather the courage to voice my perspectives, my opinions are met with daggers.  
Navigating the intersections of race and racism is like tending to wounds that will never heal.  
Do you ever think about how that makes me feel?  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

Upon entering the pre-teen or tween years, I took dance lessons—Bharatanatyam, to be exact.  
Telling a story through hand, eye, and facial gestures, it leaves quite the impact.  
When I stopped taking lessons, I was certain that dance would become a memory of my past.  
Yet, as a graduate student, I am dancing once again—a very different form of dance,  
one that tells the story of how I've navigated academia, mindful of your critical glance.  
This *dance* is the dance of whiteness,  
a dance I've had to master in order to be cast with a semblance of likeness.  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?  
Knowingly and unknowingly, I've been *dancing the dance* since the start of graduate studies,  
filtering my words to avoid unnecessary inquiries.  
Entering spaces not meant for me,  
I do so in hopes that I successfully obtain my degree.  
You may say that all are welcome,  
but your hollow words are awfully tiresome.  
Still, I enter these spaces and hold my tongue,  
for if I don't, I fear that I'll be stung.  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

Zoom-ing into these spaces has certainly felt safer,  
but I've still experienced forms of erasure.

Although our Zoom boxes may all be the same,  
as we click on our cameras and join our meetings, our names appear in our individual frames.  
Why, then, was another Muslim female recently addressed as me?  
Are we not each deserving of our unique identity?  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

Exclusion is racism.  
Although I endure it, so you don't feel uncomfortable,  
how can that be your measure of professionalism?  
What if you dared to decenter your feelings?  
Letting me experience some form of healing.  
Surely, you've heard the expression, *to step into someone else's shoes*.  
An opportunity to re-think some of your views,  
is that why you refuse?  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

Committees are being formed,  
certain practices, slowly reformed,  
but if you don't truly listen and believe,  
what is it that we really achieve?  
False promises and crushed dreams,  
these, your version of academia gleams.  
You, the majority,  
and me, forever the minority.  
How, then, can I exist outside of the *lines*?

Crushing as academia may be,  
I am learning to authentically be me.  
Advocating for myself, despite the fear,  
my views can now be heard loud and clear.  
Embracing my vulnerability,  
in the face of your performativity,  
slowly unlearning the *dance* of whiteness, I no longer hope to survive.  
Instead, I dare to thrive.  
Might I then finally exist outside of the *lines*?

## Decolonizing & Blackness

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ANONYMOUS

Decolonization is a severely and sometimes deliberately misunderstood concept. Decolonization is a process that requires decentering whiteness and re-imagining what the settler and Indigenous relations could look like. Decolonization both verb and noun must emanate from Indigenous communities and perspectives. An anti-colonial position is not the same as decolonizing, as it is missing the critical aspect of Indigenous land rights (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Reducing decolonization to post-colonialism or basic reconciliation results in performative speech acts and settlers' seeking to avoid or shift accountability.

With the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves, Canada's longstanding 'historical amnesia' has been shaken. We can no longer deny the many atrocities [being] committed and the ongoing Indigenous genocide. In response to current events then, the work of decolonizing becomes a public enterprise. Governments, schools, and workplaces are developing strategies and initiatives to address 'decolonization'. Though Indigenous people have always had a voice, their resistance is being amplified by this growing sense of urgency.

When discussing decolonization, the first question that comes to my mind is: Who is a settler? If settlers are non-Indigenous people who "come and settle in a land inhabited by Indigenous people", then I am included in this category (Eidinger & York-Bertram, 2018). Interestingly, Yang and Tuck exclude immigrants from the 'settler-native-slave triad' as immigrants are ' beholden' to Indigenous laws and epistemologies. I would argue that immigrants fall under the settler umbrella.

I believe that this term settler generates feelings of guilt and shame. By contributing to the Canadian colonial project and displacing the original peoples of this land immigrant settlers are benefiting from settler-colonialism. Although this guilt is not productive, I think it is a natural response and part of the learning process. Robinder Sedhev cautions that this guilt "often shifts attention from challenging oppression to easing conscience". Sedhev succinctly summarizes my thoughts regarding my intersecting privileges and oppressions:

When I was a student, a professor asked those of us non-Aboriginal students to consider the privileges we enjoyed in Canada. This was a hard task for me as I saw more burdens than privileges. I saw racist violence, alienation, glass ceilings, tokenism, and accusations of fundamentalism and terrorism. And even though I continue to see and experience racism in varied ways, I benefit from settler privileges. The right to earn a living from the land, to build a home (physical and metaphorical) anywhere in this country, and to be a citizen are only a few examples of how settlers are privileged. These privileges came from treaty with Aboriginal nations, without whose recognition settlers would have no right to build homes, govern themselves, move freely or earn a living here.

Black people living in North America hold a precarious place in the settler-native-slave triad. My burdens outnumbering my privileges does not erase my settlerdom. As a settler and educator, I have a double responsibility to teach and engage in reconciliation. Recognizing my position is the first step, acting and leaning into the uncertainty of decolonization is discomforting.

There is no doubt that there is a normative whiteness in Canada. White people are the standard, and all other races and ethnicities are ‘marked by racializing terms’ (McKay, 2019). Racism and prejudices against Indigenous people fall under what Dwanna McKay calls ‘legitimized racism’, where this racism is “normalized, institutionalized, internalized and systemic”. This manifests as Indigenous folks being hypervisible and invisible at the same time. Additionally, settlers (including people of colour) lament that they are tired of providing “handouts and ask why Indigenous peoples cannot simply “move on” with them as a united people in the Canadian settler state” (Macdonald, 2017).

As a second-generation Canadian, I think my status as a settler is one I have come to terms with. For many others in my community, the concept of being a settler is foreign. The violence and instability that brought my people to Canada in the early 1990s would fall into a modified category of what Jodi Boyd calls *arrivants*. These arrivants are “people forced into the Americas through violence”; they are in the unique position of being “Indigenous from one place, [and their children] became native-born settler colonialists in another” (Spear, 2019, p. 432). While their resettlement was not the direct result of Anglo-American or British colonialism, they nonetheless sought safety in Canada. These immigrants and refugees were primarily focused on survival. Rightly or wrongly, engagement with decolonization was not a priority. As subsequent generations seek to establish themselves on these lands, explicit education regarding Indigenous issues is required.

Alongside this awakening, there are many future challenges including the practice of ethnic fraud and self-indigenizing. This is done in order to access treaty rights, disrupt reconciliation, or for personal gain. Black people can and do contribute to Indigenous erasure by self-indigenizing. In practice, decolonization will require different sacrifices on the part of different groups. For people of colour (POCs), I believe decolonization begins with understanding that we are also required to engage in this work. Decolonization is not a white and Indigenous matter. As difficult as it may be, POCs must recognize that solidarity can only achieve so much.

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## An Intersectional Approach to Teaching Sexual Education

ALYNAH HYDER ALI (SHE/HER)

Being a first-generation South Asian immigrant, who believes in pro-feminist, pro-choice and anti-oppressive principles, my experiences of learning about sexual health, sexual education and reproductive justice are not linear. Within communities of colour, particularly in my experience the South Asian community, talking about sexual education and sexuality is often silenced or viewed as “too radical and/ or too white”, as the mainstream media generally depicts women’s liberation through a white feminist lens. Albeit, I had the privilege to be raised by parents who are post-secondary educated and generally gave us the freedom to voice my opinions, gender discrimination and oppression of femme sexuality were often present in my upbringing as well. It is only now that I understand that my parents, educated in the colonized, British education system of Pakistan, were also conditioned to believe in the same capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist ideologies which are prevalent in many academic institutions and the current mainstream society today.

Often in our communities and countries, conservative religious authorities and leaders condemn speaking about and seeking an abortion, birth control and sexual education, and therefore, access to contraceptives and understanding sexual health is rare, or for those few from a privileged socio-economic class. The basic vocabulary to express oneself in terms of one’s sexual health, let alone reproductive justice, is also, then, limited in our communities. Hence, it is imperative that communities of colour are provided opportunities for education, not only biological, such as learning about ovaries and testes as we generally do in high schools in Ontario but also giving students of colour a safe space to talk about sexuality and sexual feelings in a healthy manner. Talking about feelings, generally, in the dominant discourse is considered weak and/ or “unmasculine.” However, it is the male students who require this education just as much, if not more, as their female counterparts. Considering this, one must acknowledge that every culture and religion has its own beliefs and practices around sex. Hence, living in Canada, one must, also, consider that students come from diverse communities and that they must be educated in a non-oppressive way that does not affirm the colonizer’s belief around sex and healthy relationships (Kent, 2009). There are many questions that come to mind when educating students about sexual health when students come from diverse backgrounds. Using the Reproductive Justice framework seems to be the way forward as it is based on three interconnected human rights: 1) the right to not have a child using birth control, abortion, and abstinence, 2) the right to have a child under the conditions of one choosing, 3) the right to parent a child in a safe and healthy environment free from violence by individuals and state (Ross & Solinger, 2017).

Reproductive justice started off as a movement, a framework, in the tradition of the Combahee River Collective, where twelve Black women working within and outside of the pro-choice movement coined this term. Reproductive justice is inherently *intersectional* as it recognizes the full reproductive and sexual human rights at the intersection of race, class, and gender (Ross, 2017). Loretta Ross states that while abortion is one primary health issue, abortion advocacy alone inadequately addresses the intersectional oppressions of white supremacy, misogyny, and

neoliberalism (Ross, 2017). *Intersectionality*, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, here, recognizes the power dynamics between how one sees themselves versus how society views them. Hence, employing the Reproductive Justice framework to teach sexual education not only interrupts the status quo, but it also gives students of colour the opportunities to imagine better futures regardless of their race, class and gender while becoming better equipped to advocate for sexual education in their own communities.

Paralleling Reproductive Justice, Tonya Kent (2009) writes about her experiences as an Outreach and Resources Coordinator at the Sexual Assault Survivors Support Line in the early 2000s and the obstacles faced by students of colour related to sexual education. Of course, the topic being considered taboo, or “dirty” in schooling and mainstream society, she faced difficulties getting into many schools since schools are inherently oppressive under the capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist paradigm. Topics such as abortion, birth control, pre-marital sex, and same-sex relationships were forbidden to speak about in Catholic schools and even some public schools resisted and/ or denied them access (Kent, 2009). In her article, Kent (2009) shares that she was responsible for contacting schools about educating students on sexual assault and healthy relationships in the area surrounding the Jane and Finch (predominantly Black and South Asian students) and York University in Toronto. Students of colour living, especially those living in lower - income areas and municipalities are, then, most impacted as educators in those classrooms are ill-equipped to change the students’ preconceived ideologies and conditioned beliefs about sexual abuse and sexual health. Kent (2009) found that sexual education about same-sex marriages were often viewed as “disgusting” and/or outside the “norm” in classrooms with mostly students of colour. Moreover, withholding beliefs of students in mainly white classrooms about topics related to sexual assault and drugs or alcohol was that if the victim was under the influence of drugs and/ or alcohol, it would not be considered sexual assault. It is important to note that the teachers in the white classrooms were more apt to correct the white students; whereas, for students of colour, teachers would accept the oppressive ideas and do nothing to challenge and/ or change them (Kent, 2009).

As I write this in hopes to support my students with tools (advocacy and education) to challenge oppressive systems while affirming their identity/ies, a couple of questions still linger in my mind: 1) how can the reproductive justice framework be integrated in schools and institutions to support survivors of sexual abuse, and 2) how can folk of colour be encouraged to not only advocate for themselves, but also become non-performative allies as the right to produce children is not always a given in the white supremacist society for Black and Indigenous women?

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## Embodied Truth

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ELIE NDALA (HE/HIM)

### Son of Congo

Reminiscing on my brief childhood in DR Congo, I never really sensed the - although inevitably present - discrepancies between the neighborhood children and me. I did not stand out from the crowd, but in such an unstable political climate, severe poverty, and an underemployment problem (Iyenda, 2005; Aterido et al., 2018), divergence in life conditions between social classes had always been staggering. My parents, a couple of promising physicians, began ascending the ranks of their profession and, by the time they had me, their cultural and social capital had increased beyond that of the average middle-class citizen. Whenever the children of their various acquaintances visited our newly built condo in an underdeveloped part of the capital, the adults would let us socialize near what was then my playroom. I never thought much of it as a child as it was just a room where they stored my toys. Not until the play session was over and my guests had to return to their parents that they would clumsily wobble towards the door, pockets filled and clunky. Such sequence had become so recurrent that my parents eventually sat me down to educate me on how the circumstances of their childhood were drastically different from mine. They advised me not to resent any of them but rather be thankful for my position in life.

Among the plethora of languages that make up the Congolese multilingualism, Lingala had become “one of the major languages of wider communication” (Bokamba, 2009, p.50) both in popular music and on television, to the point where its notoriety exceeded the national borders. Obviously, I wanted to learn it. Often tirelessly urging my elders to initiate me, they would react with the same reluctance, implying that it was not a language meant for me. I had to foster the proper French that I was lucky enough to be taught. As a result, I found myself oblivious to most of the conversations among the youngsters, under the pretext that French would take me further in life.

Ironically, as the following section will contrast, I must admit that I was in a privileged position. The socio-professional status of my parents had a lot to do with it as they came from wealthy families, and I, an only child, was destined to the same fate. Nevertheless, it is clear that the ideological influence of the colonial past, which encouraged a certain dissociation from the local sociocultural heritage, cannot be denied. Lingala emerged as the operative language of the black workforce bearing the duties of white conquerors during the Belgian dominion (Samarin, 1989). From this background, those with financial means continue to strive for the European standard, perceptible in the value accorded to French, as colonial heritage, to private education, and Catholicism.

The civil war of the early 2000s triggered my chaotic search for identity and belonging. During that time, the geographical proximity of countries in conflict with each other led to local invasions and mutinies that caused distrust between ethnic groups (Reyntjens, 1999). Barbarism had become so widespread that ducking under a table and counting the stray bullets stuck in the living

room wall was part of our weekly routine. One day, as my father picked me up from school, our usual ride home took a dangerous turn when gun-toting soldiers led us to a roadblock. It was their way of singling out individuals they found suspicious or collecting bribes through their abuse of power. One soldier ordered my favorite person of all time to roll down his window and take his hands off the wheel. He then briefly glanced at me. I was sobbing. His reaction was to point the muzzle of his gun to my father's head while arrogantly warning me that if I did not keep quiet, he would pull the trigger. Eight months of exile and survival in a refugee camp later, we received permission to immigrate to what my parents referred to as their promised land.

### **From Mercedes to welfare**

O Canada, land of hospitality, land of opportunity. What could we possibly be missing when we settled on your grounds on a chilly October day? What if our only culture shock was winter, hockey, poutine, and maple syrup? Alas, no one warned us of the tribulations to come. My parents' diplomas were not recognized, forcing them to look for survival jobs and scramble to find a new wardrobe among the donations in a church basement. I found myself in a first-grade class where I was the only black student. As if that was not enough, the local newspaper devoted a section to our perilous journey, adorning it with the following headline: *From Mercedes to Welfare*. Quite the honor! Desperate to understand myself, I quickly decided to play the sponge game and absorb any knowledge accessible from my surroundings. At home, I nurtured the traditions I had inherited by cherishing our worship sessions, submitting to adult authority, and avoiding profane behavior. The household was very much like the motherland. During school, I realized how free the children were to interrupt the teacher, get up at will to go to the restroom, and publicly show their affection for others. Wanting to be part of the gang, I timidly accepted to become Claire's boyfriend and cautiously steered away from my traditional values. By the end of elementary school, I had managed to alter both my mannerisms and accent to suit my social context. Unless my folks showed up for the parent-teacher conference or my friends came to visit me at home, I somewhat figured out who I was. Like a chameleon, I could become a French Canadian or a Congolese, but never simultaneously.

At last, I was successfully adapting to Canadian life. I taught myself to ride a bike, swim, and skate solely not to look like an outsider. If I could change my skin color at that time, I suspect I would have seriously considered it. My desire to belong was that deep. Nonetheless, there were times when I still questioned my identity, especially when I received questions about my apprehension of winter, my love for rap music, and basketball, the two staples of black culture. I had to be honest with myself. Despite my attempt at partial assimilation, the discomfort of being constantly reminded that I was from somewhere else kept haunting me. The immigrant, who tries to liberate oneself from the weight of otherness, is eventually reminded of his alienness, of which he is well aware (Henein, 2021).

### **Who am I to you?**

I felt doomed to forever juggle this Canadian-Congolese duality whenever interacting with both communities. Goffman's (1978) concept of impression management captures the depth of this phenomenon, as each individual is inclined to alter the necessary components of one's personality when interacting with a group of people who share a common interest, whether it be in a shared trajectory or a collaborative endeavor. Not having identified the motive of this group, the person will tend to produce what the author likens to a theatrical performance to ensure credibility with

peers in a role negotiation. In my case, this desire to perform was laced with a fear of marginalization and ultimately constrained my authenticity, as evidenced by the nickname “mundele” (the white one) bestowed by my cousins. Besides, a failing attempt to wish my grandmother a happy birthday in our native tongue reinforced the idea that I had drifted far away from my roots.

Our family had recently moved to a small town in the Francophone region of New Brunswick for employment opportunities. I would soon enroll in the nearest university. Back home, education loses prestige unless it involves medicine, law, or engineering. Once I was admitted to the pre-med program, my priority became to avoid exclusion and replenish my social circle. To my surprise, the university had partnered with several African institutions, and I found myself surrounded by doppelgangers, who were understandably overwhelmed. Clans quickly formed, as is often the case in institutions catering to a homogeneous population. The international students formed one bloc and the Acadians a second. Determined to build on the effort I mustered up to this point, I sought to fit in with the locals by sharing common interests and, of course, displaying more candidness than my African compatriots. Unfortunately, this first impression failed to attract my white contemporaries, similar to the academic staff, who mainly viewed me as an international student due to my name and appearance. Even worse, those with whom I had the potential of forming bonds defiantly questioned my Quebec accent. Unaware of linguistic varieties underlaying a legitimacy conflict, my erroneous belief that all Canadians spoke the same French would henceforth be detrimental.

Filled with despair, I sank into a depressive state as my identity fragmented. On the one hand, I was too white to return to Congo and not be treated as a foreigner by my people, and on the other, I was too black to integrate the group of local students and was considered a recent immigrant. As a last resort, I dropped out of medical school to pursue a career in education. Being immersed in a collaborative environment, learning about societies, cultures, and child development would eventually lead me to understand myself. My intuition was correct. The intercultural lens resulting from my struggles to reconcile my overlapping identities quickly became an asset. I uncovered my ability to anticipate students' challenges based on their life experiences, which allowed me to excel. Academic success gave rise to growing self-confidence. Not only did my professors value my contributions, but they stressed that my input was critical to Canadian society. One of them went as far as privately declaring that I was her favorite student because I knew more about Canadian life than my African classmates. At the time, these remarks only flattered my ego until I was confronted with the harsh reality of being black in Canada.

## **Rebellion**

Despite my academic achievements and solid qualifications, I noticed that I remained an outsider during my stint as a long-term substitute teacher. If I was not the only unlucky one without an invitation to a colleague's cookout, the slight shoulder frown I received upon entering the lunchroom reminded me of the countless times I found myself disarmed by cold gazes at my blackness in a crowded room. Here I was again at square one, torn between the need to be a good Canadian and the unavoidable barriers associated with my body, that of the other, which “makes of me always a man who questions” (Fanon, 2008, p. *vii*). Consequently, I decided to pursue graduate studies to obtain, at least, partial answers to my myriad of questions.

Then, the George Floyd homicide happened. What had been a lonely existence highlighted by internal battles became a full-fledged desire for revolution. The gravity of this offense forced the entire world to witness the extent of racism, and the hatred of one's neighbor, disregarding their narrative and human rights. Concurrently, the succession of activism that followed awakened consciences to the daily challenges of preserving black lives. Suddenly, after 20 years of seclusion, I was receiving interview demands, contract offers, and consultations requests with the specific purpose of sharing my experience as a black person in Canada. All the questions I had never gotten answers to, the misunderstandings that sometimes brought me to tears, were suddenly thrust into the spotlight. What was I going to say? That I had spent my youth trying to suppress my blackness to avoid being excluded and that in the end, my efforts had not been successful? That I sometimes felt superior to those international students who had just arrived and faced more opposition than I did? I could only imagine the guilt of cherished house slaves as their field counterparts were disregarded and considered heavy, loutish, and slow (Ingraham, 1860, p. 34-36). Incidentally, I discovered that I still had to censor myself when speaking out, either to avoid offending a francophone community that is still wavering between racial and linguistic tensions or, perhaps, to avoid exposing an institution perpetuating the same injustices that it publicly denounces.

When that professor praised me for understanding Canadian life better than my classmates, I should have taken a stand. Nothing made me a better Canadian than my racialized peers, I who had been running away from my own blackness. That was the last straw. I could not set a defeatist example for my younger brother brought in this very system since birth.

I was today years old when I became aware of my divine right not to pin an identity badge to my chest whenever I find myself in a particular social context. Determined to break free from the shackles of categorization, I will no longer bear the title of French Canadian, Black Canadian, 1.5 generation immigrant – even African or Congolese - should it silence other parts of my existence. Am I not afraid of burning bridges? I certainly am. Yet, how refreshing to fully acknowledge my being, unapologetically and as an expert of my embodied truth.

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# My Body is a Poem on Fire: From Burning to Writing as a Practice of Freedom

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SHYAM PATEL (HE/HIM)

“A distinction must be made between that writing which enables us to hold on to life even as we are clinging to old hurts and wounds and that writing which offers to us a space where we are able to confront reality in such a way that we live more fully. Such writing is not an anchor that we mistakenly cling to so as not to drown. It is writing that truly rescues, that enables us to reach the shore, to recover.”

— bell hooks, *remembered rapture: the writer at work*

## Writing as a Practice of Freedom

At the age of eighteen, I read *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks and it reached me in a way that I could never imagine. Almost twelve years later, it is still hooks' scholarship and writing that provides me with the sustenance to believe that I, too, can write. That, in its own way, writing can be a practice of freedom. It is for this reason that I open with a passage from one of hooks' evocative works, to preface the way in which writing rescues me. In the past, however, I have come to writing by way of culling my own body to tell a story. Perhaps the extraction by the colonizer has imparted on me an articulation of the self as a singular mode — that of a colonized subject. This degeneration of viewing my body as only and wholly oppressed is wanting. It archives me as a text that collapses into history as trapped in a state of unfreedom. Despite this harrowing reality, the 'subject' so-to-speak, in this case my racialized body, is not merely abject. This realization reaches me in the foundational work of feminist authors and scholars who offer newfound ways of writing the body and the self. Their pushback of what Frye (2000) calls a double bind, wherein oppressed peoples are imprisoned to undesirable options, invigorates in me a similar sense of unbinding to write freely and openly.

In this piece, I consider Ahmed's (2017) call that the personal is theoretical. Expounding on this premise that my own body is a site of theorization, I drift in the words of Trinh (1997), not simply writing the body as/with theory but through the body. In that, I seek to examine how feminist theorization frames writing that is personal, triggered in memories of the body, and then contextualize how the location of "I" as a bodily function emerges from the feminist theorizing of a 'male' body, namely, my own. In that brief tracing, I want to remain careful and considerate to not be uncritical and unreflective, considering that bodies of men, and to some extent male-passing or masculine-presenting peoples, have historically been forces of domination and oppression. I acknowledge that such bodies are not more or similarly oppressed to other bodies. Instead, what I hope to articulate is that patriarchal and sexist thinking manifest bodies, for men as well, in a dangerously flawed and harmful manner, and that feminist theorists, particularly women of colour

who have employed writing as a mode of discursive intervention and mobilization (Townsend-Bell, 2012), provide me with the groundwork to be more engaged and reflective in my own scholarship.

### **(Re)reading the ‘Male Body’ through Feminist Scholarship**

For Trinh (1997), “we write-think and feel – (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts” (p. 258). In this emergence of the body as theory, there is the performative formation of gender that is constituted over time, which penetrates what is written. According to Butler (1988), the body, as a stylized of repeated acts, is formed by how it is culturally defined by said acts. As such, the author contends that feminist theory seeks to examine the cultural and political structures that take form in how the body is constructed — the ways in which it is performed — vis-à-vis gender. In non-Western cultures, Menon (2012) argues that this binary of bodies as ‘male only’ and ‘female only’ takes form through so-called modernity. For bodies a part of the Global South, such a binary requires the examination of other binaries that are constructed, especially that of caste and race. In writing, that interrogation is not always without its contentions. As mentioned by Trinh (1989), “writing the body in theory sometimes chokes to the breaking point” (p. 43). In the mechanics of writing, there is what the author calls both an engagement and disengagement in the master discourses. So, even in the extrication of the male gaze (or any other dominant gaze), there is a tendency to fall into the trap of gazing an entity, such as the body, through the very gaze that is being deflected (Patel, 2021). It is not only the ‘male’ body that does so because masculinity is not only held in the reservoir of the male body (Reeser, 2010). It punctures all bodies. To write about the body, then, means to write in that entangled space. Feminists also write knowing that patriarchal and sexist thinking strangle writing. In that admission, it means to always write while dialoguing with something else (Reeser, 2010), in this case, rupturing the confines of the male gaze and being scrupulous in not reflecting it. This engagement vis-à-vis writing has been a consistent tool among feminists (Townsend-Bell, 2012).

For the so-called ‘male’ body, the patriarchal and sexist gaze both reinforces dominant and oppressive perspectives of masculinities. In one manner, it affords privileges to some more than others. Bodies that are able-bodied, cis, heterosexual, male, thin, and white (or even passing as any of these identities) are born or birthed at some point as privileges. For example, Indian families steeped in patriarchal and sexist thinking favour the arrival of a male child (Rawat, 2014), whereas the ‘female’ body is framed as disposable. While patriarchy privileges the bodies of men, as is the case with the patriarchal manifestation of Indian and other men, it also sterilizes any emotionality. Patriarchal manhood as such requires men “to surrender their capacity to feel” (hooks, 2014a, p. 130). While the author specifically considers this in relation to Black men, this sense of reverberating the “manly” facade is damaging to all men of colour and all bodies of men. We are not only denied feeling, but we are all also inscribed by colonial markers that terrorize the body and the self. For example, Arab men are mischaracterized as being terrorists and such thoughts are reinforced by the media (Taylor, 2021). This view of all Arabs and Muslims, including all those assumed to be both or either of the two, as being terrorists, is a dangerous ascription to the body. Unfortunately, these false views are prevalent across communities. In queer communities, the “no fats, femmes, or Asians” caveat is rampant (Liu, 2015). It inscribes a “singular queer community” that does not examine discriminations and oppressions (Conte, 2018). In that, there is a formation of what and how the queer body should “look” like, wherein white bodies prevail dominant — a dominance not necessarily in numbers but rather in dictating “who gets to be a ‘good’ queer” in the community. For gay men of colour, this can lead to experiences of sexual racism (Han & Choi, 2018). Such discrimination and exclusion only compound when other oppressions intersect, and the view of the

dominant, namely whiteness, remains intact. According to Conte (2018), this singularity leads to “[h]omonormative formations in queer spaces [that] have marked the fat, femme and/or racialized queer body as ‘unwanted’ and ‘undesired’” (p. 26).

Countering such hegemonic thinking, it is often the writing of feminists who have written about the “undesirability” of historically oppressed bodies that has foregrounded mapping the body in radical ways. Taylor’s (2021) emphasis on radical self-love forms much of that work. To embrace the body as such, West (2017) focuses less on convincing herself of her self-worth and more on rejecting the [negative] messages that society forges on her. It is an act that requires the self to stop apologizing for the body (Taylor, 2021). Writing can be a space to trace that journey. It is, as Toni Cade Bambara imparted, an act of language (Trinh, 1989). In that language, texts can take form about the body or through the body. Cixous (1992) argues, however, that the body is already a text. According to the author, “[h]istory, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body. I go where the ‘fundamental language’ is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things, acts, and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh...recomposed into a book” (p. 52). For feminists, the body is birthed in writing, and as such, the bodies of men are also texts that are made and in making. The foundation of this assemblage is socially constructed in being antithesis to all that is characterized and performed as feminine. In a patriarchal system, this is performed in “doing” masculinity. Over time, men develop a fear of the feminine (Kierski & Blazina, 2009). They deem, rather pejoratively, “gay” and “girly” as undesirable (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). Men gaze at the bodies of women, but they fear being ascribed to the patriarchal and sexist markers they uphold. To be feminine, however performed gender happens to be, is an act of infanticide to the so-called male body and even its psyche. So, for feminists, the body, including the bodies of men, lends itself to a composition of scholarship and writing.

### **From Theory to the Body and Self**

#### **Body Mattering and Rejecting “Body Terrorism”**

A body that is vile, that is virulent. This is how I view my body and the self that is imposed on me. That no matter what I do, the body is always there. In the words of Kate Hao, “I swallow, and my body always goes down the wrong way / lodged in my windpipe / doesn’t let me breathe without reminding me of its presence” (Button Poetry, 2016, 1:55). To view my body as foreign in its own home, with every breath as a reminder, is harrowing. For me, it is the sight of patchwork, altering shades of Brown, from one part of my body to another. It is the coarse hair that grows everywhere. At times, I find myself searching for answers to questions like “Do women find hairy men attractive?” and “Why are Indians so hairy?”. In the former, I commoditize my body and its worth to someone else finding it worthy. In the latter, I enter another form of self-hatred in wanting to rid myself of being Indian. Through this entrapment of not wanting to be “in” my body, I search through old pictures from elementary and high school, vigorously tearing apart the ones from sixth to eighth grades because I am fat during those years. In high school, I wore only long-sleeve shirts to hide the hair growing all over my chest, arms, and back. I start to dread gym class because not only am I unsightly, but I also smell. My body sweats profusely. It reeks. I learned that even sweat is entangled in the politics of privilege (Waitt & Stanes, 2015). This is another blow to this Brown body, which is already ascribed as ‘curry-scented’ in another assault on the South Asian body. Such assertions remind me that this is not a ‘normal’ body. Indeed, at least for me, a sense of guilt and shame emerge before entering the teenage years (Taylor, 2021).

In considering how I have internalized self-hatred, I come to feminist theory to make sense of the body. Like Ahmed (2002), I dwell in a process or rather processes that renders the body a site of racialization. It is a process, which holds against the markers of whiteness, that Yancy (2005) mentions returns the “raced” body as distorted. I enter, by way of this (dis)orientation, a doubled taxonomy vis-à-vis Bhabha’s theoretical offerings, where I engage in mimicry (Bhabha, 1984) in an (un)homely body (Bhabha, 1992). In *Longing for Possibilities*, I write about this engagement of wanting to rid myself of Brownness. I am at unease, so to speak, with what I “see” in front of me. Such forms of body image dissatisfaction can develop from childhood (Birbeck & Murray, 2006). Through film, television, and other media, there is a constant flow of messaging that devalues certain bodies as a threat to hegemonic forces. Although there is a paucity of research on children of colour and body image, boys of colour specifically, my experiences as a teacher in the classroom shed light on their struggles with being “in” a racialized body. An example to elucidate this comes across in discussing the “doll test” in the classroom, which has been used to showcase learned racism, including its internalization, among children. While the depth of responses shifts from the elementary to high school years, I notice students of colour have a consensus: the white doll is constructed as more desirable. Even if they do not internalize this themselves, they are able to articulate that society hammers otherwise, and sometimes those messages impact their self-image and self-worth. Drawing from Taylor (2021), these early messages also come to define my own sense of worth. Salvaging parts of me that have not succumbed entirely to that messaging, I am grateful to feminist theories for tracing those remnants. Feminists inform me in “seeing” theory as a form of healing (hooks, 1991) and writing as therapeutic (hooks, 2013). Using this as a basis, I now write to confront what Taylor (2021) coins “body terrorism” in the form of body shame and body-based oppression. In other words, I leverage words to grasp what has happened to me (Ahmed, 2017), and to draw closer to my experiences. In a course with Dr. Pat Palulis on the language arts in the fall semester of 2018, putting theory into practice, this journey emerges in the form of a poem:

*Brown matter  
 Every second  
 Every minute  
 Every hour  
 A pilgrimage is made  
 Out of my  
 Brown body  
 Because  
 I am almost unreal,  
 Unnatural,  
 But let me tell you  
 That all this  
 Brown dripping,  
 Luring,  
 Seducing  
 The depths of a wallflower  
 Lazily hanging  
 Almost coaxing to say  
 I am brown  
 I am beautiful  
 I am undeserved  
 By some random traveller*

*That will not understand  
The power of this nectar  
So subtle  
So sticky  
So sweet  
That it makes  
A whole garden  
Fall to its feet*

Reading this now, there are parts that make me cringe, especially words like “dripping” and “sticky” in the poem. I can only think of hypersexualized imagery (perhaps another piece of writing to consider). I suppose reading the body is taking me time, but I digress. But, more importantly, this poem demonstrates that I am proud of a body that is Brown and one that refuses to be colonized. As such, my writing does not only offer a “writing of the body” that is a threat to the mechanics of established canons (Trinh, 1989), it also takes pride in Browning the body from the inside. It is a rejection of body terrorism. Although gradual, I profuse being Brown as being content. I enter writing through (t)racing instead of erasing the raced body.

In intersection and parallel to this journeying, this practice of freedom involves writing to heal. To heal the body that is in grief or in a passing of sorrow. In 2019, the physical and spiritual spirit that is my body had been overcome by this feeling with the passing of my paternal grandmother. I turned to poetry to write about it. A year later, in another course with Dr. Palulis, I start to heal from this pain in another poem:

*my grandmother healed from the earth. she bathed us in warm water with neem leaves. she cured sore throats with honey and ginger. she sang lullabies — told us stories of our ancestors. the lyrics sealed open wounds, rested them gently in the meadow of our hearts. when we wept, she held our bodies in her arms. in her last moments, i wonder if she held us then too. i wonder if her love still carries within an endless track of soil or a river that runs into an ocean current. some days, when the quiet breeze passes, i can feel her hand fold into mine. i feel the caress of fingers, telling me the salt water of my tears is sacred. do not bury those tears. let them moisten the dry land. to heal, i cry. i let the pain and trauma heal through this ongoing ritual. somewhere, someplace nearby, i can see my grandmother crying with me. even now, she holds me like her own child, still teaching me the way of the earth.*

In sharing this poem, I demonstrate that I am not only writing with the body but through the body. I am pulling threads from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work. Borrowing the words of Ahmed (2006), I am also writing a “phenomenology [that] emphasizes the lived experiences of inhabiting a body” (p. 2). The volition to write about this process stems from the emotionality that feminist authors and scholars impress upon me. Patriarchy forbids men from being familiar with feelings, from loving (hooks, 2004b). This theorization of men’s emotions is a feminist issue (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Through that, I expand the body in writing in what it experiences and feels, and the (un)becoming of how I arrive at feminist theory to make sense of that. As Belcourt (2020) reminds me, “no one runs to theory unless there is a dirt road in him” (p. 54). This is what makes writing so important in terms of healing. To profess the body out of apology is to immerse in a life-long passage towards holding it gently, loving it. So, when I write a poem about my grandmother, I am both processing through grief and healing the body. I am remembering that the body can be grieving and still be powerful.

But what specifically makes it so that writing about the body remains so healing? To respond to this, I draw on the words of the feminist teacher who has undoubtedly shaped much of my thinking. In *remembered rapture*, hooks (2013) writes the following: “To me, telling the story of my growing-up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die” (p. 80). When I write about the discontent of my own body, I can leave that behind in the written text. I am able to lift a burden. That does not mean that I am absolved of criticality and self-reflection, or that I am no longer hurting. What it means is that I have wept thoroughly and the later stages of weeping, at least for me, are assuaged. However, crying, whether it be in the form of tears or weeping through writing, is gendered. Such performativity can take form in the “boys don’t cry” framing (McQueen, 2017). In adolescent boys, Oransky and Marecek (2009) explain how peer groups can ridicule open expressions of hurt and vulnerability. In having ascribed that onto my own body from a young age, I did not openly communicate or express my feelings. In terms of my physical body, I had been reeling in turmoil from body image dissatisfaction, but I did not dare to say that out loud. Putting this into a container, I am now weeping with emotions.

The foray of these emotions that disperse from my body is a point of becoming free. In fact, men and boys are capable of feeling. To this end, Oransky and Marecek (2009) point out that the statement of “boys don’t have feelings” is not a statement that is made by boys. As per their study, “most boys said they put on a show of manly stoicism as a means to avoid their peers’ disapproval” (p. 237). Considering this, I argue that mapping the body through theory and writing is a part of practicing freedom. Encouraging myself to write, or even engaging otherwise, creates opportunities for care and relationality that transcend the body. Writing offers me the freedom to move away from the repressed state of hiding emotions. In that way, I am writing through the body, and I am also provoking life writing. Like Leggo (2000), life writing, for me, is hopeful and seeks health. It imagines a futurity of this body that breathes — one that excavates lungs from heavy suffocation, releasing “repressed emotions” in a gentle and loving way. My own educational journey, especially in elementary and high school, did not prepare me for this. It did not equip me nor even remotely warn me of the dangers of how oppressive structures such as patriarchy and racism can assault the body. Even though emotional distance among men is known to be connected to male dominance and sexism (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017), no such conversations occurred during those years to discuss the deference that is owed to the body and its workings. In that manner, rejecting “body terrorism” is powerful beyond the body as one’s entity. It is a rejection of all that is oppressive in nature, including the site of schooling, and, in turn, a reclamation of a body and its Brownness — hair, uneven patches, and everything else that writes stories of the homeland on this landscape. For me, it is writing where I come “to retrieve the body from its disembodied, denatured status and to relocate it in the subject” (Smith & Watson, 1998, p. 35), where body mattering takes place.

### **Writing the Self: Culture and Identity in the Making**

According to Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo (2018), “[w]ithout a body, there is no self” (p. 4). So, I come here knowing that the self exists as a raced body (Ahmed, 2002; Yancy, 2005), wherein writing about the self is intrinsically connected to that process. It is in the space of writing that I can think about the self, especially my culture and identity, beyond the body as a physical reading of race. For me, this examination unfolds through the method of autobiography. It is a form of writing that evokes a particular experience (hooks, 2013). For Spivak (1992), “autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry” (p. 795). In this offering, I claim the self in writing memoirs of my life’s experiences wherever and however I can. To provide an example, coming back to the first course with Dr. Palulis, I use these words to write the following bio poem:

*Shyam is not an “exotic” name for you to marginalize.  
 It is the name of his ancestors — colonized,  
 But fierce, grounded, personal, and resilient.  
 With a father who chatters in his native Gujarati, torn as an immigrant,  
 And a mother who signs softly, whispers the stories of her womb.  
 Longing, yearning for his loves: family, friends, and communities  
 To be unbound, unchained — to become whole again.  
 What does he need? He needs to learn  
 Not to survive, but to live in this world.  
 In front of him, he sees a sea of whiteness,  
 But he would like to see the surrounding unfold  
 Between his birthplace, Canada and his homeland, India.  
 Patel is his last name, and he carries it like the brown on his skin.*

Like Yancy (2005), “I write out of a personal existential context. This context is a profound source of knowledge connected to my ‘raced’ body. Hence, I write from a place of lived embodied experience, a site of exposure” (p. 215). This above poem is one such example. It captures an expanse of life writing into a few words. Such writing of poetry, especially situating the self, is a form of feminist inquiry. On this matter, Anantharam (2012) has shared the following: “The case for how bodies matter in national imaginings has been made eloquently and forcefully in the poetry of women—not only in the South Asian context but in diverse locations where border disputes reveal complicated histories of imperialism and colonialism, of subjugation, domination, and exploitation of one community by the other” (p. 4). Connecting the dots of autobiographical writing and life writing, especially in terms of the mattering of bodies and the self, it is the work of antiracist and feminist writers that elicit me to do the same.

However, writing about the self has not always been revered in education. There is a troubling imposition that the site of the self or the written “I” is relinquished as being inappropriate or unprofessional in academic spaces. In my first attempt at post-secondary education, I am informed that the “I” has no place in writing. But, despite repressing the urge to put into language the personal, I only come to this rebellion almost ten years later. By situating the personal as theory (Ahmed, 2017) in writing, I can practice freedom. In fact, in courses that I have taken in Teacher Education with Dr. Pat Palulis and in graduate studies with Dr. Heba Elsherief, it is the “I” that is encouraged in location through theory. At first, there is a trepidation that comes with this, but I come to fall into ease with it. Not that writing about the self is easy; rather, it sparks in me a burning desire. This process is possible because of feminist teachers in the classroom. They embody tenants of Shrewsbury’s (1993) feminist pedagogy. As one example, feminist teachers sustain empowerment pedagogy. They recognize the importance of experiences, including emotions of anger, discomfort, and resistance (Almansori, 2020). In doing so, the impetus of liberatory education is realized (Shrewsbury, 1993). For me, it has been locating the courage to wax the “I” against experiences with colonialism and racism, and being critical of those, that bring me closer to freedom. Powerfully, what I hated about the “I” is now no longer a site of tension in the sense of discomfort or pain. In writing the self, I experience a rejuvenation of my culture and identity.

But what really engages me in terms of writing about and through the self, shifting away from mocking, letting go of shame, a self-hatred unlatched into the past, is the shift from student to teacher. I write, as Low and Palulis (2004) do, “out of the laboured breathing of our pedagogic lives

enacted in translation” (p. 15). To provide an example of how this relocation connects to the self through cultures and identities, I think about names. In a first-grade classroom, when I ask a student of colour if his name is pronounced a certain way, he becomes upset. He informs me that I should never use his home name and instead use his school name. As much as I am torn by this encounter, I am familiar with it. Across my schooling, I had bastardized my name to make it easier on the English tongue. Even worse, students of colour experience cultural disrespect in relation to their names (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). In 2018, I recall sitting in the staff room during my first-year practicum of Teacher Education, where the other teachers in the room, all white women, had laughed about a student in the school with a Chinese name that “sounded” funny in English. It made me uncomfortable and upset, but I did not say anything. It is these moments, as I am held captive in the role of a teacher, that I come to be assassinated differently. I am not only vicariously living the racism, but I am also transported into the past, where the forlorn memories of the self, recur.

It is this painful trajectory that compels me to call writing into question in the classroom. In that space, students often express to me an embarrassment of their own culture and identity. I remember a first-grade Palestinian student who had once come to school wearing a dress from her culture. She had been mocked by a few of the students, and after that, never returned to the classroom with that same pride again. These interactions emerge because of the pervasiveness of whiteness in defining culture. Kohli (2008) further advises that teaching dominant cultural norms leads “students to think less of themselves, their culture, or their people” (p. 185). Although culture can have different meanings for students of colour (Yosso, 2005), cultural racism in the classroom is present. As evidenced in the example that I provide of the first-grader, students reacted by mocking a culture that did not assimilate with the dominant culture. These articulations are not innate to children; rather, they manifest through sites of learning, including the home and school. It is for this realization, in this case parts of one’s culture, that I bring writing into the classroom as a practice of freedom. As I learn, at least from my own students, the nature of oppression that dismembers their own lives, I think about the feminist teachers who appreciate and celebrate the “I” in writing. I similarly encourage my students to write freely and openly, even if it means reading writing that is unfamiliar to what I am used to. I am certain, as I read their work, there is breathing that takes place with the rhythmic nature of the heart (Leggo, 2000), or at some level, this is my hope. A sense of self is renewed and restored.

### **Bringing the Flame to Light**

As I journey towards writing, thinking about what it means to “consume” and “produce” thoughts, I must express gratitude to feminist authors and scholars. They remind me that I am not merely a ‘subject’ for extrication; rather, I am powerfully stitched from the loose ends of my ancestors, traversing to writing with a sense of (re)articulation of my Brownness in it reaching the shore — to imagining another world — one that not only dreams but sustains freedom. I am not, contrary to what whiteness suggests, a Brown man on the verge of terrorizing. Like hooks (2013), “[t]hat woundedness that I was once so ashamed to recognize became for me a place of recovery, the dark depths into which I could enter to find both the source of that pain and the means to heal” (p. 12). Through her work, and that of other feminists, I examine my own body and self, practicing freedom through writing. When patriarchy and sexism dictate that the bodies of men must remain emotionless, I turn to feminists. Feminist theorists pinpoint the importance of emotionality among men (hooks, 2004a; hooks, 2004b). This response stems from the historical ambivalence that men have with their own emotions and that of others (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). Rejecting that, as I

embrace feminist theories that exhume the body, I write with emotionality. I can say with certainty that my body is a poem on fire. It is a body that grapples with “body terrorism” and the self as written in culture and identity. They, the colonizers, tried to extinguish that but the fire turned into something they did not see coming. I did not burn. I turned it into a depth of poetics. In my writing, I bring that flame to light.

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## Rants of a Canadian-Iranian Hijabi

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FATEMEH ANVARI (SHE/HER)

For almost as long as I can remember, I have been wearing the hijab, but throughout my life, the reasons for covering my hair have been different. And I would be lying if I said I have always loved wearing it...

At six years old, starting grade one in Iran, I started wearing it as part of my school uniform, and at the age of nine, as part of my religion. I became attached to it. I was proud to be wearing it. My mom and every other woman I knew were all wearing it, and to me, to cover meant to grow up. It was how I defined my maturity, because I was dressing like all the women I knew. I wore it with love, and not because I felt like I had to, and certainly not because anyone was forcing it upon me.

Such were my feelings until I moved to Canada with my family at 10 years old. Slowly, I started to feel different, alienated. No one was wearing it the same way I was. There were many with hijabs at my school and neighbourhood, but none that wore a chador like I did. The chador is a head-to-toe piece -usually black in colour- and worn on top of the head piece which covers the hair. I did not let being the only girl in a chador get to me, despite once being “humorously” told by a teacher that I looked like a turtle with my backpack under my chador. However, it took a couple of more microaggressions, specifically from boys I went to school with, for me to decide I was done with the chador, at least at school. So, I removed it, while still wearing the hijab. In all honesty, it is not common for girls and women to wear a chador in Canada, and back then, looking “normal” was all I wanted. I had just learned English and was learning how to fit in. I was a kid who did not want to be the odd one out.

Flash forward to moving back to Iran as a 16-year-old: I was no longer in an environment where wearing it was weird. I was now around many people who wore a chador, and no one would mock me for it, but it just was not part of my identity anymore.

It just was not what I felt most comfortable in. So, I started to challenge it, which was not at all easy to do. I was now around a large family of “chadoris”. It would now be odd if I removed it. I would be the odd one out, not to mention a disappointment to my family. So, I kept it on, and took it off sometimes when family were not present- on school trips, for example. I still wore a hijab, but I did not always cover with a chador.

Slowly, though, my parents started to see that I no longer had interest, and despite it being hard for them to have me not wear a chador, they started to accept my occasional removal of it, so long as we weren't around our bigger family. And it wasn't even that they forced me to wear it, but it was expected of me, and it was an unwritten rule that I just followed, so as to not hurt anyone.

I lived in Iran until I was 23, longing to come back to Canada, the country where I could wear what I wanted. When I moved back here, that is exactly what I did. I was free. No one would judge me, no one would expect me to dress a certain way.

As time went by, and I became more aware of the White foundation of Canada and the injustices faced by the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and people of colour, I felt afraid. Afraid that my wearing of a hijab means that I will never belong. That it would be excruciatingly difficult to succeed. So where, I thought, is my home? If Iran isn't quite home although it actually is, and Canada is home, but it actually isn't, then where can I call home? Where do I belong? Which land wants me? I grew up in Canada attending multicultural schools. I saw this country as a safe haven, where I could be me. No one could judge me, and not very many even wanted to. "It's okay", I thought, "at least I am free to be me, and I am safe".

At this time, I also unrelatedly happened to be thinking a lot about what my spirituality meant to me, and whether my current religiosity ultimately led to my spirituality. This exploration is still going on. I want to be the best I can be, and I love God, but I am just not sure if what I had learned all my life about what God wants me to do is actually true.

I started to question my whole belief around the concept of the hijab. I was not sure I believed in it anymore. I had lived twenty some years confident that my wearing a hijab was an act of worship, but I just was not sure anymore. I was not sure that God wanted this from me, and I started to question whether the whole concept has been tampered with by patriarchy. "Maybe", I thought, "it is not expected of me by God, in the current society that I live in, to wear a hijab. What is the necessity? What damage would not wearing it cause anyone?" So, I started to wear it more loosely. I was stuck between not being sure whether this was even an act of worship, and wondering "what if it is?" Too hesitant to take it off and to change such a huge part of my identity, I decided to keep it on, albeit loosely, and see where my life and views take me. To see where God takes me.

I also did not want people to be accepting of me only on the condition that I did not wear a hijab. I wanted to stay strong and wear it, and the good ones would stick around. I would be able to see who the good ones are. If I removed my hijab, I would not be able to tell if people are treating me with respect because I do not wear it, or whether they would still do so regardless of how I was dressed.

On June 6, 2021, in London, Ontario, a Muslim family, three of them women, went out for a walk. They were run over by a pickup truck in an Islamophobic act of terrorism. The first week after the incident was filled with sadness for me; filled with disappointment. I had been let down. Due to my experience with immigration, I am no stranger to identity crises in general. But never had I felt this lost, this powerless, this betrayed. I no longer felt that I could be me. I no longer felt safe. Going for a walk could be fatal now. My hijab could now cost me my life. Should I remove it?

In a class I happened to be taking at the same time, we were discussing leadership. Some of us, including me, were leaders of small groups in our class, and we were asked to express what being a leader in a group has brought us. I had an easy answer ready. I was going to say that being a leader has enabled me to deeply care about the performance of each of my group mates, even though each member is working on their own project individually, and we just provide support in our little groups.

I wanted to mention that being a group leader has taught me to stand with each person and genuinely want them to succeed. That class and its prerequisites have taught me to always think about how I can "be", as a leader, so that those around me live to their own full potential. As I was

polishing my answer in my head and was waiting for my turn to speak, I was hit in the head with a metaphorical rock. I was hit with a realization, and I had a new answer.

I thought about the recent attack, and I started to tear up. When they called my name to speak, I started to talk about the incident, and I broke down for the first time since it happened. Through my tears, I told my coaches and fellow group leaders about what had happened; how I had felt sad, disappointed, afraid. I told them I spent the last week questioning my hijab, and not wanting to look Muslim, so that I could be safe.

I told them that I have been blaming colonization, and rightfully so. The inaccurate representation of Muslims in the media, be it in news or movies, the lack of proper antiracism education in schools, and the scarcity of Muslims, particularly Muslim women, in decision-making roles in Canada, all lead to a twenty-year-old terrorizing a Muslim family while they are on an afternoon walk. I told them that I still believe all of that to be true, but what am 'I' doing? How am 'I' "be"ing?

I believe that marginalized individuals and groups should not be expected to educate those in power and with privilege on their shortcomings. Those with privilege should educate themselves and others and challenge the power structures. And while I believe this should not be an external expectation, does leadership not start with willing to go beyond the self and deeply caring for the education of other humans as well? A leader does not just consider the atrocities of what has happened, but also the possibilities the future holds. A leader sees a future in which change has already happened. A leader sees a transformed future.

What if, I thought, I choose to be a leader? I do not even mean a politician, but a leader in my small circles. What if I can influence one person, just one, and the butterfly effect of my actions can stop one act of terrorism from happening?

Of course, this does not disregard the fact that politicians need to be held accountable, and that systemic change is still needed. But I know and believe that each individual has power. If we did not, then we would never have been marginalized to begin with. So, as a citizen, as a person, I have a role to play. Perhaps wishfully thinking, what if this butterfly effect reaches a powerful politician? It seems far-fetched, does it not? However, a leader believes in the possibility of such huge change. A leader does not base their actions and words on what has thus far been possible, but on a future no one has yet experienced. A future in which people and systems are transformed. For the better.

So, what if, despite all the fear, uncertainty, and difficulty that wearing a hijab in the West may bring, I still wear my hijab? Maybe then, my hijab is an act of resilience, not an act of worship in and of itself. And that very resilience is my worship.

So, as a Muslim, and as a citizen of this world and of this country, am I resisting the rhetoric that has pushed me to the margins of society, or do I simply believe that I am powerless?

So, I ask myself: How do I choose to "be"? Do I choose to continue to be marginalized, or do I choose to speak up? Do I choose to be a leader, or do I go the route of being a follower?

The answer, to me, is clear. I choose to see a transformed future. I choose to be a leader; however small the scale may be.

Today, I choose to wear my hijab proudly. Not because of modesty, but because I deliberately choose to show that I am not oppressed, and certainly not powerless.

Every time I step out of my house with my hijab on, wearing one of the many colours of hijabs that hang in my closet, it means I am not scared. I will not hide. I will not allow others to define me. I will not allow anyone to take away my identity.

And I promise myself this: If one day, I choose to remove my hijab, it will certainly not be out of fear. It will not be to conceal my identity.

The path ahead is not without big and small bumps along the way. But I firmly believe that “surely, with hardship comes ease” (Quran, 94:5). Ease comes not just after hardship, but even with it, hand in hand. At first glance, some might think this means to sit back and accept the pain and pretend it does not exist. However, this is not the case. It means to be resilient. To “be” as you are, to exist as you do, however difficult that might be. The ease is the change you bring to this world. And, without a doubt, someone out there will take it and radiate it.

So, I choose to be strong. To be resilient, to stand tall, and to exist.