



Article

The Hijab Project: Troubling Conceptions of Agency and Piety through Community-Engaged Art Making

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Abstract: This article focuses on *The Hijab Project*, a collective art exhibit that was created by a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) collective to address assumptions about Muslim women and girls who veil. The art project used data from a survey collect at Mount Top High, a suburban public high school in Utah, to inform the need for a public intervention that addressed issues of Islamophobia during a time of contentious political climate in the United States. Using transnational feminism to think about concepts of agency and piety, the article contends that, despite traditional framing of Muslim women as passive victims, through their artwork, the girls in this research group prove that religiosity and choice are not dichotomous. Lastly, this piece argues that *The Hijab Project* represents a successful example of critical community-engaged scholarship by demonstrating that partnerships between community members and universities can be a force for civic engagement and social change.

Keywords: Islamophobia; minoritized youth; education



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“All the negative stereotypes that have been placed on the hijab, as well as Muslim women are truly sad, but the hijab has made me nothing but stronger.” Tabarek, 17 years old

1. Introduction

Tabarek, the author of the epigraph that opens this article, was one of the founding members of the research collective *Al Ahad*¹; her writing was prominently displayed below her artistic interpretation of her relationship with the hijab. In the piece, the artist uses soft colors like pink, blue, and gold to create a fine image that transmits peace and harmony to the audience. The colors work in tandem with delicate details, such as fabric flowers and ribboned pom-poms, that frame the wearer in an almost crown-liked manner. The piece (Figure 1) along with eight others were displayed at *The Hijab Project*, a collective exhibition that used textile art to interrogate Western understandings of the Muslim veil and the women and girls that wear them at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art (UMOCA). *The Hijab Project* was the culmination of a 9-month Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) project conducted at Mount Top High² a primarily Caucasian school in the suburbs of Salt Lake City (Utah) during the 2016–2017 academic year, which sought to understand how Islamophobia was materialized in the everyday experiences of Muslims girls in a public high school. *Al Ahad* was a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) collective formed by five Muslim high-school aged girls from refugee and immigrant backgrounds and me, a Latina graduate student at the time. The five girls who participated in this project are Amina,³ Iqra, Kadi, Shams, and Tabarek⁴ (in alphabetical order). Amina, Shams, and Tabarek were juniors when this research was being conducted and Iqra and Kadi were sophomores at the time. Prior to starting this project, I worked with all of the girls but Shams in an afterschool setting. I have written about my relationship with the girls elsewhere (Lac et al. 2021), but in this paper it is important to highlight that I knew the girls prior to the project and continued to have a relationship with them after the project was over.



Figure 1. Tabarek's piece at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art.

Using data from a survey conducted with 134 students at Mount Top High, as well as the artists' statements and pieces displayed at UMOCA, this article uses a transnational feminist lens to think about agency (Mohanty 1988), piety, and tenets of critical community-engaged scholarship (Gordon da Cruz 2017) to analyze the ways in which the girls in the research collective spoke back to assumptions made about them in and out of school. The research coincided with the 2016 presidential election, a period of heightened xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment (Khan et al. 2019), and while we did not set out to explicitly look how non-Muslim students, teachers, and school staff perceived the hijab—the headcover worn by all of the Muslim members of our group—it soon became the main focus of our project. During the length of the project, our conversations kept coming back to the fact that, as Muslim girls who veil, the members of *Al Ahad*, were often singled out in classes and other educational spaces as the embodiment of and spokesperson for all-things remotely connected to Islam. While the young members of the research collective had first-hand experiences with individual students' perceptions of the hijab, they were curious to see how the student body as a whole understood the Muslim veil. With the survey results in hands, the girls were inspired to speak back not only to their peers, who had so many misguided ideas about who they were, but to the larger society that often magnified these erroneous assumptions.

The combination of academic-level research that is community driven and knowledge production that is not solely centered around scholar circles makes this project a strong example of what is possible when critical community-engaged scholarship is successful. Critical community-engaged scholarship is an offshoot of the more traditional field of community-engaged scholarship that focuses on "partnerships between universities and communities that collaboratively develop and apply knowledge to address public issues" (Gordon da Cruz 2017, p. 363). In explicitly adding the word "critical" in her definition, Gordon da Cruz (2017) highlights the necessity of recognizing that university–community partnerships need to do more than only "public good", to actually address the issues of power and privilege that move us towards a more socially just society. This need also aligns with feminist values that ask scholar-activists to continually bring matters of "self-reflectivity and analysis of power" (Costa and Leong 2012, p. 173) to the forefront of any work conducted alongside communities. In surveying the literature on community engagement, Gordon da Cruz (2017) highlighted six core tenets that guide the work. When thinking about the contributions of *The Hijab Project* as a piece of critical community-engaged scholarship, I focus particularly on three tenets that ask this work to be based in real-life problems as defined by the community, grounded in scholarly theory and methods, and that produces results that are beneficial to all involved. A larger discussion around these tenets in relation to the exhibit is introduced in a forthcoming section of this paper.

Before delving into the project and discussion, however, I want to briefly define two other terms that are important for the understanding of the arguments put forth in this paper. The first term is racialization, and though it only appears marginally in this article, it is important to recognize its importance in the field of immigrant and Muslim studies. Racialization is defined in the literature as the process by which individuals are othered based on a perceived unassimilable difference (Gans 2017). Scholars in the field of ethnic studies argue that certain concepts, such as race and ethnicity, are most often understood as static and are connected to specific ideas, such as biology and country of origin (Gans 2017; Kubota and Lin 2006; Omi and Winant 2014). However, these scholars also recognize that, in everyday lived experiences, the ways racial and ethnic belonging are perceived by society and how this perception affects the lives of individuals varies through time. Therefore, some scholars choose to talk about racialization (a process) rather than race (a category) to account for the constant web and flow of racial boundaries in American society. This conversation is particularly important when talking about Muslim Americans. Since 9/11, Muslim Americans in general and Arab Americans (who are not all Muslim, but are considered Caucasian by the U.S. Census Bureau) in particular have systemically become the target of violence and persecution. Elsewhere, I present a more in-depth discussion (Antunes Forthcoming) of how Muslim identities are racialized in post-9/11 America; however, in this paper I want to highlight that the racialization of Muslim Americans is often gendered, with Muslim women who veil receiving the brunt of hate and violence due to the hypervisibility of their hijab.

The second concept I want to define in this section is the concept of agency. Transnational and decolonial feminist theorists have called attention to the fact that, even though women's agency, that is, their capacity to act against oppression, has been the focal point of feminist theorizing for many years, the term is often defined through Caucasian and Western lenses (Hirschmann 1998). Transnational and decolonial strands of feminist theory work counter this generalizing ideology to create "an analytical and a political project that goes beyond unpacking gender ideology to confronting far-reaching relations of domination spanning but not limited to political, economic, and cultural spheres" (Chowdhury 2016, p. 164) that remind us that certain issues, such as gender and race, are heightened by nation-state boundaries and transnational relationships (Falcón and Nash 2015; Rankin 2011; Wang 2016). Furthermore, transnational and decolonial feminists argue that understandings of oppression and what constitutes "action" against said oppression are often understood through the same lens of Caucasian Western womanhood, which then is framed as the universal measure of "women's liberation". This push back against ideas of universal understandings of agency asks us to historicize experiences. Context allows feminism to not become a set of rules by which all women around the world have to live, but a relational tool that builds bridges across differences. The discussion about how the concept of agency, as defined traditionally, is seemingly incongruous with religiosity and places Muslim women within a frame of passivity and victimhood is the focus on the next section. The ideas developed there are the context for the remainder of the of the article. After presenting a brief overview of how the veil has been perceived in the West, I use survey data to demonstrate how these understandings are present at Mount Top High. These sections create a picture of the environments in which the girls of *Al Ahad* live and study every day and serve to highlight the need for a critical community intervention that is developed through *The Hijab Project*.

2. The Muslim Veil and Agency: A Transnational Feminist Perspective

While most people associate the veil with Islam, the tradition of covering has existed in the areas where Islam grew hundreds of years prior to the birth of the religion. "Historically, veiling—especially when accompanied by seclusion—[was] a sign of status that was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iran and Byzantine Empire" (Hoodfar 2003, p. 6). Therefore, despite what is commonly assumed, the regional costume of veiling was incorporated into religious practice and not the other way around.

In fact, many scholars argue that there is nothing in the Holy *Qur'an* that forces women to veil (Al-Saji 2010; Hajjaji-Jarrah 2003; Hoodfar 2003; Mernissi 1987, 1991). Feminist Muslim scholar, Fatima Mernissi (1991), argues that different sects of Islam interpret and use the hijab differently, highlighting that in the Sufi tradition veiling is understood as the metaphorical cover that separates the faithful from God's true consciousness.

Bullock (2010) furthers that perspective by arguing that the adoption of the veil as a widespread costume was a direct reaction of the population of Muslim-majority areas to European occupation. It was during the dissemination of colonialism that the usage of veil ceased to be something only rich women did and became a widespread cultural practice, especially after the 1798 French invasion of Egypt. Wearing the veil became a way to assert ethnic identity and to gain protection against the hungry eyes of colonizers. For the French occupying the Maghreb region, for instance, the veiled Arab woman was both seen as hypersexualized vis à vis the idea of the harem, and out of reach as they could not be seen by French men (Scott 2009). The head covering was perceived as a form of teasing the sexual desires of European men, who used the veiled woman as a metaphor for the conquered territory; once colonizers were able to unveil the women, they would have total control of the land and therefore be able to civilize their people. Additionally, scholars argue that the veil became a marker of ethnic and religious identity to the women who wore it because of the writings of European scholars (Cannon 2006; David 1996; Majeed 1992) and travel writers (Clark 1999; Lewis 2004; Mills 1993).

The idea of the veil as the symbol that separates the "civilized" from the "barbaric" still exists today. As Joan Scott (2009) expertly puts, since colonial times, the veil has been reduced to "a symbol of the irreducible difference and thus the unassimilability of Islam" (Scott 2009, p. 45), a marker that separates "us" (the civilized) from them (the uncivilized). Furthermore, she argues that in contemporary times the refusal of Muslim women to unveil and give in to Western clothing and costumes highlights the assumed barbarism of the culture, one that brainwashes people into accepting their own submission. The connection between the veil and submission is ubiquitous in every aspect of contemporary Western life; it has been used in the media (Sensoy 2010), in literature (Abu-Lughod 2013), and as reasoning for starting wars (Bush 2001) and passing legislation (Chakraborti and Zempi 2013). The idea of the veil as an oppressive force has become so pervasive that it is not only present in the West, but also in Muslim majority areas. Scholars argue that in Indonesia, the country with the biggest Muslim population in the world (Diamant 2019), the rise of women veiling is seen by some as a turn to extremism (Brenner 2011; Jones 2010). In a country such as Indonesia, where economic and political interests require alignment with Western nation-states, open displays of Muslimness are seen as a rejection of modernity. However, contemporary understandings of the Muslim veil that unilaterally associate the practice with forced religiosity and a rejection of modernity fail to take into consideration the agency of the women who wear them. For example, in her study with Muslim women who chose to veil in Indonesia, Smith-Hefner (2007) argues that contrary to what is disseminated in the mainstream media, the Javanese women who chose to veil do not see it as a return to traditionalism, but rather as a way to increase participation in public life while following religious beliefs. Instead of feeling surveilled and constricted, the women in this particular study see the hijab as a bridge that allows them to connect all aspects of their lives without any sacrifice. The example of the Javanese women in Smith-Hefner's (2007) study emphasizes the need to contextualize our understanding of agency, and recognize it is not a universal concept that should be defined in relation to a myriad of aspect that frames one's reality.

When talking about ideas of relationality, Arturo Escobar (2008) argues that the term is defined as one's ability to imagine life differently, that is, to recognize that there is not one correct way to live (p. 5). Relationality asks us to consider women's oppression and the tools they use to fight against it not as a "one size fits all" approach, but rather as realities embedded in specific national, religious, and cultural contexts (among others) that can only be fully understood by those within. Escobar's perspective directly connects

with transnational feminist theory in that it moves away from global feminism perspectives and recognizes the importance of historicizing ideas, such as freedom and agency (Vanner 2019). Additionally, Sylvanna Falcón (2016) demonstrates that when we examine women's issues through a relational lens, it allows us to move away from simplistic binary understandings of reality towards a more nuanced perspective, based on co-construction and connectivity. As it relates to this particular project, the Caucasian Western perspective of global feminism sees women's religious belonging as incongruous with agency (Koegeler-Abdi 2017); however, through the more nuanced definition of agency found in transnational and decolonial feminisms, we can recognize that "Muslim women are agentive in ways that differ from conventional Western notions of agency" (Rinaldo 2014, p. 825). In the case of the literature reviewed above, agency becomes not about individual action, but about embracing collective identity to achieve one's goals. Therefore, any conversation about the act of veiling that does not include voices of Muslim women and girls and that do not include discussions about choice and agency continue to disseminate antiquated stereotypes that are a detriment to social justice efforts that seek to eradicate discrimination against Muslim youth in the West (Boland 2021). Similar to how women and girls in the *Ummah*⁵ have embraced their religious identity as a way to self-actualize and assert agency, *The Hijab Project* demonstrates how the Muslim girls in *Al Ahad* define themselves in their own terms.

3. Perceptions of the Hijab at Mount Top High

As a research group, we agreed that it was important to understand students' perceptions of Muslims in order to better comprehend what was happening at the school. The young women had already had bad experiences with some of their peers at the school: (1) they had been called terrorists in their classrooms; (2) been harassed by peers on the streets who yell *Allahu Akbar*;⁶ (3) told to leave the United States; and (4) asked if they had plans to kill the student sitting at the computer next to them in class. Even seemingly harmless interactions, such as asking the young women if they "shower with the hijab", "have hair under it", or if they "had cancer", add up to creating a somewhat hostile environment at school. We wondered: do the majority of students agree with the outspoken few that had already shared their anti-Muslim sentiments with them or was it only the few students they had encountered who had these bad sentiments? In order to find out the answer, we developed a questionnaire that was distributed to Mount Top students during lunch time.

The questionnaire distributed at Mount Top High School addressed perceptions of Muslims in two different ways. The first set of question consisted of three YES or NO questions that sought to measure students' interactions with Muslim students at the school as well as their perceptions around diversity and inclusion in the school; the second set, which consisted of a pair of write-in answers about Islam and the hijab, helped us explore how Muslim women are perceived at the school. Similar assumptions about Muslim women that viewed them as passive were present at Mount Top High. As we looked through the survey responses, the post-it notes, and the colorful poster boards, a pair of words kept coming up in the answers to the questions about the hijab: very religious. The words caught my attention because, conducting research on a school where most students attend the Latter-Day Saints Religious Institute classes during the school day, I assumed most students would describe themselves as "very religious". However, in the context of the hijab, these words felt different. Transnational feminist scholars (Bhaumik 2017; MacDonald 2019; Miled 2020; Mohanty 1988) have argued that the Muslim veil in Western societies becomes a marker of subjugation and the impossibility of assimilation. When reading the survey responses, I felt these words were being used to mark this difference. So, I asked the girls how they felt about it. "When people say you are very religious, do you think they mean it as a good thing or a bad thing?" I asked. Shams,⁷ a 17-year-old girl originally from Iraq, answered: "I feel like it's a bad thing". Soon, Tabarek, also 17 and from Iraq, followed. "They think we are strict. We don't do anything, they think that we don't have fun, that we exclude ourselves from everyone, that we don't do the things that they

do". As Tabarek finished her sentence, Shams cut right in, "yeah, like we are not normal". Even though they had not yet read transnational feminist theory at that point in time, the girls had experienced what the theory is describing; that religiosity, when connected to Muslimness, is perceived negatively.

The overwhelming majority of the answers to the question about the hijab mentioned religiosity and piety in some shape or form. In fact, 61% of the answers framed the hijab in the context of extreme religiosity. Our understanding of these answers were shaped by the location of our research, as Utah is a very religious state. Salt Lake City is the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormon Church. While only half of the population of Salt Lake County are members of the LDS church (Canham 2017), Mount Top is wedged between two suburban cities in the county with 62% of their population describing themselves as active members of the LDS church (Sperling's Best Place n.d.). The culture of Utah is in part molded on the culture of the Mormon Church and its outward commitment to religious freedom. Therefore, there is an assumption that practicing Muslims would feel more welcomed in an environment such as this because the local culture is more receptive to open displays of religiosity.

However, we found that at Mount Top High, Muslim piety or open displays of religiosity are not perceived in the same way that Christian forms of religiosity are. Religion is very important in this state. In fact, the Pew Research Institute affirms that 83% of Mormons in Salt Lake County attend religious service regularly and 81% of them consider religion to be a very important aspect of their lives (Pew Research Center 2017). However, when we explored the meanings behind assumptions of piety, we noticed that, as it relates to Muslims, it was not perceived in a positive light. Instead of being admired or seen as a characteristic that made Mormon students relate to their Muslim peers, the idea of extreme religiosity was used to "other" the young women in the school, to make them different from the rest of the student body. According to the interpretation of Shams and Tabarek, when people talk about them in these terms, they are marking them as discernably different from the norm.

The narrative of religious acceptance in the state is important because, despite its high numbers in Utah, the LDS church's institutional history is constructed around Mormons being religious minorities everywhere: Marlowe (2005) argues that 80% of Mormons live in communities where they are a minority. Furthermore, historically, the Mormon Church has been persecuted in the United States (Kerstetter 1997), and in a Pew Research Institute survey in which seven religious groups were ranked from the most liked to the least liked in the United States, Mormons came in second to last, ahead only of Muslims (Lipka 2017). This history of mistreatment has made religious freedom valuable for members of the LDS faith (Marlowe 2005) and for that reason, several of the church officials have spoken in defense of religious understanding (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Newsroom 2008; Marlowe 2005). Therefore, excluding someone due to their religious beliefs in this community would be frowned upon. However, when religious markers (such as the hijab) become racialized, that is, seen as an intrinsic part of the body it no longer represents a religious identity but a racial one, one can still exclude or discriminate against a Muslim student without having to interrogate how these actions go against the teaching of religious freedom. At Mount Top, the process of racializing Muslim young women allows for the creation of a hierarchy of belonging that functions without subverting the Mormon Church's mandate of religious acceptance. Oppression and backwardness then is disconnected from religiosity and connected to the body. Lastly, the disentanglement of a Muslim identity from a religious identity also helps to explain national belonging. Even though Mormon religious identity is perceived as being completely different from that of other Christians, Mormons are still part of the nation-state narrative because freedom of religion is a right granted to all Americans by the constitution. However, when the conversation around Muslims shifts from religion to race, those rights shift as well.

4. The Hijab Project as Critical Community Scholarship

The Hijab Project was born out of the analysis of the data collected at the school and the need to educate others, on the girls' terms, about the significance of wearing the hijab. The project to address "real-life social problems [...] defined with or by the community" (Gordon da Cruz 2017, p. 366) and followed in the footsteps of other movement building and organization that use textile art as a feminist means of constructing counter narratives for hundreds of years. From abolitionist sewing circles in which quilt patterns were used as maps for the underground railroad (Bratich and Brush 2011), to the reappropriation of knitting by third-wave feminists as a mean to reclaim femininity as a feminist endeavor (Groeneveld 2010), women have been using textile technology as a form of community building and organization for centuries. In these circumstances, textile art has been used as a form of collective activism that "reflects a democratic paradigm, eliciting multiple viewpoints that challenge the dominant discourse" (Frostig 2011). The idea for the project came from the girls' ventures on Instagram, a photo-based social media network. In one of our meetings, Amina and Kadi were looking at the pictures of a Muslim clothing company they both follow. They commented on how beautiful and different all the hijabs were and how each model had styled theirs differently. From there, we had a conversation about people's expectations about women in hijabs. Kadi voiced her dissatisfaction about people monitoring the way she dresses: "People are always surprised when they see me wearing a hat [on top of my hijab], they always say I didn't know you could wear a hat. I'm like, ok . . . ". The conversation then steered to us talking about how Iqra always wears beautiful floral printed scarves, how Amina likes black hijabs, and how Tabarek's little sister always styles hers with a cute headband. Despite the diversity in styles, tastes, personalities, and cultural background, they argued that people saw them all as one and the same. From this conversation, an idea was born.

In the Spring of 2017, we organized a hijab-making workshop, which sought to use the veil as a canvas for artwork and individual expression. The young women invited family and friends to participate by creating a hijab and to write a brief artist statement to accompany each piece. Originally slated to be displayed at the UMOCA from 21 July 2017 to 20 November 2017, the exhibit was extended for 2 more months due to its success. The exhibit consisted of nine foam mannequin heads painted in bright colors. The heads were purposefully painted in unique ways to represent the diversity that exists within the Muslim community. The artists painted the heads and styled the hijabs to reflect their own personal styles, with some opting for a simpler visual representation while others ornated theirs with multiple colors and details that resemble make-up. The two scarves hanging from the wall were designed by two Muslim girls who do not veil. The black scarf is painted with a star pattern in different colors and on top has the text that says "Shoot for the Stars" (Figure 2). On the side of each hijab, there is an artist statement about what the hijab means to each of them.



Figure 2. An overview of *The Hijab Project* at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art.

Not only did the exhibit create space for Muslim girls who veil to talk openly and honestly about their relationship with their faith, but it also allowed for those who manifest that faith differently (not wearing a hijab) to speak out as well. Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush use the term “fabriculture” (Bratich and Brush 2011, p. 234) as a way to describe how textile art and crafts are used by women as a collective way to “understan[d] current political possibilities” (Bratich and Brush 2011, p. 234). As argued above, the hijab has been used as a political tool in the West for hundreds of years. In being able to create art to address the ways in which their bodies are understood in the West, the girls are enacting “critical pious consciousness” (Rinaldo 2014), which is defined by women’s participation in politicized discussions about religious texts. While the hijab is not a literal religious text, it acts as a text to the outward society, who read Muslimness and piousness in the presence hijab. Collectively, all of the parts of the exhibit (the textile art and artist statement) build on the idea of critical pious agency (Rinaldo 2014) because, in creating this work of art for public consumption, the girls claimed space in the public conversation about the significance of the hijab in their own lives. *The Hijab Project*, therefore, works as an “act of feminist writing” (Koegeler-Abdi 2017, p. 9) by which the artists use a politicized canvas to define themselves and reaffirm their agency in a society that sees them as trapped victims of their religion. By claiming the right to tell their own stories, these Muslim girls make a powerful statement about being agents of change. In connection with the objects, the written document provided space for the artists to take charge of the narrative surrounding Muslim womanhood, telling their stories on their own terms. Statements such as “I am not oppressed! [. . .] Give it a rest! The hijab is my identity!”; and “[the hijab] is my crown and my decision. When I wear it, I feel confident and I stand out” demonstrated to the audience that the girls’ relationship with her hijab is personal and diverse: a departure from the mainstream narrative surrounding the topic.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Muslim young women who do not veil in the exhibit served to dispel the idea that there is a chasm between “secular” Muslims (those who relegate religious practice to private spaces) and the “pious” ones (those who make their faith public). The space in the museum was used to raise up the voices of other women and girls in their community. In doing that, they also allowed for voices different from theirs to come out; they invited Muslim women who do not veil to share their thoughts on the hijab. For example, Sahar, a 16-year-old girl who does not veil, wrote: “I love the hijab and one day I will definitely wear it [. . .] I am so proud to be a Muslim and one day, I will wear a hijab.” In including those who may have different understandings of their shared religion, the young women showed that solidarity and friendship does not have to be limited by imaginary boundaries and rules.

It is important to highlight that, as an adult working with girls, at no point did I see *The Hijab Project* as a tool to “give voice” to young people. As many scholars have argued, the discourse around “giving voice” is problematic because it assumes that people did not have things to say before (Spivak 1988). However, the project did give tools for the girls to speak up about issues surrounding Islamophobia in their everyday life. For example, Tabarek describes this process as follows:

“[b]eing in this group helped me find my voice, I used to be afraid to speak up for what is wrong and just hope that maybe someone out there will say something, or more really speak up for me. Because I was afraid to have an opinion, due to all the hate I thought I was expected to be okay with everything that is going on, because it became something that we are used to, sadly. But I’ve learnt that, NO you stand up for what you believe in. You have your voice heard. Yes, there will be people that will disagree with you, and will even maybe disrespect you because you spoke your mind and it offends them in a way. But that is okay, I found a way to be okay with that”.

As Tabarek describes above, she has always known that Islamophobia was present in her life, and she knew it impacted her in a big way, but she did not have the tools to address it and did not know what to do when explicit acts of Islamophobia happened to

her or to her Muslim friends. She knew something needed to be done, she just needed to figure out how to say how she felt aloud. Similarly, Kadi argues that the project gave her lifelong tools that will help her to navigate the anti-Muslim sentiment that she will certainly encounter. Finally, she affirmed that she is “never going to forget this until the day I die. I’m gonna tell my kids, and they are going to tell their grandkids [about the project]”. Individually, the five girls that made the core group of *Al Ahad* had experienced issues with Islamophobia. However, they had never talked about it openly with each other. Having the space to talk about their similar (and also different) experiences with Islamophobia created a sense of community and strength as they began to support each other, walking together from school or speaking with teachers after class in pairs to make sure there was always a witness to any potential act of microaggression.

The Hijab Project worked as a relational bridge because it placed the voice of Muslim girls and women at the front and center of the exhibit and invited the audience to move away from a binary understanding of Muslim girlhood and towards a complex understanding of how the artists negotiate gender, religion, and race in their everyday lives. Audiences gained a perspective through the project that is different from what they usually see in other spaces. Furthermore, the art exhibit provided space for the young artists to put themselves into the world as agentic actors, that is, as individuals who are responsible and in charge of their decisions. Koegeler-Abdi (2017) affirms that, when we look at agency as bounded by secular ideas only, we risk reducing “Muslim women to being either escapees or pawns of their own culture” (p. 13). Nevertheless, the girls demonstrated through their art that agency and religion do not have to be oppositional. On the contrary, as the data shows, the artists of *The Hijab Project* are aware of the way others perceive them and actively construct their “selves” in conjunction to their religious identities.

5. Conclusions

Audre Lorde (2012) expertly addresses the issue of diversity education, arguing that individuals who are minoritized are often given the role of teaching others about their oppression and difference, excusing mainstream communities from having to do the work of learning. Critical community-engaged scholarship provides one way to shift this burden from marginalized communities. Through the critical intervention designed to address the problematic perception of Muslim women and girl who veil, *The Hijab Project* functioned as “social mirrors, scientific instruments designed to reflect back lived realities that were being denied by dominant ideologies and ‘official definitions’” (Torre et al. 2012, p. 174). Once *The Hijab Project* exhibition was up for display, the young Muslim women’s ideas were open for non-Muslims to interpret and to learn from, and the burden of work was on their side. Non-Muslims were expected to do the work of interpreting and learning while engaging with the exhibition. While art is subjective and can be interpreted in innumerable ways, the young women made sure that their words on what the hijab meant to them were front and center: next to each piece, there was a brief quote that explained the artist’s relationship with the hijab they made. Evidently, no one can control the reception of their work; audience members could choose to not take the young women’s words at face value, but they could not ignore them. The positioning of the exhibition as a social mirror highlights the tenets of critical community-engaged scholarship that center the resolution of real-life problems through an academic-level community driven approach.

Furthermore, the project actively sought to disrupt issues of power and privilege by centering the voices that are often marginalized as experts. While Muslim girls are often denied agentic identities, the members of *Al Ahad* made a conscious choice of how they wanted to engage with the larger discourse about the hijab circulating in their community. Housing the exhibit at the museum gave these Muslim young women opportunities to talk back to Islamophobia without the fear of direct backlash that they would perhaps receive in school. Throughout the academic school year, the young women became disillusioned with their interactions with school administrators. While they had in the past been received with open arms in the principal’s office, and their issues and concerns were listened to, their

complaints and concerns were never really resolved. The inaction of adults in the school coupled with the young women feeling they needed to defend Islam and Muslims to their teachers and often their peers was exhausting for them. The young women have always known that their truths are not up for debate and they refused to try to prove they had Islamophobic experiences. The museum exhibit gave them the possibility to speak truth to power without having to deal with debates, counter-arguments and devil's advocates. The choice of putting their experiences front and center without allowing others to question their validity asserted the girls' agency and disrupted what traditional understandings of what constitutes action against oppression. Instead of adhering to mainstream readings of the hijab as a symbol of submission, they used it to assert their religious identity and self-actualize.

Lastly, I want to highlight the ways in which this project fulfills another tenet of critical community-engaged scholarship by providing benefits not only to the community at large (access to and learning from the exhibit) and the university, but most importantly to the young women who formed the research collective. Throughout the rest of their high school career, all five of the young women have continued to talk about Islamophobia and how it affects the lives of the Muslim American youth in their school. The continuation of the young women's work around Islamophobia is important because it underscores the consequences of engaging young people in conversations that matter to them: once they recognize the importance of their own voice, and see their power in action, they persevere as agents of social transformation. Once these voices are brought forth, they cannot be silenced.

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Notes

- ¹ In Arabic, the word means indivisible and is one of the 99 ways used to describe G*d in the *Qur'an*, the Muslim holy text.
- ² The name of the school was changed to preserve the anonymity of the survey participants and school staff.
- ³ The members of *Al Ahad* chose to use their real first name in all the activities of and writings about the research group.
- ⁴ Amina's family is from Bosnia; Tabarek and Shams were both born in Iraq; Iqra was born in Kenya to Somali parents; and Kadi was born in the Ivory Coast to Malian parents.
- ⁵ The word in Arabic is used to describe the unity of the global Muslim community.
- ⁶ In Arabic, God is great. Khoja-Moolji (2016) argues that the sentence is used in fiction as the last sentence Muslim terrorists utter before killing innocents. Therefore, when students say it, they are implicitly calling those at the receiving end terrorists.
- ⁷ While the name of the school was changed to protect the identity of peers and teachers, the girls of *Al Ahad* chose to use their real names in the project.

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