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Nurjehan Aziz, editor. *The Relevance of Islamic Identity in Canada: Culture, Politics, and Self*. Mawenzi, 2015. Pp. viii, 224. CAD\$24.95.

Nurjehan Aziz's edited collection of essays explores, as the title indicates, the relevance of Islamic identity in Canada. Most of the chapters reflect on how Canadian society's largely negative construction of Muslim identity impacts the contributing authors' sense of identity. The authors discuss either their personal or the Muslim community's experiences, often unpleasant, of having others pin a "Muslim" identity on them at the expense of their own sense of self. The opening chapter, "An Incompetent Muslim" by Safia Fazlul, recounts a story in which Fazlul's co-workers' reactions to her change markedly

after they discover she is Muslim: “Suddenly I wasn’t invited as frequently to after-work get-togethers and I was made fun of in a negative connotation [sic]” (7). She writes: “Ever since 9/11, I find I’ve been questioned more about being a Muslim than ever before. Many of the non-Muslim Canadians who question me seem to feel entitled to my opinion about Islam and terrorism, as though I owe them an explanation for choosing a faith that is inherently ‘evil,’ ‘violent,’ and ‘un-Canadian’” (6). Her story is echoed in nearly every subsequent chapter, pointing to serious but under-discussed problems in Canada’s multicultural society.

Bringing such voices to a general reading public, then, is an essential contribution to the Canadian literary landscape. Along with a preface by Aziz, the book contains eleven chapters and reflects on questions such as “What does it mean to be a Muslim? Is it a public or private identity, and as an identity does it make sense in a secular democracy such as Canada? What relation does it bear to historical, cultural, and ethnic identities? Is a total agnostic or an atheist a Muslim? Is a person who disavows being a Muslim still a Muslim?” (Aziz vii). The collection attempts to explore such questions through the narratives of Canadian Muslims.

Four chapters are personal reflections: Fazlul’s “An Incompetent Muslim,” Ameen Merchant’s “Identity Fragments,” Asma Syed’s “Who I Really Am: Communicating Islam Across Generations,” and Mayank Bhatt’s “Married to a Believer.” Five chapters explore aspects of Muslim Canadian life from an intellectual perspective: Narendra Pachkhédé’s “Mosques and the Making of Muslim Identity,” which looks at the impact of mosques on urban space; Haroon Siddiqui’s “Anti-Muslim Bigotry Goes Official—Canada’s Newest Dark Chapter,” which examines Islamophobia in Canadian politics during Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s time in government; Karim H Karim’s “Speaking to a Post-Secular Society: The Aga Khan’s Public Discourse,” which highlights how the Aga Khan has been able to use faith-based discourse effectively in the secular public arena; Zainub Verjee’s “The Performing Identities of Muslims,” which explores how a Muslim festival of arts and culture in a public city space can offer an alternative and “dissenting narrative” (140) to the Islamophobic narratives explored by other contributors; and Ihsaan Gardee and Amira El-Ghawaby’s “The Framing of Canadian Muslims,” which takes another look at Islamophobia in Canada during the Harper years. Finally, Monia Mazigh’s “Reexamining Relations Between Men and Women” and Mohamed Abualy Alibhai’s “The Future of Islam in North America” suggest reforms to Qur’anic interpretation that they believe will lead to more “viable” and “acceptable” (Mazigh 30) ways of life for Muslims in the twenty-first century. Their chapters explore radical interpretations of

the Qur'an that they propose are more suitable for a twenty-first-century Canadian context. Such diversity in voices and perspectives is both a strength and a weakness of the book. The dominant cultural narrative about what it means to be a Muslim in Canada is impacted by a distinct power imbalance: those who control the narrative tend to be white, non-Muslim Canadians. Thus, having many different Muslim voices comment on, argue for, and describe their views or academic perspectives is a necessary corrective to the monolithic narrative that Muslims are backward/terrorists/un-Canadian. For this, Aziz's book is a must.

However, the mix of personal, scholarly, and reformist approaches, which move from individual experience to academic discourse and back again, provides an uneven collection of narratives. Compiling a volume that uses only one approach or the other may have been more effective because some readers are attracted to personal narratives and not everyone is interested in academic discourse.

Finally, a major concern is that the book may, paradoxically, help solidify the dominant narrative singled out as so troubling by the contributors. Obviously, given the degree of sectarian and ethnic differences in Canadian Muslim communities, not to mention individuality of faith-expression (nearly a million different points of view), a single text cannot bring to light every voice. Yet the book is biased toward avant-garde perspectives: three of the four personal essays are written by authors who identify as agnostic/atheist/secular Muslims (and don't pray or fast), thus challenging the traditional view of a Muslim as someone who believes in God and/or follows traditional practices like prayer and fasting, and the two reformist essays are based outside tradition. Indeed, the last essay, "The Future of Islam in North America," makes the astonishing argument that Muslims should give up the foundational belief that Islam's Holy Book is the word of God and instead think of it as written by Muhammad under divine "inspiration" (Alibhai 181), much as poets describe receiving their verse through inspiration (182). Taken together, this and other chapters suggest, perhaps inadvertently, that unless Muslims abandon their faith-based traditions, they cannot truly be integrated as citizens in a secular liberal democracy. This implication could have been avoided with the inclusion of a chapter or two by authors who are grounded in tradition, pray, fast, and believe that the Qur'an is the word of God yet are working on reforms to tradition within the Canadian context. Doing so would showcase the creative and hard work that is also being done by more traditional Muslims to establish the "relevance of Islamic identity in Canada."

Katherine Bullock