Memorializing Aqsa Parvez: Public Feelings and Secular Multiculturalism

Eve Haque
York University

ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDIES JOURNAL
VOLUME 7, NO. 2 Fall 2022, PP. 273–298.

Published by:
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,
Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley

Disclaimer:
Statements of fact and opinion in the articles, notes, perspectives, and so on in the Islamophobia Studies Journal are those of the respective authors and contributors. They are not the expression of the editorial or advisory board and staff. No representation, either expressed or implied, is made of the accuracy of the material in this journal, and ISJ cannot accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made. The reader must make his or her own evaluation of the accuracy and appropriateness of those materials.

DOI:10.13169/islastudj.7.2.0273
In late 2007, Aqsa Parvez, a 16-year-old Canadian high school student in the suburban region of Mississauga of the Greater Toronto Area, was murdered by her brother Waqas, a tow truck driver and her father Mohammed, a refugee who came from Pakistan in 1999 and worked as a taxi driver. Aqsa was the youngest of eight children, most of whom lived together in a multigenerational extended family household. Both her father and brother confessed to the murder, were imprisoned to life in jail in 2010, and in 2017 Mohammed Parvez passed away while still incarcerated.

Aqsa’s life and death continues to be one of the most cited “honor killing” stories in Canada (often cited as Toronto’s “first honor killing”) and was covered extensively, not just locally and nationally but also internationally. This case not only captivated countless days and weeks of headline media attention and analysis but also was taken up in documentary film (Saywell 2010), song (Brooks 2012), countless community panels/events, and also kick-started an industry of academic work, government policy, and legislation, such as the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act (2015) which enshrines the concept of “honor killings” in federal policy and continues to frame most narratives about “honor killings” in Canada into the present.

At a time when anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobic violence are at unprecedented levels domestically (some recent examples include the 2017 Quebec City mosque shooting, the 2021 vehicular murder of the Afzaal family in London, Ontario) and globally (the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque massacre, as well as the ongoing state-sanctioned genocides of Rohingya in Myanmar, the Uyghurs in China, and Muslims in India), “honor killings” are not only proof of Muslim barbarity and therefore explanatory rationales for the demonization of entire groups of people but also serve as the limit case of tolerance in both overtly Islamophobic as well as liberal discourses about Muslims and Islam.

In the domestic context, there is a particular intensity to the limit case of “honor killings” when the Muslims in question are second generation or “homegrown” Canadians, as this throws into sharp relief the crisis of integration that lies at the heart of official state “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework” narrative (Haque 2012). In a previous article on the media coverage of the murder of Aqsa Parvez (Haque 2010), I have argued that it is in these cases that national anxieties about Canada’s global status as a tolerant multicultural exemplar are most pronounced. Therefore, concerns particularly about young “homegrown” Muslim women and their integration into the nation do the work of reaffirming narratives of benevolent and tolerant white settler nationalism; that is, the idea that Canada remains an immigrant nation putatively open to all immigrants, regardless of origin, through the integrative promise of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework (Haque 2012; Mackey 2002; Day 2000).

The demonization of Muslims and the integrative promise of white settler tolerance and benevolence—although seemingly contradictory—comes together across sites including one of particular interest to this paper. This is a site over 120 kilometers south of Toronto and its sprawling suburbs—including Mississauga—in tourist-friendly rural southern Ontario in the town of Pelham with a population of approximately 17,000. Pelham is a small town composed of five small historic villages, in what is mainly a farming area located near the beautiful
and fertile wine country in the heart of the Niagara Peninsula. In this seemingly idyllic town, located at one end of the small town square, called the Peace Park, is a stone memorial bench dedicated to Aqsa Parvez. Driven down to Pelham by a close friend, I went to visit this bench a few years after it was erected in the hope I could figure out how this small town which had no relationship at all with Aqsa or her family could come to have a memorial bench in their main town square to commemorate her life and death.

In this endeavor, this paper will explore how multiculturalism and secularism were mobilized in this commemorative project to erect a memorial bench to Aqsa in this small southern Ontario town of Pelham located so far away from where Aqsa lived and died. In the pursuit and execution of this project, Aqsa as a young Muslim victim of an “honor killing” was the limit case of white settler multiculturalism which prompted an outpouring of public feeling in the search for an appropriate memorial across a range of sites from domestic to international. I want to argue that, as this commemorative project unfolded, gendered Islamophobia became entangled with secularized multiculturalism in a redemptive mission of integration to affirm white settler national feelings of tolerance and benevolence. I want to conclude with a few thoughts from my visit to the memorial site and the ethical challenge of writing about memorialization projects.

**FRAMING THE STORY**

If the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-70) marked a post-war repudiation of the Anglo Celtic hegemony of Canadian society since Confederation, then the policy response of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework to the final reports of the commission marked the establishment of the modern Canadian nation state. All this happened in an era where notable changes were happening to Canada’s shift away from overtly discriminatory immigration policy, the introduction of equality rights for women, and the colonial attempts to assimilate and erase Indigenous sovereignty. As I have discussed elsewhere (Haque 2012), even as multiculturalism as official policy (1971) inaugurated an era which acknowledged the settler history of Canada as an immigrant nation, it could only do so by establishing a hierarchy of racial belonging within dual white settler nationalism, where racial others would have recognition through their culture alone while those identified as anglophone and francophone would have a suite of equalized citizenship rights constitutionally guaranteed through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Haque 2012). Thus, citizenship and belonging for racialized others would thereafter be predicated on their relative yet racially attenuated integration into the liberal dual white settler nation.

Into this context, the murder of Aqsa is read nationally as the truncation of her attempt to escape the bonds of her backward religious background and integrate into tolerant Canadian multicultural society; thus, cast narrowly in a “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington 1996) discourse. Samuel Huntington argued that culture and cultural identities are civilizational identities and that in the 21st century a new world order will emerge where the dominant clash will be between “Western” and “Islamic” civilizations, and religion will emerge as the main basis for identification that transcends national boundaries and unites different civilizations (Huntington 1996, 315). In this civilizational discourse the clash between the Islamic and Christian worlds can be traced back to pre-modernity but in the modern world, Christianity is represented as having evolved into a secularized “West” with democratic politics and is currently the most powerful civilization in the world (Huntington 1996), whereas “the prospects for economic and political developments … in the Muslim republics are bleak” (Huntington 1996, 29). In this way, a clear culturally based civilizational divide emerges that marks Muslim culture as ever pre-modern and in opposition to secular and democratic principles.
Talal Asad (2003) has traced the genealogy of secularism to show that “The insistence on a sharp separation between the religious and the secular goes with the paradoxical claim that the latter continually produces the former” (193). Thus, there is no strict separation between religion and the secular; rather, as seen in Western national formations, secularism introduces a hierarchical relationship between religion and the categories of secular liberal society (Asad 2003) such as toleration, assimilation, and integration as barriers to Muslims being accepted and accommodated in the West (Scott and Hirschkind 2006, 10). In her book *Sex and Secularism*, Joan Scott (2018) argues that the idea of gender equality as inherent to the logic of secularism is false and used to justify claims of white, Western, and Christian racial and religious superiority from the past into the present (Scott 2018, 5). This contemporary vision is a deeply Orientalist (Said 1978) one where secularism is identified with Western practices that are contrasted sharply with Islam and gender equality is given as a defining characteristic of this iteration of secularism.

If gender equality in the contemporary Western secular context turns on the question of the culture of the racialized Muslim Other, then white settler multicultural tolerance depends on a fantasy of secular inclusion that purports to accommodate a racially diverse range of cultural and religious practices and traditions. However, as Brenna Bhandar (2009) argues, both multiculturalism and secularism operate together, as “at the core of secularism and multiculturalism there lies the germ of a subject and law formed through a concept of culture that was to a great degree indivisible from religion,” that is, Christianity (Bhandar 2009, 306). Therefore, even as multiculturalism centers difference, it also, like secularism, continually reinscribes a concept of the sovereign subject that is not only autonomous, independent, and rational, but is encumbered by a cultural religious identity that is revealed in moments of being challenged by other, non-Christian modes of being (Bhandar 2009, 307).

In the Canadian context, Aqsa’s murder is a limit case that challenged the ideal of the autonomous, independent, and rational subject who lies at the heart of the secular yet multicultural national fantasy. As Yasmin Jiwani (2014) notes in her analysis of the media coverage of “honor killings”, these young women are portrayed as exceptional to the quotidian domestic violence of white settler society, even as the systemic violences of migration and racism in their lives are overlooked. Rather, the tragic yet singularly valorized framing is that in their endeavor to “become like us” (Jiwani 2014, 30), these young women became victims of a barbaric religious—always racialized—culture, or as Jasmin Zine (2009) has termed it, “death by culture” (152). As I have argued elsewhere (Haque 2010) and as summarized by Dana Olwan (2019), this framing, “relies on its ability to foreclose troubling, discursive, material and historical gaps that have the potential to unsettle rescue visions founded on multicultural integrative myths” (Olwan 2019, 916). Thus, the narrow dominant framing of Aqsa’s murder solely as an “honor killing” secures the integrative fantasy of multiculturalism and is the limit case that also challenges the secular sovereign subjectivity of the dual white settler nation encumbered by a non-Christian religious identity.

Challenges to national secular sovereign subjectivity on the terrain of cultural religious identities most often play out in the public sphere where the sharp separation between the religious and the secular is revealed in hierarchical relation. Lori Beaman (2017), in her analysis of the controversy over the removal and eventual reinstatement of the crucifix from the lobby of the Saint-Sacrement Hospital in Quebec City shows this hierarchical relation in the ensuing public debate and generation of public feeling, concluding that “despite the promise of multiculturalism, Christianity as the majoritarian religion still retains a position of privilege, albeit now under the guise of heritage and culture” (9).

In her book *Memorial Mania* (2010), Erika Doss carefully traces how public feelings about public artifacts or memorials become a source of knowledge about the self, nation, and Other as emotions flow between individuals and their social and physical environment in the
public sphere (15). As one form of public artifact, memorials are bodies of feeling and cultural entities whose social, cultural, and political meanings are determined by the emotional states and needs of their experiencing audiences. As Doss shows, even as personal felt experiences, memorials can generate public feelings through an expanded economy of affect that shapes contemporary understandings of self and nation (52). Thus, memorials, as “enabling agents of national identity” (53) that function within the relational dynamics of physical space and social practice, embody the feelings of particular publics at particular historical moments and frame cultural narratives about self-identity and national purpose (58-9).

Public feelings about secular multicultural nationalism can therefore be constituted through circulating debates about “honor killings” that reach sites geographically, socially, and culturally distant from the place of original violence. In the case of Aqsa’s murder, a density of public feeling emerged initially through media coverage and later through shared blogs asserting that her death had not been appropriately memorialized by her family: therefore, it was incumbent on the benevolence of the national secular sovereign subject to appropriately memorialize her. Although it took a while, public feeling galvanized a handful of strangers in this commemorative project that ultimately resulted in the dedication of a memorial stone bench to Aqsa in the town square of a small town so far away from the place that she had lived and died.

THE MEMORIALIZATION PROJECT

As mentioned above, Aqsa’s murder was covered widely and in grim sensational detail supplemented by pictures culled mainly from her Facebook page. The story played for weeks in local and domestic media, and was covered internationally as far away as the European press, Australian press, and CNN. This extensive media coverage generated widespread public feelings as various related controversies emerged and were publicly debated, particularly around the framing of the case as an “honor killing”. On December 10, 2008, the Toronto Sun published a story by Joe Warmington for the anniversary of Aqsa’s death, titled “Aqsa Parvez rests in a numbered gravesite: Strangled teen dared to be different.” This story focused on the fact that Aqsa’s grave site at the Meadowvale cemetery in Brampton—a suburb of Toronto close to suburban Mississauga where Aqsa’s family lived and she went to high school—remained unmarked. The story focuses on the fact that a numbered plaque in the ground was all the visible physical memorial there was to show she existed; “Section 17, plot number 774, in the Meadowvale Cemetery in Brampton, to be precise. No name, no date of birth, no date of death. No nothing. But resting here is a girl who dared to be Canadian” (para. 1).
Warmington’s story is one where the perceived inadequacy of a memorial generates feelings as knowledge about Aqsa and her relation to the nation as a “girl who dared to be Canadian” (Warmington 2008, para. 2). Foregrounded here is a singular framing of Aqsa’s resistance to her father’s wishes as wanting to “become like us” (Jiwani 2014, 30), confirming her as a victim of a backward religious culture which is in hierarchical relationship to a more desirable multicultural secular nationalism. Although variable in custom, the fact that Islamic graves tend against lavish display in memorialization is completely overlooked in the article’s registration of this as an outrage. As Vanderstraeten (2014, 457) suggests, cemeteries are places where the dead are publicly remembered and thereby remain “open texts” (Meyer 1993, 3) to be read by anyone. In this case, the reading of Aqsa’s numbered plaque by Warmington elides any familial or cultural context and is framed to manufacture an outrage that goes on to generate considerable public feelings. Pelham fire chief Scott McLeod and fellow firefighter Norman Traversy were two people who felt this outrage enough to act on procuring a headstone for Aqsa that they deemed would be an appropriate memorial for her. Traversy was a former Mississauga firefighter who identified his emotional attachment to the memorialization project as coming from the fact that he had given talks about fire safety at Aqsa’s school and had “three daughters in the same age range” as Aqsa (Geller 2009c). As regular readers of Pam Geller’s infamous Atlas Shrugs blog they brought the Warmington story to her attention. Just a few days later, on December 12, 2008, Geller posted a charged request for donations in order to raise funds for a headstone for Aqsa’s grave. Soon after, her request was also taken up by Robert Spencer (2008) of Jihad Watch with whom she had also co-founded the American Freedom Defense Initiative (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-a).

Geller’s blog call for donations—written entirely in capital letters—is titled, “Canada: No Headstone Marking Honor-Killing Victim. Help Atlas Buy Aqsa Parvez a Headstone.” Drawing on the public feelings of outrage generated through Warmington’s article, the blog goes on to state:

This is an outrage. This delicious girl fought to live a normal life. Aqsa Parvez is buried in an unmarked grave. Number 774. It’s as if she never existed. Damn them! I am starting a collection to buy a headstone. I will contribute $180. If you wish to help make a contribution to writeatlas@aol.com, go to paypal and specify Aqsa Parvez, and we will honor Aqsa. This wrong will be righted. The Aqsa Parvez memorial headstone fund. Your name will be listed on the top right sidebar—this wrong must be undone. Islam will not win and this gentle soul will not have died in vain. Update: Robert Spencer over at Jihad Watch has taken up the cause and is urging his readers to contribute to the headstone. (Geller 2008)

The overt Islamophobia of this blog conditions “normal” life as secular when positioned against the pre-modern barbarity of Islam. As well, the outrage over the lack of what is deemed an appropriate memorial for Aqsa is a public feeling that donors can be easily interpellated into by having their names publicly listed. As Doss (2010) reminds us, memorials are also bodies of feeling whose social, cultural, and political meanings are determined by the emotional states of and needs of their audiences. Here, Geller’s outrage condenses the meaning of the in-ground plaque as an inadequate memorial through an Islamophobic framework for her blog post audience.

In little over a year, Geller and Spencer raised over $5,000 from their blog readers in order to establish a memorial to Aqsa Parvez. As detailed in her blog, in her initial correspondence in January 2009 with Meadowvale cemetery staff, her request for a memorial bench and
tree at Aqsa’s gravesite was turned down because of space constraints at the site (Geller 2009b). Subsequently, Geller proposed the purchase and placement of a memorial headstone at Aqsa’s grave and even posted a mock-up of it on her blog.

However, Aqsa’s family would not give permission for Geller’s memorial to be placed at Aqsa’s grave site and Geller shared her email response to the cemetery staff person she had been in conversation with on her blogpost:

Philip,

The family is not going to memorialize this girl. She has shamed the family. Sharia law will not allow this girl a headstone. Am I to understand that if the family does not sign off on the headstone that the cemetery in this free, western nation will submit to the barbarity of a misogynist barbaric code and allow this girl to rot in an unmarked grave?

Yours in liberty

Pamela Geller

(Geller 2009b)

In her response to the family’s refusal to allow this memorial headstone to be placed at Aqsa’s grave, gender equality is centered against the barbarity of Islam in hierarchy to superior
secular Western freedoms reinscribing Geller’s Islamophobic framing. As well, the headstone accrues significance as the preferred memorial against the existing in-ground plaque, analogously giving it meaning as a visible repair to the purported lethal misogyny of Islam.

With the family’s refusal, an alternate site had to be found, and Traversy suggested making a donation in Aqsa’s name at the arboretum of the University of Guelph which has the Wall-Custance Memorial Forest program, where benches could be dedicated and trees planted in memory of loved ones. Although there was initial correspondence and consideration of this request by the arboretum, by mid-February 2009, this option was also withdrawn. The reason given by the manager of the arboretum was that ultimately too much public attention would be drawn to Aqsa’s memorial which would be inconsistent with the peaceful use of the arboretum.

Pushed by the local paper, The Guelph Mercury, to explain their reversal on their initial decision to entertain Geller’s request, University spokesperson Chuck Cunningham worried that Geller’s blog was “politically charged” and voiced strong views against Islam, thus, the university was leery that a memorial could be seen as an endorsement. He stated, “We don’t want the Arboretum to become a vehicle for someone’s political agenda” and that “We will not let our Arboretum get caught up in controversy” (Shuttleworth 2009). In the responses to Geller, it is clear that, between the initial request and its ultimate denial, the arboretum and university had gained a sense of the extent and type of public feeling that this particular quest for a memorial to Aqsa was generating and did not want to mire its “peaceful nature” in politically charged “controversy.” In a newspaper response, Traversy expressed his surprise at the refusal since the university “had the money and were all set to go when suddenly, the people at the university stopped calling back or taking calls,” adding, “Even the people at the women’s studies office” (Warmington 2009).

Geller’s association of the proposed memorial with the repair of gender equality against Islam’s barbarity—materialized as the inadequacy of the plaque at Aqsa’s grave—underlies Traversy’s astonishment that “even the women’s studies office” did not respond to support their request. However, there is a tension here between the social and political meaning of the proposed memorial and the publics that it may address. For the arboretum, there is a possibility that the “controversy” and “politically charged” associations may disrupt the quiet reflection sought by many in the peaceful nature of the arboretum, despite its mission to be a place for memorialization; thus, the arboretum imagined an audience for this proposed memorial that was at odds with their target public for the arboretum.

At this point, Scott McLeod, who was the fire chief of Pelham, approached town councillor Sharon Cook about installing a memorial in Pelham for Aqsa Parvez. And on March 2, 2009, the town council passed Resolution 13. This resolution approved the installation of a memorial bench and tree in the small Peace Park in front of the townhall:

MOTIONS & NOTICES OF MOTION
Resolution No. 13: Memorial for Aqsa Parvez
Monday, March 2nd, 2009
Municipal Council Chambers
MOVED BY COUNCILLOR S. COOK, SECONDED BY COUNCILLOR J. DURLEY
WHEREAS Canadians enjoy a privileged life under the Charter of Rights & Freedom;
AND WHEREAS Canada is a preferred choice of immigrants escaping the lack of freedoms and other atrocities in their countries of origin;

AND WHEREAS we are a country of immigrants;

AND WHEREAS many immigrants choose to embrace the culture of the Canadian people, there are cultures that are in conflict with our cultural rights and freedoms;

AND WHEREAS Aqsa Parvez was allegedly murdered by family members for her attempts to embrace the Canadian ways and was buried in an unidentified grave, let us not forget her struggles;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE Town of Pelham, honour, not only the memory of Aqsa Parvez, but all immigrants who find themselves caught between cultures and are challenged to conform to both. We honour these immigrants by installing a bench and planting a tree as a memorial in Peace Park and encouraging other municipalities to honour the memory of Aqsa in a fashion as they see fit.

CARRIED

(Geller 2009d)

In this declaration, Indigenous presence and ongoing colonial dispossession are erased in the declaration of Canada as solely an immigrant nation. As well, a clash of civilizations discourse is reproduced in the assertion of conflict in cultural rights and freedoms by certain cultures and the global positioning of Canada as a preferred immigrant destination over other countries with “atrocities.” Aqsa’s identity is reduced to her truncated attempt to “become like us” (Jiwani 2014) by “embracing Canadian ways,” which narrows the tragic context of her death even as it confirms the purported integrative potential of a national secular multiculturalism. The framing of this resolution not only highlights the idea that the multicultural nation can integrate this young Muslim “victim”, but that, in so doing, it fulfills the promise of its secular benevolence against Aqsa’s “death by culture” (Zine 2009). The proposed memorial tree and bench are positioned against the “unidentified grave” not only as a memorial for Aqsa but also one that jumps scales as an “agent of national identity” (Doss 2010, 53) to honor “all immigrants who find themselves caught between cultures” in the multicultural secular nation. The passage of Resolution 13 supporting the memorial proposal expanded public feeling through the municipality as reflected in the minutes of the March 16 council record which stated that the town had received “in excess of two dozen e-mails praising the motion passed honouring Aqsa Parvez, including queries regarding making donations, such as a granite bench, which will be situated in Peace Park” (Pelham Town Council 2009a).

The suggestion of a tree and a bench to memorialize Aqsa was a memorial form that was proposed from the start by Geller to Meadowvale cemetery and then next to the Guelph arboretum. Memorial trees and benches are established contemporary forms of personalized memorials, that often require permission, and are intended for ongoing enjoyment by the community as a contribution on behalf of the deceased to the living and serve as a subsequent reintegration of the deceased into the society of the living (Holloway et al. 2018, 13). Thus, in this site, memorial trees and a stone bench dedicated to Aqsa also signal a future will to reintegrate Aqsa’s memory, both concretely and metaphorically into the secular multicultural society of Pelham. This becomes clearer as the actual purpose and dedication of the bench are revealed.
In a June 15, 2009 townhall staff and engineering meeting, the financial, legal, and staffing details of the memorial construction were confirmed. The record of this meeting explains that this was a “plan for a memorial to Aqsa Parvez and to the plight of suffering that many immigrants to our country have endured” (Pelham Town Council 2009b). The meeting notes go on to detail that Chief McLeod would meet with a representative from Kirkpatrick O’Brine Monuments “to discuss specific details for the bench (immigrant suffering) and a plaque (Parvez) inset into a concrete pad” (Pelham Town Council 2009b). If Resolution 13 expanded the framing of the memorial from individual death to national “immigrant suffering,” the staff meeting notes of June 15 concretized this memorial as an agent of national secular multicultural tolerance and benevolence. Although there is little explicit mention of Christianity in the town records, once the plans for the memorial site were drawn up, Asad’s (2003) insight that modern nationalism draws “on pre-existing languages and practices—including those we call, anachronistically, ‘religious’” (194) becomes obvious. Suggestions for the sheltering foliage of the memorial bench include Weeping Nootka False Cypress on either side of the bench and Burning Bush planted all behind. The Burning Bush directly recalls biblical reference to the third chapter of the Book of Exodus where God calls out to Moses from the burning bush that is never consumed by the flame. As the ceremony for the dedication of the memorial bench unfolds, these “pre-existing religious languages and practices” become even more explicit.

By August 25, 2009, the foundations of the memorial were poured and as promised in Geller’s original blog post, the names of the Atlas Shrugs blog readers who had donated money were recorded on parchment with the preface below and then dropped into the footing of the Aqsa Parvez memorial in Pelham Peace Park. The video for this ceremony can still be watched on YouTube (Geller 2009f).

Preface to list of names:

This memorial is dedicated to the life of Aqsa Parvez

The following, is a list of people from around the world who came together to ensure that this child would not be forgotten. While we have attempted to gather all who supported this endeavor, however it is likely that some are not noted in the following. We believe that those unknown hero’s prayers and support are in this document, as though printed. We have gathered as a family, who cross religious, ethnic and geographic boundaries to create this memorial which represent, what we as a global community believe is the ethical and honorable thing to do. We have included the prayers, comments and statement of values which we as citizens of the world hold dear. Rest in Peace Aqsa, you will be remembered.

(Geller 2009f)

Again the pre-existing religious language and practices of “prayers” are made explicit even as a secular multicultural fantasy of a “global community” that crosses religious, ethnic, and geographic boundaries is invoked in the preface for a list of names that constitute the initial public blog post of Geller’s call for donors and who are literally part of the foundation of the memorial.

On September 18, 2009, the dedication ceremony of Aqsa’s memorial bench and site took place at Pelham Peace Park. Brian S. Osborne (2001) cites Connerton’s (1989, 70) idea of the “theatre of memory” to describe commemorative ceremonies. He explains that this theatre is meant to engender a sense of a “collective autobiography” by communicating shared values
encoded metaphorically and symbolically as in this memorial dedication ceremony for Aqsa (Connerton 1989, quoted in Osborne 2001, 59). Osborne explains that public participation in the commemoration of memorials anchors collective remembering in fixed and tangible sites (Savage 1994, 130, quoted in Osborne 2001, 59). Although Pelham’s Peace Park is
geographically, socially, and culturally distant from Aqsa’s life in Mississauga, this dedication ceremony is meant to suture her both concretely and metaphorically to this site as a confirmation of the secular multicultural benevolence of this small town “with a big heart”.

During the dedication ceremony, McLeod spoke and at the end, read a poem:

_I would like to thank the people here today on behalf of Pelham, who are assisting us in the dedication of this memorial bench._

_We believe that this memorial and the ideology behind it, is a demonstration of values which we as a town and country hold dear._

_Personally I am extremely proud that this event is taking place in Pelham Ontario. We consider ourselves to be the town in the heart of Niagara, with a big heart._

_I could dwell on the events which caused us to create this memorial; however I believe it is more fitting to celebrate the Life of Aqsa, rather than her death._

_There have been true hero’s (sic) in this story who have shaped the efforts to make this possible._

_The first are Pamela Geller & Robert Spencer who created the fund which made this possible, Norman & Sandra Traversy who worked so hard in Mississauga._
My personal Hero's are the members of the Town Council in Pelham who approved this memorial without hesitation.

I would also like to thank the numerous people who came forward with assistance & donations to make this event possible.

I will finish my statement with a paraphrase of a poem which I believe fits this all our friends and Aqsa.

THEY SHALL WALK BEYOND THE CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN
THEY SHALL BE LIFTED ON THE SHOULDERS OF ANGELS
THEIR STORIES WILL BE TOLD IN THEIR HOMELANDS
AND THEY SHALL REST IN PEACE.
RECOGNIZED BY THE TALLY OF THEIR DEEDS
GOD SHALL STAND BESIDE THEM FOR ALL ETERNITY
FOR THEY HAVE ENTERED INTO THE REALM OF HONOR

(Geller 2009g)

Almost nine months after he and Traversy initiated the quest to establish a memorial for Aqsa, McLeod was finally able to give a dedication ceremony speech. He was clear to thank the local and regional publics of Pelham and Niagara but he also explicitly thanked Pam Geller and Robert Spencer. This speech also echoes Resolution 13’s invocation of the Canadian rights and freedoms. If the social, cultural, and political meanings of memorials, as bodies of feelings, are determined by the emotional states and needs of the audience who experience them (Doss 2010) then Aqsa’s memorial as an agent of the multicultural national identity for this local, regional, and even national audience is sedimented with the Canadian “values” of rights and freedoms of the “town and country.” However, in his final poem, McLeod is also explicit in his reference to Christian symbolism, reciting words and phrases such as “angels,” “realm of honor,” “eternity,” and “crystal mountain,” as well as related Christian imagery. The pairing of the explicitly Christianized poem with the speech focused on universalized Canadian values reveal, as Asad (2003) reminds us, that there is no sharp separation between the religious and the secular; rather the latter continually produces the former.

Mayor David Augustyn also spoke, praising Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism which, he stated, acknowledges the rights of all citizens to identify with and take pride in their cultures and he encouraged cross-cultural tolerance and understanding (Campbell 2010). However, he added, it also gives individuals the freedom “to choose for themselves to withdraw” from the customs of their individual culture to identify with the wider culture (Campbell 2009b). Again, although Augustyn begins with multiculturalism as a capacious enough to tolerate all cultures, he narrows this down to the preference of secular liberal multiculturalism as unidirectional integration; that is, the freedom to “become like us” (Jiwani 2014). This echoes the clash of civilizations discourse where the “customs” of individual cultures are oriented as less preferable to a wider tolerant secular culture. Councillor Sharon Cook, who had moved Resolution 13 at the townhall, spoke as well. Cook was also a crisis intervention counselor with Niagara Victims Support Services and described as having dealt
with immigrants struggling with the Canadian way of life and cultural integration (Mitchell 2010; Campbell 2010). She stated that, although there had been a lot of talk about honor, “there is no honour in the death of Aqsa Parvez and as Canadians we cannot condone such actions” (Campbell 2009a). Cook’s pointed statement about honor in the context of Aqsa’s memorial directly links to “honor killings” and the inherent concern of gender equality in secularism as the ruse to justify claims of white Western and Christian racial and religious superiority (Scott 2018).

The dedication ceremony was covered in local news outlets such as the Pelham News tabloid and the Niagarathisweek.com site. And after the memorial bench was unveiled, Laurie Meredith of Kirkpatrick Monuments said that reading a newspaper story about Aqsa had galvanized the offer of a memorial bench. She stated, “It’s such a sad thing to have happen. Maybe the attention from this memorial may save a life” (Campbell 2009a). Thus, a memorial bench serves a dual purpose as it is a place to inscribe the message that will orient the audience of the memorial to the meaning it is meant to consolidate and inspire but also, it is a structure that one can sit on, to have an embodied experience with the memorial, ideally with respect to the original intention of in situ contemplation of the person/s being memorialized. The carved inscription on the memorial bench, Remembering new Canadians lost to the quest of integrating cultures—In Loving Memory of Aqsa Parvez—Remembered and Free, recapitulates all the discourses of the dedication ceremony and even retains much of the original phrasing from Geller’s headstone mockup: “In Loving Memory of Aqsa Parvez” and “Remembered and Free.” The tragic truncation of the integrative impulse of secular multiculturalism is memorialized clearly on the bench in relation to Aqsa who is also metonymically linked to other unnamed new Canadians and who upon her death is freed, presumably, from the unnamed barbarity of her religion; “death by culture” indeed (Zine 2009).

However, it wasn’t until January 6, 2010, approximately five months after the dedication ceremony, that the Toronto Star (one of Canada’s largest newspapers, which had originally broken the story of Aqsa’s murder in 2007 and published a lot of stories on her since) ran a substantive article on the Pelham memorial in its regional news section. This article is of particular interest because in it both McLeod and Cook take great pains to distance themselves from Pam Geller, Robert Spencer, and their respective blogs. Asked about the impetus for the memorial, McLeod stated he acted because he had seen a haunting photo of her “unmarked” grave, and that “It had nothing to do with whether she was a Muslim or not … In my mind, it seemed she had just been forgotten” (Mitchell 2010). McLeod said he was aware of Geller’s blog and its reputation but insists there was no political motive or anti-Muslim sentiment behind his decision to find a way to remember the Mississauga teen. Cook also asserted that “The memorial isn’t against the Muslim faith … It’s against the fact this young girl was murdered, allegedly for trying to integrate into Canadian culture” (Mitchell 2010). McLeod said he did not get a single negative email. “We got so much support because I believe we in Pelham reflect small-town Canadian values. What we wanted to do and what we did do, didn’t have anything to do with us wanting to make a political statement” (Mitchell 2010).

A week later, Pelham News ran a story about the Toronto Star story, especially as it had generated a flood of emails, phone calls from reporters, and Cook had even been part of a Toronto-based phone-in show in the aftermath of the article’s publication. Again, when asked why Pelham had decided to put up a memorial to Aqsa with whom they had no connection, Cook repeated that it was “because of small-town Canadian values” and also because the town was located “in the centre of a large multicultural region, a gateway for immigration” (Campbell 2010). Again, Cook reiterated that this had nothing to do with being Muslim in any way; and that integration into the Canadian lifestyle affects “all immigrants of all cultures” (Campbell 2010). She added that some of the phone-in radio show callers had tried to politicize
discussions and refer to “honor killings” but she reiterated that this had nothing to do with “our memorial” (Campbell 2010). This was an interesting elaboration as during the dedication ceremony, Cook had explicitly focused on the question of honor in relation to Aqsa’s death. McLeod reiterated, as he had in the Toronto Star article, that he had received good emails but that the “stuff on talk radio has turned rather negative … They were talking about racism” which he found “nauseating” (Campbell 2010).

Five months after the dedication ceremony and a year after the McLeod and Taversy’s quest to establish a memorial to Aqsa had begun with a direct request for donations on Geller and Spence’s virulently Islamophobic blog sites, McLeod, Cook, and Augustyn were all backpedaling from the initial openly anti-Muslim framing of the memorial proposals and various statements leading up to and during the dedication ceremony. This required the refocusing of the memorial as not solely about Aqsa, and thereby her Islamic religion, but rather linking her metonymically to, as Cook stated, “all immigrants of all cultures” (Campbell 2010). Then the rationale for a memorial in her name had to also be scaled up to the assertion of “small-town Canadian values” in a larger “multicultural” region which was the “gateway to immigration” (Campbell 2010). Despite this backpedaling, their logic still followed the same liberal secular integrative trajectory of the racialized Other into the dual white settler nation. As well, the purity of the nation was assured by having the small town with the “big heart” in the midst of a multicultural immigrant gateway region. As McLeod’s comments show, the limit to this backpedal was any admission that this was a racist white fantasy.

The backpedaling also meant that, despite his earlier support and public linking with Geller, now five months after the dedication ceremony in Pelham, McLeod was claiming that, “We never took any of the money raised through the initial fundraising campaign organized by Geller,” and that rather the memorial was funded by local donations. This, of course is in direct contradiction to his statement at the memorial dedication ceremony five months earlier at Pelham Peace Park (Mitchell 2010). Also, the fact that the past August there had been a ceremony with Atlas Shrugs blog donor names written on parchment dropped into the foundation of the memorial was not mentioned (even though the video of this ceremony still exists on YouTube) at all.

All this did not go unremarked by either Geller or Spencer. Geller skewered McLeod on her blog and pointed out the contradictions of his earlier enthusiastic thanks for their support and collaboration on funding and establishing a memorial for Aqsa. According to a letter Geller (2010) posted, in June 2009 McLeod had sent her updates on the plans for the Pelham memorial including an invitation to the dedication ceremony and even made her an honorary firefighter because of her commitment to the memorial project for Aqsa.

Cut out of the memorial project in Pelham, Geller and Spencer were left to find a different way to memorialize Aqsa. They approached the Jewish National Fund and finally found a place in American Independence Park in Jerusalem, Israel, where they could plant the Aqsa Parvez Grove of trees and have a plaque mounted there on a memorial wall, alongside other memorial plaques. This particular small green plaque identified the grove and stated simply: Atlas Shrugs Readers New York, NY—In Memory of Aqsa Parvez. Olwan (2019) has written about the how Geller’s “honor killing” narratives about Aqsa Parvez travel transnationally through right-wing political activism in ongoing projects of multicultural nationalism and settler colonialism. These discourses are clear in the dedication ceremony at American Independence Park where both Geller and Spencer speak. There is a nine-minute excerpt of their speeches on YouTube (M. n.d.) and it is rife with the usual Islamophobic fear mongering, the reductive framing of Aqsa’s—and other Muslim women’s—murder/s as an “honor killing” that is characteristic of Geller and Spencer’s demonization of Islam. Geller begins her speech by detailing the challenges they had in Canada first with the cemetery, then at the University of Guelph arboretum, but she
never mentions the memorial at the Peace Park in Pelham. Next Spencer speaks, again in the same Islamophobic vein as Geller, and in speaking about “honor killings” he outlines how “this is the kind of abomination that is being allowed in the west under the guise of multiculturalism and tolerance” (M. n.d.). If back in Pelham all the main players in the establishment of Aqsa’s memorial backpedaled to a liberal secular multicultural position on the meaning of Aqsa’s memorial, here at American Independence Park, Geller and Spencer maintain their overtly Islamophobic framing of “honor killings” as a key defining characteristic of Islam and claim Aqsa away from her barbaric religion in a redemptive move to her place as “a human being before God” (M. n.d.). Over and over again, “honor killings” are invoked as the limit case of Muslim barbarity and serve as the explanatory rationale for the Islamophobic demonization of Muslims globally. Geller and Spencer’s explicit Islamophobic framework is reverse side of the same coin as the secularized multicultural liberal backpedaling of Cook, McLeod and Augustyn. Exploiting the bodies of young murdered Muslim women to the end, Geller and Spencer’s dedication ceremony video ends with a montage of murdered victims of “honor killings” from around the globe; a montage that ends with a lingering Facebook picture of Aqsa Parvez.

THE SMALL TOWN WITH A “BIG HEART”

This story of the establishment of a memorial for Aqsa, eventually, in Pelham emerges in the era of other post-9/11 stories of small towns in Canada and their engagements with immigrants, multiculturalism, and in particular Islamophobic exclusion. Among these is the example of the Statement of Values for immigrants published by the municipal government of Gatineau, Quebec, in December 2011; these list 16 guidelines for newcomers to Gatineau including injunctions not to “willfully starve” their children, not to use spices that cause body odour and smells to emanate from their homes, as well as warnings that men and women have equal rights and that physical and sexual violence is wrong. This Statement of Values is of course reminiscent of the more infamous Herouxville, Quebec Code of Conduct from 2007, which included injunctions against FGM, stoning of women, and covering one’s face—as well as prayer in school (ironic to someone, like me, who had to endure daily Christian prayer in Canadian elementary schools).

This complicated journey to establish a memorial for Aqsa also exemplifies white settler anxieties about the encroaching barbaric culture of the Muslim Other and the need to fortify real “small town Canadian values.” Elizabeth Furniss (1999) discusses the importance of the frontier myth in the construction of Canadian nationhood and the formation of small town identities with Canadian frontier myths distinguished from American frontier narratives in the “construction of Euro-Canadian identity as one of benevolent paternalism” (197). This belief in the benevolence and the “niceness” of Canadians (Furniss 1999, 197) is captured in the repeated phrase of Pelham as the “small town with a big heart.” This benevolence has come to frame contemporary assertions of Canadian national identity of iconic niceness and benevolence as multicultural tolerance (Furniss 1999, 187), again distinguishing it from American “melting pot” society—which is important national identity work so close to the American border. Furniss (1999) also outlines the myth of the moral superiority of the small town—which is widespread and continues to shape public constructions of small town identity in powerful ways (83); that is, that rural communities are also portrayed as existing out of time and epitomizing the traditional, harmonious cultures of the past from which contemporary urban societies have long since evolved (Furniss 1999, 83). Cook’s reiteration of Pelham as a small town with a “big heart” within a multicultural region that is a gateway for immigration reaffirms this idea of Pelham as a pure traditional site of Canadian harmonious benevolence; a benevolence that is at the root of contemporary tolerant secular multiculturalism that can welcome immigrants from around the world. What better place than Pelham then to memorialize Aqsa
as a move to redeem her in death from the barbarity of her religion; to finalize the completion of her journey of integration into secular multiculturalism.

This benevolent frontier myth is deeply embedded in Pelham's past as it has been part of Welland County pre-Confederation, since the 1780s, in what the town website describes as a “peaceful and pleasant community” in the “heart of Niagara.” In these types of local descriptions, the history of slavery in this region, Indigenous dispossession, and ongoing dual white settler colonialism are all erased. As well, gendered memorialization did not begin with the importation of Aqsa Parvez's memory to Pelham, rather it was Laura Secord9 who is best remembered as the first heroine of the Niagara region. Coates and Morgan (2002) have argued that Secord's commemorations in the area were not only about outlining a heroic white frontier femininity but in demarcating the Niagara area as a region rich in frontier history (197), it was also an attempt to create and confirm the continuity of white settler national identity.

John Gillis (1994) has argued that memory work such as memorialization is embedded in complex power relations that determine what is remembered or forgotten, by whom, and for what end (quoted in Coates and Morgan 2002, 8). The commemorative genealogy in this Niagara region, from white settler frontier heroine Laura Secord to victim of truncated multicultural integration Aqsa Parvez, serves, in juxtaposition, to sediment a particular secular multiculturalism that confirms dual white settler nationalism as public memory.

Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) I want to argue that what needs to be denounced in this disturbing and extended story of Aqsa's memorialization is first the murder of Aqsa but also the racist present within which representations of her and other Muslim women's murders as “honor killings” are produced, as well as the ongoing racism these representations sustain. In addition, these representations are always in the shadow of the sovereign subjectivity of the white settler; for example, the historical celebrated muscular sovereign subjectivity of Laura Secord. However, if these representations, even as memorials, lose their relationship to a living present, then the focus on the past diverts us from the present injustices for which the past only set the foundations (Trouillot 1995, 150). Trouillot warns us that the legacy of past horrors—in this case femicide—is exceptionally visibilized only because of the renewal of Islamophobia and gendered anti-Muslim racism which repeats in the present. Thus, this particular secular multicultural formation of Aqsa's memorial removes from view the continuing and myriad exclusions of racism and the racialization of poverty, an understanding of femicide as a lethal harm which continues to affect all Canadian women, and the ongoing settler colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

If the memorial in Pelham is meant to re/present a particular benevolent narrative of Aqsa's—and metonymically all immigrants'—redemption in death from the barbarity of her religion/culture and integration into secularized multiculturalism, the question remains whether this framing is the only one possible for this memorial at this site? If public memorials are meant to perpetuate memory in external deposits in shared public space to anchor collective remembering (Gillis 1994, 130), can this particular “external deposit” as an engraved stone bench, framed by intentionally selected greenery and foliage in the middle of a public small town square, be anything but a redemptive move towards integration into secular multiculturalism against the barbarities of Othered racialized religions and cultures?

For me, one way to answer this question was to go in person to see this memorial bench and site. In 2011, my friend Dr Mary Jo Nadeau and I drove down to the Peace Park in Pelham to visit the memorial I had read about in the January 6, 2010 *Toronto Star*, mentioned above. After we parked in the lot beside the town square, we walked past the white gazebo and immediately saw the sign for the Peace Park.
Centred in the Peace Park, unsurprising given its name, was the town’s war memorial which commemorated both WWI and WWII as well as the Korean war. This was clearly the official memorial of the town square as all paths led to this memorial site.
One side of the memorial stone listed the wars and the other side listed the names of all locals who died in these wars. This large memorial was not only centered in the town square but also had a tall flag pole beside it which meant the memorial could be seen from far away and from all directions. In fact, this was the kind of war memorial in the middle of a small town square that was common to many small towns and therefore an unsurprising sight to us. However, what we initially could not see as we wandered up to and around this war memorial, was any sign of Aqsa's memorial bench nearby.

Photo by author 2011.

We fanned out in different directions to look and I eventually found Aqsa's memorial bench tucked away in a corner of the Peace Park (as had been indicated in the plan map), and bordered by a view of the Beer Store and its parking lot.

Photo by author 2011.
The foliage around the bench, although not in bloom, was relatively well maintained and the surrounding grass was well trimmed. I read the inscription: Remembering New Canadians Lost to the Quest of Integrating Cultures—in Loving Memory of Aqsa Parvez—Apr. 22, 1991-Dec. 10, 2007—Remembered and Free. As the bench invited, I decided to sit.

Shanti Sumartojo (2016) discusses the importance of atmosphere for commemorations in built memorial environments. Sumartojo points to the dynamic combination of built environment, place, and people with the “quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies while also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal” (McCormack 2008, quoted in Sumartojo 2016, 544). She elaborates that atmospheres reveal “specific types of relational configurations” between the subject, her memories and experiences, and the representational and more-than-representational elements that constitute her spatial environments (Anderson 2014, quoted in Sumartojo 2016, 545). Sitting on Aqsa’s memorial bench, sensing the built environment and registering the spatial configurations of the area, I thought about the intent of the carved memorialization; in particular, what read to me—as the daughter of formerly “new” Canadians—as a lethal warning about the imperative to integrate. The dominating view of the beer store over the bench, although mildly tacky to me as a supposedly well integrated Canadian, reminded me—again as the daughter of Muslim “new Canadians”—that this view would be seen by them as a continuous secularizing disciplining of their, and Aqsa’s, faith and Muslim identities.
It was a cloudy and damp day which reinforced the immaterial etherealities that I was feeling in this particular environmental configuration. Thus, although I knew details of Aqsa’s murder (having written about this: Haque 2010, 2017), sitting here, I felt somewhat sad given how much I knew about her death compared to how little I actually knew of her life beyond what had been covered by her friends’ few sparse quotes in the media and in Saywell’s documentary (Haque 2017). The memorial was in fact not a place to gather that knowledge with its sole injunction to remember Aqsa as free; free presumably from her life of which I knew so little about. I also thought—again as the daughter of new Canadian Muslims—of how luckily different my teen years had been from hers—after all, I was still alive—even as we were only separated by time from the unitary dominant identification by secular multicultural society as imperiled Muslim girls. Sitting on a damp granite bench dedicated to a young murdered woman, I was reminded of the Marker of Change memorial (1997) to the 14 women murdered at L’Ecole Polytechnique on December 6, 1989, which consists of 14 benches, each coffin size, made of tombstone granite arranged in a 300 foot circle that I had visited years before in Thornton Park, Vancouver. These women had been specifically selected by their gender to be killed by the gunman and although this was a case of femicide that shocked the country, it took a few years to be recognized as a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada; a day now commemorated across the country in a range of actions every December 6. I thought of the relational configurations of my current environment, a single damp bench bordered by a beer store, to that of the Marker for Change memorial site and how Aqsa’s murder, although also clearly a case of femicide, was cut off here in a corner of Pelham town square half a country away from the circle of benches in Vancouver memorializing the women of L’Ecole Polytechnique. Sitting on this bench, I wondered if it was even possible to think about Aqsa’s death beyond the singularity of death by barbaric Islamic culture; to see it and remember her as part of a larger national crisis of femicide as well?

As my friend found me and joined me on the bench, we looked out on the beer store and talked about how beer stores in small Ontario towns were iconic of a folk authentic white settler identity and we discussed how the presence of this memorial bench in Pelham would probably make a great academic paper to research and write one day. I discussed the reservations I had had writing even the first paper about Aqsa (Haque 2010); trying to calculate my ethical relations as well as my responsibilities to Aqsa who had lived, been murdered, and then repeatedly—autonomously from family or community—had had her death scrutinized, mis/remembered, appropriated, investigated, analyzed, and revisited; just what was she liberated from as we remembered her as “free”? In short, what were the responsibilities of doing this work within the academic industrial complex? We came up with no workable answers but foundered on issues of knowledge, understanding in the service of amelioration of harm, social and political critique for change, as well as social and racial justice. If the original intent of the memorial was to represent a particular benevolent narrative about secular multicultural white settler nationalism, as I sat there, my memories, conversations, and experiences also became part of the more than representational elements of the memorial atmosphere as a check against the carved original singular narrative representation.

Given the sensationalism generated around her death, the memorial bench at Pelham was of course not the only memorial made in remembrance of Aqsa. In the wake of her death, in addition to the songs and documentaries made about Aqsa, some examples include a number of online memorial sites, including 20-plus Facebook pages (a platform she had been active on), as well as YouTube videos among others. Aqsa’s death also inspired memorable actions such as the Don’t Believe the Hype Campaign organized by the Urban Alliance of Race Relations in response to the racist misrepresentation of Aqsa’s murder in a Toronto Life cover story. This
action held a speak out and press conference as well as a phone campaign directed at the magazine’s editor, Sarah Fulford, and asked people to raise their voices on the important issues of violence against women, racism, and Islamophobia. Aqsa Zine was also started after Aqsa’s murder as a memorable way to honor her; described as a grassroots zine for young Muslim cis and trans identified women, it was a way “to honour her and other Muslims who experience and resist violence—We strive to work from a feminist, anti-oppressive framework.” Aqsa Zine published four issues featuring the writing, artwork, and photography of young Muslim cis and trans identified women on themes ranging from love/sex/marriage, Islam, im/migration, resistance and self-defense, as well as a final issue on ancestors & descendants. Although Aqsa Zine has been discontinued, it continues to circulate in hard copy and online archive as a powerful record of renarration against narrow representations of young Muslim cis and trans identified women by both Islamophobes and secular multicultural nationalists.

However, one final caution. If memorials are erected as sites of remembrance, they are also most often meant to script particular narratives; which in this case is the integrative promise of secular multiculturalism within a white settler society. Although my experience of being at Aqsa’s memorial site suggested the possibility of remembering otherwise to the intended narrative, it was still very much a personal engagement and rescripting that left no trace at the site and, in relation to Aqsa, recentered my thoughts, my memories, and my experiences. Also, even amazing community grounded remembrance projects such as Aqsa Zine were primarily meant to provide space for other voices who are identified with a particular framing of Aqsa’s subjectivity: young Muslim woman.

Therefore, in engagements with these memorializing and remembrance projects, “empathetic recognition” is to a large extent an “affective understanding of the other’s situation” to make “what was once unknown now … known” (Abel 2006, 384). These ethical relations with Aqsa are predicated on the primacy of the engaging subject who merely recognizes the other instead of, in a Levinasian sense of ethics, is “coming into being through … the infinite debt I owe the other” (Abel 2006, 384). In this ethical relationship, as Abel elaborates, “the ground of the subject is its subjection to the other”, that is, a recognition of the radical alterity of the other (Abel 2006, 387). In engagements with these various representational memorial and remembrance projects, there is a presumption of knowing and understanding Aqsa as a “young Muslim woman” who perhaps wanted to be “just like us” (Jiwani 2014) (whatever that “us” may be) and was a victim of “death by culture” (Zine 2009). In fact, even in critique, we can know none of those things. Rather all I can know is that my subjectivity comes into being in my debt in facing the radical alterity of Aqsa and not as recognition of Aqsa in a project of social justice, even though social justice may be a laudable goal but would again reinstate the primacy of my self. The question that then remains as a driver of ethical engagement is how can I be “response-able” (Abel 2006, 387) in this infinite debt to Aqsa, how can I ground my subjectivity in subjection to Aqsa as other in my engagement and response to remembrance? As I write this paper, I am struggling with that question as I am also remembering sitting on Aqsa’s memorial bench with my friend facing the radical alterity that death brings; I am indebted to them both.

CODA

In 2009, about a month after Pelham town council passed a resolution approving the memorial bench for Aqsa in the Peace Park, cemetery officials said the Parvez family had put an in-ground stone on her grave that reads, “In Loving Memory of Aqsa Parvez. Always loved, always remembered” (Mitchell 2010).
1I use quotation marks around the term “honor killing” throughout this paper not to discount what feminist scholars have written about gendered honor-based violence in specific Global South contexts. Rather, my use of the quotation marks here is to point to the discursive work that the delimiting of certain racialized gendered violences as honor-based killings does in the Canadian context to shore up Islamophobic and anti-Muslim white settler nationalist public feeling.

2The friend who drove me to Pelham was Dr Mary-Jo Nadeau with whom I talked through many of these ideas around gendered commemorations and memorializations in the making of national white identities. This paper is written in her memory.

3As for example in the earlier Supreme Court of Canada decision on the very similar Saguenay case on public prayer and crucifix display in municipal council. The court held that: “[i]f the state adheres to a form of religious expression under the guise of cultural or historical reality or heritage, it still breaches its duty of neutrality. Mouvement Laïque québécois v Saguenay (City), [2005], 2 SCR 3 at 7.

4Pamela Geller is an America blogger and commentator known for her anti-Muslim views and activism. Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-b. Geller is the founder, editor and publisher of the blog Atlas Shrugs.com (now known as the Geller Report). The Southern Poverty Law Center considers her an extremist and calls her public statements hate speech. Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-c

5Started in 2004, this blog is now known as the Geller Report (gellerreport.com)—known for promoting anti-Muslim conspiracy theories.

6Robert Spencer runs Jihad Watch, an anti-Muslim website. Jihad Watch is associated with the David Horowitz Freedom Center

7The American Freedom Defense Initiative has been designated an anti-Muslim hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-a.

8Laura Secord was a Canadian heroine of the War of 1812. She is known for having walked 20 miles out of American-occupied Niagara peninsula in 1813 to warn British forces of an impending American attack. The
information helped the British and their Mohawk warrior allies repel the invading Americans at the Battle of Beaver Dams. She has been honored on stamps, coins, schools, museums, and even has a statue erected in her honor at Queenston, Ontario, near the Canada-US border.

9In all their forms: See Saywell (2010) and Brooks (2012).

10Video of event: vimeo.com/3250078.

11See Aqsa Zine archived at zeedesigns.wixsite.com/aqsazineonline

REFERENCES


