

VIDEO REVIEWS

Neglected Voices Unveiled

Muslim Canadians have initiated a documentation project that can be replicated across U.S. and Canada.

BY TENDESAI CROMWELL

MUSLIMS HAVE BEEN A PART OF THE FABRIC OF Canadian society for generations, and many have embarked upon the difficult task of forging a balanced Canadian Muslim identity. Even with the passage of time and deeper roots in Canada, little has changed for Muslim youth who still endure many challenges in their search for identity.

During times when Islam and Muslims are under immense scrutiny, a great need exists to document and express the Canadian Muslims' oft-neglected narratives. In recognition of this priority, The Tessellate Institute, Toronto-based nonprofit research institute, undertook two timely initiatives: "Neglected Voices" and "Giving Ourselves a Voice."

"Neglected Voices," funded by the Olive Tree Foundation, and cosponsored by MENTORS (Muslim, Education, Network, Training and Outreach Service) features four Canadian Muslim youth who, in short five minute "point-of-view" films, recount their unique experiences of being Canadian Muslim with all the attendant challenges and successes. "Giving Ourselves a Voice," funded by the Toronto Arts

Council, and sponsored by several Muslim community groups (see website for sponsorships), was an intense media training workshop, run by Jawad Jafry—the brain behind many aspects of the Adam's World series, as well as the director and producer of the "Neglected Voices" films—and a team of media professionals. Aspiring young Muslim documentarians spent two weekends learning the art and skills of pre- and post-production. The products are almost entirely that of the young filmmakers, with the professional media team providing oversight and guidance.

Each video presents a short snapshot into the lives of these youth in their own words. "Giving Ourselves a Voice" features two Canadian Muslim women who spoke about their relationship to Islam as it relates to aspects of their daily lives. One of them a convert, who discussed the transition to Islam in her life. Both video series are honest retellings of the experiences, both positive and negative, of being Muslim from mainly in and around the Greater Toronto Area. They spoke of alienation alongside belonging, despair alongside hope, and failure alongside accomplishment.

The experience of Muslims in Canada is one of contradictions.

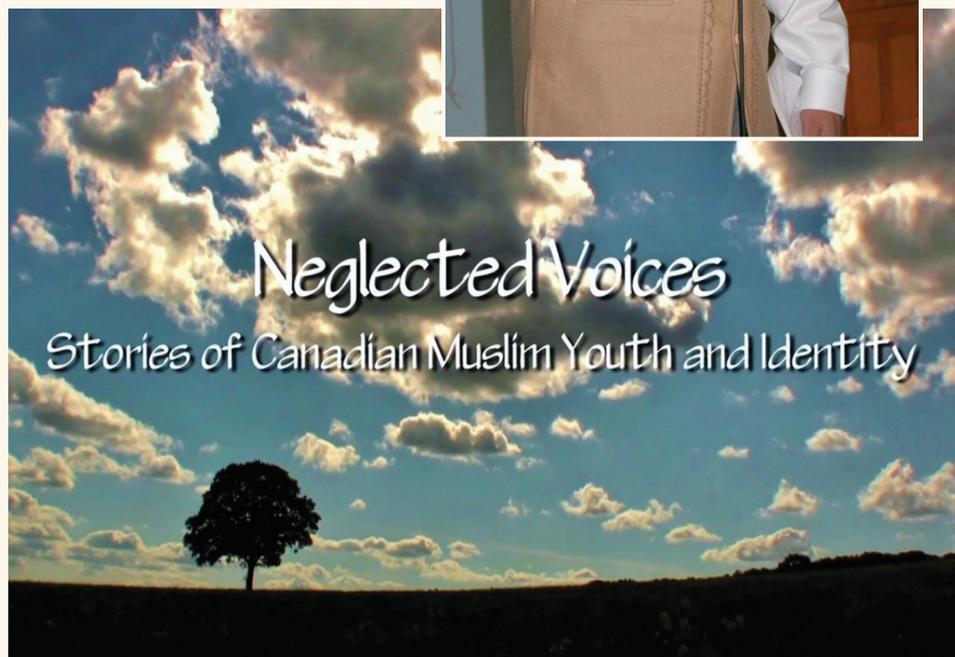
Celebrated poet Boona Mohamed, one of the featured youth in "Neglected Voices," gave a personal testimony, succinctly describing the condition of the Muslims in Canada when he revealed that "sometimes I'm a disappointed Canadian and sometimes I'm a proud Canadian."

Ahmed Saleh spoke of the prejudice he faced on several fronts: his identity as an Arab-African, his association with an urban community, and finally his faith. As he aged, the relationship to Islam transformed so too did his relationship to others and himself as did Kate Kassem, who began wearing *hijab* after moving to Toronto from western Canada.

Fatima Ahmed spoke of the post-9/11 Islamophobia she and her family faced. But each of the young Muslims persevered.

The featured youth are a diverse group whose only commonality is their mutual faith and the individual paths of success they have tread upon. For instance, one woman is a martial arts instructor; another is an activist and educator. One person is an academic, while another is a poet. Each of them have made valuable contributions to Muslim community and Canadian society at large. It is also a celebration of the diversity of experience for which Canada is celebrated.

From these documentary film's inception, there was a commitment to giving Muslims command over their own narrative, essentially giving them



As successive generations of Muslims firmly plant their feet in Canadian soil, narratives that documents the journeys of Muslims will be invaluable tools to aid with navigating society.

tools to tell their stories from their own perspective. And because the projects involved connecting established media professionals with young Muslims, it created important and necessary mentorships to advance.

Also, by documenting their narratives, the youth are validating their experiences and others like them. It is a familiar conversation to hear many youth talk about straddling two worlds and feeling estranged yet engaged with the wider Western world.

Perhaps the videos will reach the ears of those unfamiliar to the lives of Muslims. Most people are fed a singular representation of Muslims from the media which tends to homogenize and stigmatize.

The films will be available online year-end. ■

Tendisai Cromwell, a Toronto-based journalist and creative writer, most recently contributed a short story to *Basodee*, a Canadian Black History Month anthology.
