

“Is it Halal?”: Exploring the Food Practices of Muslim Canadian Women

by
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Abstract

For many Muslims, eating halal food is an everyday practice of religious and/or ethnic self-identification. In Canada, where Muslims are a religious and often ethnic minority, choosing to eat only halal food (foods deemed permissible according to Islamic guidelines), requires intention, adaptability, and sometimes sacrifice. This study examines individual and socially navigated halal food practices of observant Muslim women from a mosque in Victoria, BC. Drawing on Butler's performativity theory, I explore how my interlocutors define, select, prepare, consume, and share halal food as a component of their religious performance and negotiation of identity. I discuss how, although diversely interpreted and negotiated, halal food practices are a corporeal site for meaning making – meaning that is constructed both privately and communally and embedded with Islamic ideals and collective histories.

Keywords: halal food; Muslim; practices; performativity; identity

To Dan:

Thank you for encouraging me, feeding me, learning with me, and loving me.

To my precious kids:

You inspire me to learn and grow.

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Baklava from the BC Halal Food Festival

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Research Question

Why do Muslims eat halal food? What is it like to follow these practices?
How do halal food practices differ among Muslims?

These are some of the questions with which I approached my fieldwork about the meaning of halal food. This research stems from my curiosity about the communicative capacities of foodways, especially from the context of a religious lens. My research question: **“What is the meaning of halal food practice to Muslim women in Canada?”**, examines how adherence to Islamic dietary practices might offer an arena in which to explore the agency, resistance, identity, and values of Muslim women, who are uniquely positioned to cultivate and articulate aspects of following Islam as they negotiate halal food practices for themselves, their families, and for community events. In addition to exploring the commensal value of halal food, and how ‘eating halal’ may contribute to Muslim identity, my fieldwork in Victoria, British Columbia enables me to consider how living in a largely non-Muslim community may impact Islamic dietary practices.

Early in my graduate program, I knew that I would like to examine how adherence to specifically defined foodways (for example, vegan, kosher, Indigenous, or the ‘Paleo diet’) are negotiated and embodied by individuals, and further, how this dietary adherence is a tangible component of self-identification. One option for research that presented itself was to investigate halal food’s meaning to Muslims. As someone who was born and raised in Canada, I recognize how my Eurocentric and Christian upbringing contributes to my biases, including ones involving the Muslim community. As such, I chose this research as a means to interrogate and develop my personal perceptions of Muslims by engaging with Islamic-informed foodways, and also to contribute to the body of knowledge of food as a both a practical and symbolic facilitator of connection, identity, and even difference, through the experiences of Muslim Canadians living in a majority non-Muslim community.

For as long as I can remember I have thought of myself as a “foodie” and someone who wants to learn about different foods and seek out new food experiences as a way to connect with others. Everyone eats, but there is often a significant range in

the amount of care and attention that is placed on the foods one procures, prepares, and consumes. How, when, what, where and with whom one eats presents endless possibilities for varied food practices. On an individual level, food likes and dislikes and associations with food via sensory memories embody history and can influence one's present food experiences and practices (Williams 2022). Mealtimes with family and others guide social relations; food selection or presentation can highlight both differentiation and belonging (Counihan 1999), and the way food is presented, distributed, and consumed serves to "authenticate both social order and moral and aesthetic beliefs and values" (Ochs and Shohet 2006, 35). Even the examination of one "category" of food, halal food, poses myriad examples, each connected to the diversity of the individual responsible for selection, cooking, and presentation of their interpretation of a halal dish (Dorairajoo 2018; Marranci 2012; O'Connor 2012).

Although eating is highly personal and diversity of individual tastes and food practices abound, Abbots (2017) states "eating draws bodies together into networks of relatedness" (35); and I would argue, this connection is possible even in the face of ethnic, political, cultural, and religious difference. Recently, I saw a reel on Instagram, showing a Palestinian-Canadian who was cooking a traditional Gazan meal for the UBC Vancouver Encampment, a group that is standing in solidarity with Palestinians and demanding that their university divest from companies involved in arms-manufacture that enables the ongoing genocide. The students partaking of this dish, called 'foul', were sustained in their bodies and simultaneously strengthened in their stand for justice as they embodied and connected with Gazan-Palestinian culture through food.



Figure 1. Preparing foul (also ‘ful’ or ‘fool’), a Palestinian fava bean dish often served with flatbread

Source: (Nasser, Najjar (@najjar.nasser0). Instagram reel. May 3, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6gvDRdR3fV/?igsh=NG1oZHdpZDV3bmdq.>)

In the Muslim community where I did research, food was often tied to social action – many Muslim restaurant owners in Victoria organized special events to raise money for those suffering in the war in Gaza; I attended a fundraising meal following a magnitude 6.9 earthquake in Morocco; and during Ramadan, leftovers from Iftar were shared with those in need. Although it would be a fascinating topic to research the confluence of food and social activism, my fieldwork was largely complete prior to the Israeli military attacks on Gaza and the multiple displacements of Palestinian civilian populations there. However, before I discuss my fieldwork and share my findings, I want

to express solidarity with and also show appreciation for the Muslim women who generously spent time with me and shared their lives with me.

In the midst of the ongoing violent expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza and its profound impact on Muslims and allies in my community, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the colonial history of Canada, in which Indigenous peoples were expelled from their traditional lands. As a settler of European descent, I wrestle with the impacts of systemic oppression, colonization, occupation, and ethnic genocide where I live. My fieldwork was primarily conducted on unsurrendered Songhees and Esquimalt land, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island known as Victoria. My home is located on the unceded lands of the Quw'utsun people in the Cowichan Valley, approximately an hour's drive up-island from Victoria. I am grateful to live with my family as uninvited guests in this beautiful place, and I endeavor to walk lightly and respectfully, while I (re)educate myself and seek to be an ally committed to reconciliation. For myself, I believe part of the work of decolonization is within – to recognize how I have been complicit in believing or simply not challenging stereotypes, both towards Indigenous peoples, and the Muslim community.

1.2. Research Community

To situate my research, first I give a brief synopsis of Muslims in Canada, then I present an overview of the mosque in Victoria, BC that facilitated both my participant observations and enabled connection with interview participants.

1.2.1. Muslim Canadians

Multiculturalism is an official policy of Canada, and diversity is embedded in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, most Canadians (and myself, especially at the start of this research) do not know enough about Muslims or Islam and (mis)conceptions are often driven by inaccurate depictions in media (Bakht 2008, vii.) Though a small proportion of the population, the number of Muslims in Canada is increasing, growing from 2% in 2001, to 4.9% in 2021 (Government of Canada 2022a). According to the Pew Research Center, the Muslim population in the United States is also increasing, but nearly half of American adults surveyed admitted not personally knowing any Muslims, and Muslim individuals' experiences of religious discrimination are

also on the rise; 48% of adult Muslims surveyed reported discrimination in 2017, compared to 40% in 2007 (Mohamed 2021). In accordance with Bakht's claim, I suggest that the absence of personal connection to Muslims likely leaves many Canadian (and American) individuals to develop perspectives about the Muslim community that are largely influenced by exposure to media (2008, vii). Muslim identity has religious, cultural, and political connotations, and in the media, negative views about Muslim people persist. Following 9/11 especially, a pattern of portraying the bad behaviour of some Muslims "as symptomatic of all", has emerged, invoking concerns that often lead to Islamophobia in the general population (3). Lajevardi (2021) suggests that in the United States, media coverage of Muslims, including Muslim Americans, is more negative than coverage of Latinos, Blacks, or Asian-Americans (1060). And Corbin (2017) describes the false narratives about Muslims presented in television, movies, the news, and through Trump's administration as simultaneously enabling and constituting propaganda (455). For instance, the highly popular television series, *Homeland*, which aired from 2011 to 2020, is reputed for presenting all Muslims as suspicious, and was described as "TV's most Islamophobic show" (Al-Arian 2012). Given that Canadians typically consume American media, stereotypes involving Muslim identity that compel suspicion, disgust, and even hate are likely to be encountered (Bakht 2008,15).

Amid the volatile situation in Gaza, a Canadian news outlet is under investigation for allegedly inciting Islamophobia in the city of Toronto. In June (2024), an ad truck, purportedly paid for by Rebel News, drove through the city of Toronto displaying images of Muslims that appear to be praying, with text, "Is this Yemen? Is this Syria? Is this Iraq? No, this is Canada. Wake up Canada. You are under siege" (Draaisma 2024). Although this incident was widely condemned and is being investigated by the Toronto Police Hate Crime division, it demonstrates how anti-Muslim sentiment may be encountered in Canada. In addition to biased depictions of Muslims in North American, I would suggest that Christian holidays, such as Easter or Christmas, are often celebrated publicly with significantly less, or even no consideration given to Muslim (or other religious groups') holidays.

My purpose for discussing the presence of potentially harmful stereotypes towards Muslims in Canada correlates with halal food being a distinct marker of Muslim identity; as such, choosing to follow Islamic dietary guidelines could trigger

discrimination, or at the very least, act as a signal of difference. In some circumstances and locations this may also impact Muslims' access to halal food.

Despite these concerning trends, Muslim identity cannot be generalized. Muslim identity is diverse and operates on a spectrum; it includes individuals who are practicing, and some who are not; those with liberal expressions of Islam, and others with ultra-orthodox understandings and interpretations of the religion (Marcotte 2010). According to Mehdi (2008), Muslim identity is not exclusively comprised of external religious markers, like wearing a hijab, or for men, having a beard; and being Muslim also does not imply sincere faith. What makes an individual Muslim “is their self-identification with and immersion in a culture and broad ethical understanding that emerges from Islamic societies that have produced such a diversity of individuals” (24). Marcotte (2010) suggests that although Canadian Muslim women are subject to acculturation by living in a nation that has been “fashioned by the Christian tradition”, the importance of Islam is usually maintained by connection to a local mosque, which often serves as social and cultural hub for the Muslim community. The mosque itself can present as an important demonstrator of the enforcement of gender roles for Muslims (359).

1.2.2. The Masjid Al-Iman in Victoria, BC

At present there is a single mosque on Vancouver Island: the Masjid Al-Iman, located near downtown Victoria, about an hour's drive from my home (BCMA n.d.). Greater Victoria, with a population nearing 400,000, is a vibrant city nestled between the Pacific Ocean and rugged coastal rainforest on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The provincial capital, it is popular among tourists and students, retirees, and in recent years, has become home to a significant number of immigrants and refugees. The 2021 Canadian census reported that 10,080 immigrants arrived in Victoria between 2016 and 2021, 12.1% of whom are Muslim. This brings the number of Muslims living in Greater Victoria to 1.3% of the total population. Victoria is comprised of a majority EuroCanadian population, with only 16.7% of the population considered visible minorities (Government of Canada 2022b).

The Masjid Al-Iman's website welcomes visitors, and after I completed a contact form, one of the mosque's social directors emailed me to schedule a tour. Men and women are segregated at the mosque with separate entrances, floors, and prayer

spaces and in preparation for my first visit I was instructed to dress modestly, bring a head covering, and to meet my guide at the women's entrance. During my tour with a friendly, middle-aged Muslim woman, I was told that my presence as a researcher in the mosque was welcome and I was invited to attend various women's groups and activities. Having situated both my connection to the Muslim community and my call for participants to only attendees of the Masjid Al-Iman, it made sense to focus my attention exclusively on the experiences of women as it was unlikely that I would have very much contact with the men who attended the masjid.

The Masjid Al-Iman, which opened in 2012, is designed with separate spaces for men and women to pray, socialize, share a meal, and participate in prayer services which typically involve a message from the Iman. There is a separate street entrance for women, with a numerical keypad lock to allow access at all times of the day for prayer and/or access to other facilities. The women inhabit the upper floor of the building, which includes a library, women's restroom, and shelving for shoes (which must be removed before entering the space of worship). There are bookshelves on either side of the women's prayer room with copies of the Quran, and there are windows at the front of the room that overlook the men's space, below. This enables the women to participate when prayers are being led or listen while the Iman shares a message.

The mosque has a basement below the men's level; it includes a funeral preparation space (which I did not see), and there is a small kitchen connected to a large multi-purpose room – this is where we met for the sisters' group. Men and women are segregated at the mosque with separate entrances, floors and prayer spaces, and when the basement was being used for the women's group, I noticed that men did not enter the space. Women (including guests or those coming for a tour of the mosque) are requested to wear a head covering while inside the mosque.

As I conducted fieldwork it became evident that a highlight of my research on the meaning of halal food to Canadian Muslim women is the diversity of both the attendees at the mosque, and of my interlocutors; inevitably this also reflects varied interpretations of what it means practice Islam, including what it means to eat halal. When I attended events at the mosque I met individuals (some students, others immigrants or refugees) from all over the world; including France, Columbia, Iran, Somalia, the United States, and more. When I put out a call for participants, I advertised in a WhatsApp group chat

intended for Muslim sisters who are connected to the Masjid Al-Iman. This resulted in a pool of participants who came from different ethnic backgrounds – including immigrants from Libya, Egypt, and the Philippines, and, two of my interlocutors grew up in Canada, one with Polish heritage, and the other having a British mother and Moroccan father. All but one of my interlocutors grew up Muslim. My interviews and participant observations within this culturally diverse community entail examples of how halal food practices are individually navigated, and also connected to religious identity. My research is biased towards examining individuals who are involved with the local mosque and describe themselves as practicing, and I interviewed only women. Greater detail about my methods, along with the limitations of my research, will be discussed in the following chapter.

1.2.3. Differences

Several of my interlocutors emphasized that for them, being Muslim comes first; they choose to adhere to Islamic practices over their distinct ethnic traditions. However, as discussed, that which an individual performs publicly (or to a researcher) is not always reflective of the whole. At the masjid I occasionally observed tension and differences of practice among the Muslim sisters which complicates the portrayal of Muslim identity and “proper” execution of Islamic practices.

In March 2023, the topic of the sisters’ group was “preparing for Ramadan”. Approximately a dozen women gathered – drinking tea and nibbling on homemade cookies on this Sunday afternoon in the masjid’s basement, where we sat in a semicircle on folding chairs that took up one corner of the large, windowless room. During the lunar month of Ramadan, practicing Muslims fast (abstaining from food and water) from dawn to dusk, and the daily fast is broken by a meal called Iftar. I asked what sorts of foods were typical for Iftar and heard conflicting responses. A woman described how her family excitedly anticipated Iftars each year because this was when she cooked all their favourite foods. However, one of the group leaders interjected, eyebrows raised, and with a polite, yet firm voice explained that the month of Ramadan is about restraint; accordingly, she prepares soup and light meals for her family’s Iftars. There was an awkward tension among the group for a moment, until another woman in the group shrugged her shoulders and changed the topic to the amount of work it took to not only

make late night meals, but to also ensure that everyone in her family had appropriate pre-dawn nourishment to sustain them while fasting.

When I visited the mosque during Ramadan, the women spread out plastic tablecloths on the floor in the women's meeting room, where we sat to share the Iftar meal. Women of all colours and ages gathered around the makeshift dining area; they appeared to cluster in ethnic or family groups and I heard multiple languages spoken. The food was set up buffet-style, provided by members of the mosque, and the variety of items – dahl, curry, lamb meatballs with olives, spaghetti with chicken and a sweet tomato sauce served over rice, fried bread, and two kinds of salad – reflected the diversity of ethnicities joining together to break their fast. I sat next to a tired looking mother with two young boys who guzzled cans of pop and stared at cartoons on an iPad while she intermittently coaxed them to eat food off a paper plate. After dinner, everything was speedily tidied up for the evening prayers – aside from some elderly women, who sat on chairs at the side of the room, everyone helped clean; packing up leftovers and tearing down the folding tables, while one woman used a carpet sweeper to pick up any bits of food left on the floor.

After helping with the clean-up, I stayed to chat with women in the hallway, outside the meeting room. I met Sarah, a mother and university student who was visiting from Richmond. When I shared my role as a researcher, and my interest in halal food, she described herself as a “foodie” and told me about the upcoming BC Halal Food Festival. While we exchanged contact information, we heard a commotion in the meeting room. Two older women were yelling at each other in what may have been Arabic. I noticed a couple other women shaking their heads, clearly frustrated with the behaviour of the women, but instead of intervening, they walked away.

Sarah blushed as she apologized, “I’m so sorry you have to see this,” she said.

The yelling stopped when one of the older women marched out of the room towards the masjid elevator. At this point, the crowd had thinned, as many women chose to head home instead of participating in what I was told would be a lengthy post-iftar prayer time.

As with any social gathering, one cannot expect total agreement and harmonious relationships between all participants. The diversity of this community, and my

observance of disagreement about the proper type of meal to prepare and eat for family iftars suggests differing interpretations of Islamic practices. It is also important to note that how one presents within a group environment, does not always accurately reflect how one behaves at home, or in public settings away from other Muslims. However, within the mosque, there are both implicit expectations and explicit guidelines to promote group continuity; to align individuals into a fellowship of followers of Islam. One example is the masjid's requirement for women to cover their heads. By conforming to this practice while visiting the masjid, even I, a researcher, was often assumed to be Muslim.

1.3. Thesis Overview

My thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter One, the Introduction presents my research question and provides an overview of Muslim Canadians and, more specifically, my research community.

Chapter Two, "Halal Food Tells a Story", includes a brief literature review on the usefulness of food as an avenue for anthropological research. I then describe my methodology and activities, and discuss how my analysis incorporates Sherry Ortner's (2006) updated practice theory and Judith Butler's (1988) work on performativity as a lens to examine the experiences of my interlocutors, and to suggest how adherence to eating halal shapes identities, behaviours, and relationships.

In Chapter Three, I define halal food: this entails not only the 'textbook' definition of Islamic dietary guidelines, but also how halal food is adapted by some communities worldwide, and how my interlocutors describe what halal food means to them. I present my interlocutors' experiences of navigating eating halal food in a Canadian (largely non-Muslim) environment and describe some of my personal experiences of following halal food guidelines. Additionally, I engage Butler's performativity theory in my discussion of transitions of religious practice and Muslim identity, specifically by exploring how halal food practices are integrated within my interlocutors' self-identification as Muslim women.

Chapter Four, "Halal Food Practices in the Family and Community", discusses how my interlocutors negotiate their halal food practices, including with their families, and I discuss the implications that eating halal can have on one's private and public life.

My data elucidate how my interlocutors describe individual negotiation of their halal food practices, how this is communicated in family relationships, and the implications of eating halal food on their feelings of commitment to Islam. I highlight the experiences of a recent convert to Islam, Natalia and explore how she incorporates practices, specifically the practice of eating halal food, into the crafting of her new identity as a Muslim woman.

Finally, Chapter Five presents key findings and conclusions from my research; these centre around the Canadian context of Islamic dietary guidelines, and how the practice of eating halal food contributes to my interlocutors' identity.

Chapter 2. Halal Food Tells a Story

2.1. “The definition is quite wide when it comes to halal” - Joy

The late afternoon sun sparkles on the asphalt pathway leading through the bustling inner-city community park where I am to meet Joy (pseudonym) for my first interview about halal food. Children squeal at the nearby playground, and on the other side of the park a group of teens chase each other around a basketball court shooting hoops.

Joy had messaged me on WhatsApp, letting me know that she'd made it to the park early.

I receive another message:

“Im sitting on one of the table with chairs. Its easy to see me. After the playground.”

It feels rather warm for September, but at least there is a cool breeze. I scan the area, wondering if I will see a woman with a headscarf. Instead, I spot a youthful looking woman with brown hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a long dark skirt and a pink sweatshirt. She's sitting at a picnic table under the shade of the trees that separate the playground from the open sports fields.

As I approach, Joy stands up with a big smile. She's friendly and eager to share her halal food experiences.

Joy, who I learn is well-educated (she's in Victoria to pursue a business degree after obtaining a PhD in the Philippines), is 32 years old, married, and her husband is originally from Turkey. Although she grew up in a Muslim home, she explains to me that her family was not very observant about halal food practices; this is something she describes as common for Filipino Muslims.

“In the Philippines, anything that is not pork is halal. But when you really read the Quran or if you're a conservative Muslim, you will understand and you should know that halal food is not something that is not only (not) pork. The definition is quite wide when it comes to halal food.”

Joy describes how her desire to eat only halal food makes eating in the Philippines challenging. When she visits home, she cooks separately from her family and is careful to avoid restaurants unless she can be certain that their food is halal.

Now, living in Victoria, Joy and her husband often socialize with Muslims from the Turkish community. She mentions a donair restaurant that Turkish friends opened recently, where she and her husband like to eat, because, “we know the owner, we feel we can trust them (to serve halal)”.

I ask Joy, “Do you have any favourite halal foods?”, expecting to hear about a dish that stems from a family recipe.

“Halal hot dogs.” she answers, without hesitation.

I’m surprised by her response.

“Okay... Why do you like them?” I counter.

“It’s easy to cook and I think it’s the easiest food that is halal that I can just cook and I know we have protein and I love to eat it every morning.”

(Joy, Sept. 9, 2023)

2.2. Why Study Food?

When I was eight or nine years old, instead of requesting cake for my birthday, I asked for cornbread. My mom was surprised but seemed happy – retrospectively, I am guessing my request alleviated pressure on our family’s limited grocery budget, since we already had the ingredients in our cupboard to make cornbread. After supper, my mom put candles into the golden yellow ‘cake’ and brought it to the table – still in the aluminum pan it was baked in, that was discoloured with use and age. My older brother and parents sang “Happy Birthday”, and I blew out the unusually short yellow, pink, blue, and green candles that were recycled from the last celebrated birthday. I eagerly smeared Country Crock margarine on my still-warm, crumbly square of cornbread; its colour reminded me of the soft glow of the early morning summer sun. The margarine melted into the grainy yellow and tan speckled cornmeal-based cake, and I took small bites, savouring the sweet, slightly salty morsels that, to me, tasted like if corn on the cob made a baby with a buttered saltine cracker.

If it is not clear by now, how and what we eat tells a story. Holtzman's (2006) discussion of food and memory suggests that food’s meaning is rarely communicated in material or biological terms – “stuff that we as organisms consume by virtue of requiring energy” – instead, the meaning of food is subjectively and culturally contrasted (362). In a review of the anthropology of food and eating, Mintz and Du Bois (2002) suggest that since food and eating are both important (and required) for all human beings, this is a

valuable subfield in which to develop and advance anthropological theory and methods. Some of the earliest anthropological literature emphasized food systems and were utilized to inform the analysis of archaeological data (102).

Food's highly symbolic nature is emphasized when associated with religion, according to Feeley-Harnik (1995), who states that food allows us to explore "who, and with whom, we are as social beings" (580). Religious instructions and beliefs are central to foods that may or may not be consumed, and in the case of Jews and Muslims, these signify difference and separation (570). Prohibitions can present a barrier to accessing the "right" kinds of foods, such as properly slaughtered meat (571). Inability to acquire foods that align with religious practices can become a barrier for immigrants, and others, to connect with their beliefs. Feeley-Harnik presents Judeo-Christian and Islamic practices concerning food as forms of "eating and remembering" (567); likewise, food often serves a social function in religious settings, and it facilitates social memory (579).

Food, as embodied material culture, uniquely enables individuals to experience and connect with meaning; "the eating body can thus be conceived as a culmination of matter, knowledge and social relations" (Abbots 2017, 16). Experiences pertaining to food preparation and consumption are affected by the sensorial, shaping the experience of the individual body and its relation to the social body. These practices of the body, enhanced by the phenomenological, provide connections to memory, affiliation, and identity (Khan 2014; Markowitz and Avieli 2022; Ortner 2006; Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014). Rhys-Taylor (2017) describes the role of the sensorial in episodic memory, stating, "What people eat, the flavour they are drawn to, those which they crave and the aromas they miss, are integral to their sense of who they are" (114).

My childhood memory of cornbread for a birthday cake presents as an example of the multi-layered relationship between food and memory by which I could extrapolate historical, social, and cultural meaning (Holtzman 2006, 373). For example, the simplicity of ingredients and recycled candles connects to my family's socioeconomic position in the aftermath of the early 1980s' recession, and the 'low fat' Country Crock margarine signals the dietary restrictions my mother enforced in our family for health reasons (and, let's be honest, it was an era involving cult-like commitment to sweating along with morning aerobics on tv and pursuing thinness by obsessively avoiding fat in foods). Lastly, my affinity for cornbread itself stems from reading *The Little House on the Prairie*

series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Now, when I make cornbread for my children, I often describe how once, when I was a child, I chose it as my birthday cake. Cornbread, based on this memory of mine, uniquely communicates elements of my personal and family identity, and the influence of sociohistorical conditions upon my family's eating habits.

Carole Counihan (1999) describes food as “a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena” (6). When I spoke with my interlocutors, I asked what sorts of halal meals they like to prepare, in hopes that I might examine how their food choices are contextualized and influenced. The vignette of Joy, at the start of this chapter, demonstrates how my exploration of the meaning of halal food is impacted by the intersectionality of my interlocutors. Joy, who is an immigrant and student in an interethnic marriage, states: “The definition is quite wide when it comes to halal food”. Her identity is situated in multiple realms in which she navigates her commitment to follow halal food practices. She presents the fact that not all Muslims agree on what is halal; yet, she “feels she can trust” Turkish Muslims' preparation of halal food; and, her favourite halal meal is hot dogs (Sept. 9, 2023).

How and what one eats is never merely about filling one's stomach, but it also, as Rouse and Hoskins (2004) describe is “an expression of social, personal and religious communion” (227). When Muslims eat halal food, they may not entirely distinguish between cultural practices and religious beliefs; however, by preparing halal food they inevitably connect to the greater Muslim community and promote connection to Islamic ideals and collective histories.

2.3. How Might We Understand the Meaning of Food?

My research is inspired by numerous food-focussed ethnographies; however, I draw from the following examples to develop my methodological approach in exploring the meanings of halal food for Muslim women in Victoria, BC.

In *The Agency of Eating: Mediation, Food and the Body*, Emma-Jayne Abbotts (2017), presents the “eating body” as a place of discourse for the meaning of food where the embodied experience of eating begins with food as matter, yet leads to the meaning of the matter of food. While she supports Claude Levi-Strauss' notion, that “food is good

to think with,” Abbots suggests that it also important to remember that food is food (material, something we eat), and in her ethnographic work she discusses what food *feels* like when it is encountered (2). Abbots describes the experiences of Ecuadorian migrants working in the United States, for whom foods from home offer a “vital material bond” that enables a continued sense of belonging to home (59). However, she suggests that migrants may experience a blurring of boundaries where food preferences and choices become hybridized (61). Eating away from home can change a migrant’s body; it may be seen as weaker (68), and/or disconnected and influenced by other values (69). Abbots states, “the substances of food can give us deeper insights into the ways in which social and political relations are not just intellectually experienced but are also corporeally felt” (144). She suggests eating is an embodied and affective experience that is both personal and individual, while it makes and remakes the body. Both how and what one eats, express the agency of an eating body (145).

Kolata and Gillson (2021) discuss a feast prepared by Buddhist women that not only necessitates adherence to dietary requirements but is also a highly aesthetically crafted experience. They highlight how the hosts of the feast demonstrate food literacy; they are responsible to demonstrate and cultivate an eating experience that aligns with Buddhist values. By participating in a Buddhist feast, attendees learn what it feels like to be Buddhist, and this generates religious belonging.

Family mealtimes are described by Ochs and Shohet (2006) as spaces of social and cultural apprenticeship (46). They explore how food practices explicitly and implicitly express moral, emotional, and symbolic meaning, including social structure and values. In this example, emphasis is focussed on *how* one eats, and this is conveyed through both language and practices, and often influenced or enforced through relational hierarchy, such as in a parent-child relationship.

Lastly, Rouse and Hoskins (2004) detail a Eid picnic in Los Angeles County hosted by a community of Sunni Muslims who are predominantly African-American. They describe an eclectic cuisine that epitomizes the intersectionality of the women whose dishes express both religious commitment and creative adaptation to the diversity within their community. In this scenario, women are predominantly responsible for selecting and preparing food, and this is suggested to constitute an “empowering

religious practice” as they navigate the confluence of nutrition, religious dietary requirements, and ethnic tradition through their culinary expression (246).

These examples highlight the importance of examining both individual and communal food experiences. Abbots’ (2017) ethnographic work, which foregrounds the body, demonstrates that food’s meaning is affected by how it makes one feel; that is, individuals associate food (including taste preferences) with their personal histories, often involving ethnic traditions. When access to traditional ingredients or cuisine is challenged, it can affect one’s sense of belonging to their community of origin. Similarly, Kolata and Gillison’s (2021) example explores how both the ingredients and aesthetics of a meal cultivate belonging, and, in this case, specialized knowledge is required to properly prepare and present a Buddhist feast (567). Although eating is highly personal, it is often a socialized experience, whether in a family or community setting. Ochs and Shohet (2006) and Rouse and Hoskins’ (2004) examples demonstrate the importance of examining how preparing and sharing food has symbolic and communicative capacities; mealtimes may involve self-fashioning behaviours to demonstrate alignment with one’s community or family.

My research within an ethnically diverse community enables me to examine how my interlocutors’ sociohistorical backgrounds might influence their foodways, and inevitably impact their distinct negotiation of halal food adherence. My fieldwork explores how halal food can present as an eclectic variety of cuisines, as such I examine how maintaining halal food requirements relies upon specialized knowledge, not unlike what is required for a Buddhist feast (Kolata and Gillson 2021). Additionally, I look to the ways that halal food guidelines shape my interlocutors’ food practices in relation to family and the wider community, and how their individual adherence is an ongoing, corporeally navigated component of Muslim identity.

2.4. Methodology

Drawing from the above examples, I incorporate methods that enable me to examine both individual and communal food practices. By exploring halal food in the realms of its selection, preparation, and consumption, I endeavored to understand the holistic context of halal food’s meaning to my research participants. I utilized sketching, photography, and audio and video recordings (with permission) to compile descriptive data on halal

food and Islamic dietary practices, through which I analyse the embeddedness of meaning and values in my interlocutors' experiences (Ortner 1995). I visited halal restaurants, looked for halal foods in grocery stores, and cooked halal foods with one of my interlocutors, and at home, for my family. I listened to podcasts by Muslim women, searched for and followed Muslim "influencers" on Instagram (especially those talking about food), and looked online for recipes and websites dedicated to halal food. Most importantly, my research included eating halal food – while, simultaneously, I became far more cognizant of when I was eating foods that are considered haram (foods specified as "not permitted" within Islamic dietary guidelines).

Initially, I was interested in utilizing halal food practices as a lens through which to explore embodiment; however, the scope of this project did not allow adequate time to observe participants as closely, or as in depth as would be required to interpret how they might embody the meaning of eating halal. Although I had multiple visits with one participant, I recognize that it would take significantly more time to develop a relationship whereby I might recognize behaviours and practices that demonstrate embodiment. To that end, my fieldwork involved participant observation, along with semi-structured interviews that explored my interlocutors' activities and practices relating to halal food.

Between January and November of 2023, I attended numerous public events at the Masjid Al-Iman, in Victoria, BC. I attended the women's only 'Reverts and Friends' group (for those returning to, converting to, or learning about Islam), and an Iftar dinner following Ramadan at the Mosque. All the events that I observed at the mosque were gender segregated (women only), for instance, Iftar meals were held in both the men's and women's areas of the mosque. The only exception at the women's Iftar meal were very young boys attending with their mothers. Each event I attended at the mosque included food – from shared snacks, served with coffee and tea at the sisters' groups, to the buffet-style Iftar dinner during Ramadan. In addition to participant observation at the mosque, I attended the 2023 BC Halal Food Festival in Surrey and a fundraising dinner that was organized and carried out primarily by Muslim community members in response to the devastating earthquake in Morocco that occurred in September 2023. While the latter were not religious events, both served only halal food, and appeared to be oriented towards the Muslim community, whilst welcoming the general public.

I was invited by one of the mosque’s social directors into the “Victoria Muslim Sisters” WhatsApp group (with over 300 members), and also the smaller “Reverts & Friends” WhatsApp group (with 40+ members). With the permission of the administrator, I recruited interview participants by posting within these two groups. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants (four in-person, and one interview was conducted over Zoom). Out of all the participants, I spent the most time with “Natalia”, an early-twenties Canadian of Polish heritage who was living in Victoria for a university co-op work term. After our initial semi-structured interview, we exchanged many messages over WhatsApp, and Natalia invited me to her home for two cooking demonstrations (one which included shopping together for halal meat and other ingredients).



Figure 2. Sharing a halal meal with Natalia

As previously mentioned, my research is limited to a pool of participants that are directly connected to the Masjid Al-Iman. As such, my analysis and conclusions provide insight that focusses on practicing Muslims. Additionally, it is notable that each of the women who agreed to participate in interviews either had some post-secondary education or were currently students. The participants' ages ranged from early 20s to 50s, and they were ethnically diverse, with three of my five interlocutors being immigrants to Canada. Lastly, four out of the five women are married, and three have children. When requested, I have used pseudonyms in place of my interlocutors' names.

Through both my participant observations and interviews, I obtained data on individual and socialized eating practices, including how Islamic dietary guidelines (eating halal) impacts my interlocutors' decisions about what, how, and where they might eat. My interviews included questions about shopping for, preparing, and sharing halal food and I inquired about how their individual food practices may have changed and why. Although my research touches on the experience of being a Muslim Canadian and the complexities of living as a religious (and in some cases, ethnic) minority, I endeavor to highlight halal food practices as the key storyteller from which to extrapolate meaning.

2.5. Overview of Theory

Knauff (1997) suggests that “practice engages diverse forms of identity that do not boil down to a shared location” (132). Drawing from relevant literature, my experiences at the masjid, and the information shared in interviews, it is apparent that eating halal is practiced (with varying iterations) by a richly diverse community of Muslims. For many Muslims eating halal is a part of everyday life. According to Rachel Brown (2016), who discusses Muslims in both Paris and Montreal, eating halal food, or at least following halal guidelines to some degree, is one of the key actions by which individuals choose to identify as Muslim, even if they do not consider themselves observant to Islam (189). Eating halal food (which I define and discuss more fully in the next chapter) falls under an umbrella of practices associated with Islam. In this sense, it is connected to a greater system of religious practices; yet it is embedded in Muslim culture, and one might eat halal “effortlessly” by living in a majority Muslim community, or consume it based on familial tradition, or eating halal may be a conscientious practice in alignment with one's desire to be religiously adherent to Islamic dietary guidelines. Through my observations of my interlocutors' navigation of Islamic dietary practices when shopping, cooking, and

consuming halal food I suggest that halal food's meaning is explicitly and tacitly experienced. Further, there is both an individual and socialized component of eating halal that warrants discussion.

My theoretical analysis is twofold. First, I draw from practice theory as presented by Sherry Ortner (2006) to analyze how the everyday eating of halal food by my interlocutors is shaped by social and historical factors, whilst being subject to individual agency. Next, I discuss how adherence to halal food practices might represent performance of Muslim identity, as per Judith Butler's (1988) discussion of how acts of an individual are performances that allow them to make and remake their individual identities (519). Through these analyses I suggest how individual adherence to eating halal shapes identities, behaviours, and relationships, and ultimately, my interlocutors' choice to eat halal food tells a story of who they are.

2.5.1. Practice Theory

Who we are as social beings is exemplified in what we do. Bourdieu provides a foundation for practice in his elaboration of habitus, whereby people's actions are shaped by internally embedded structures and systems (1977, 72). According to Ortner (2006), Bourdieu's theory focuses on how "social practices tend to reproduce rather than change the world"; however, updating this theory, she suggests practice to be transformative. Through innately social practices, social subjects are produced, whilst simultaneously "the world is being made through actions" (2006, 16).

Ortner's (2005) ethnography, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* follows the lives of her own high school cohort and elucidates the interplay between individual agency and social forces in shaping "the real practices of life" (173). Describing this work as a "social and cultural geography" (5), Ortner explores elements such as gender, class, ethnicity, and the historic conditions experienced by her cohort. Then she asks what her participants "made" of their lives; what sorts of identities and practices did they develop, and how much these have "reproduced and/or transformed U.S. society in the second half of the twentieth century" (15-16). While I have not conducted the same sort of longitudinal overview as Ortner, my analysis attempts to convey how my interlocutors' halal food practices are not simply about eating a specific diet, but they are located in a greater social and historical structure. These daily

negotiated food practices develop and may transition in conjunction with individual and socially navigated circumstances, one's location, and life changes, as evidenced by my discussion on transformations of halal food practices in my interlocutors' lived experiences. On one hand, one might say that my interlocutors' intellectual understanding of the meaning of eating halal influences their practices; however, halal food practices concurrently have a corporeal affect; both on a material level as nutritional "building blocks" of one's physical body, and by affecting where one physically locates oneself to shop for halal food or consume halal food. Thus the interconnectedness of identity and practice is tangibly expressed through the substance of halal food which is appreciated and negotiated both intellectually and physically (Abbots 2017; Ortner 2005).

2.5.2. Exploring Practices in the Research Community

Practice forms the social self; it begins in childhood and continues throughout one's lifetime; whilst continuously being influenced by larger events in the world (Ortner 2006,9). The community of women at the masjid in Victoria not only represent varied socioeconomic categories, but also include those born Canada, international students, immigrants, and refugees. Many came from majority Muslim countries, being immersed in Islam from birth. Some hold to fundamentalist expressions of Islam, while others shared with me "modern" and feminist views of being Muslim. Tan and Vishnevskaya (2022) suggest that in the United States, public stereotypes present American Muslim women as either a cultural threat, or in need of liberation (2). A young Muslim student I spoke with at a sisters' group shared frustration with the stereotypes projected onto Muslim woman; she emphasized that being a modern Muslim woman does not automatically mean that one is cloistered away, or uneducated, or oppressed and subservient, or unable to take on meaningful roles in public spheres. Although the mosque presents an environment in which diverse Muslims engage in common Islamic practices, each brings their own identity, whether observable or not, to the group.

Through my attendance at potluck style sisters' groups, an Iftar, and by way of discussion with my interlocutors, I became aware that halal food – even halal food served at the mosque – may reflect and provide representations of the ethnically and theologically diverse Muslim community in Victoria. While there are commonalities concerning food served that stem from following Islamic dietary guidelines, even halal

food guidelines are ultimately interpreted and practiced by individuals subject to the social and historical past and present that is unique to their individual experiences (Ortner 2006; Rouse and Hoskins 2004).

At one sisters' group potluck, there was a table of food brought by various women to share; it included Timbits, homemade cookies, mandarin oranges, and what looked like homemade samosas – golden fried pastry wrapped around a filling. One woman pointed at the dish of samosas and asked, “Does this have meat?”.

Another woman, presumably the one who brought the dish answered, “Don't worry, it's halal.”

The first woman's face scrunched up and she asked again, “But, is there meat in it?”.

“Well, yes,” the second woman said, sounding slightly annoyed. “But it's mostly eggs and herbs and spices.”

With that answer, the first woman did not put a samosa on her plate, but instead reached for other snacks on the table.

While I do not know the reason for this exchange, it is possible that the first woman is a vegetarian. Alternatively, it may be that she eats only zabiha meat, that is, meat that is formally certified halal, and she is aware that within the community, not all Muslims adhere to this stricture. It is clearly stated in Islamic doctrine that pork is haram (not permitted), but there are varying beliefs about other meats – and whether one must only eat zabiha meat. Therefore, asking specifically, “Is the meat you used in your recipe ‘zabiha’?” could sound offensive. Halal food practices in a multicultural environment facilitate hybrid offerings that are individually and diversely interpreted and navigated (O'Connor, 2012). My analysis of practice is contextualized through attentiveness to my interlocutors' history and culture, whilst recognizing the present moment in which their practice exists, thereby acknowledging that cultural expressions are not static (Ortner 2006, 11).

Both my discussions with interlocutors and my experiences at the masjid reveal the inevitable differences among Muslims. My interlocutors are diverse but join under one identity, participating as practicing Muslims in the community represented at the

Masjid Al-Iman. Their ethnically diverse backgrounds result in nuanced and varied interpretations of Islamic practice, in addition to eclectic food traditions. While I recognize the attempts of my interlocutors and the leaders of the sisters' group to represent a unified, welcoming community, followers of Islam, or any religion, are not always uniform in their beliefs and religious expression. This is emblematic within both Victoria, and the global Muslim community, which comprises people from many cultural backgrounds, and results in various iterations of halal food practices.

In addition to diverse interpretation of Islamic practices, Muslims display different "levels of practice" (including in how they observe halal food guidelines) and this may be connected to cultural tradition or personal devotion; however, the foundations (or pillars) of Islam are explicitly communicated requirements. That is, to be a follower of Islam, one commits to fulfill five core practice. These practices emphasize demonstrable physical obedience and include the following: testifying by making a profession of faith, daily prayers, fasting and observing Ramadan, giving to those in need, and hajj (making the pilgrimage to Mecca). Following Islam is described as a way of life; it encourages mindful devotion and this mindfulness is instituted through explicit instructions regarding followers' behaviour. Take for example the requirement of daily prayers: a practicing Muslim is expected to pray five times each day, performing these prayers in the right way, and at the right times. Additionally, for devout Muslims, everyday eating that adheres to Islamic dietary guidelines is an essential component of being a "good Muslim" (Curtis 2013).

While the pillars of Islam are arguably explicit, Islamic practices are also influenced by sociopolitical, cultural, and regional interpretations of Islam. During my examination of halal food practices, I noted additional bodily practices that might signal my interlocutors' connection to being Muslim and following Islam. These observations further demonstrate diversity within expressions of Islam; being Muslim is performed in a variety of ways.

One such practice connected to Muslim identity that is not universal, is veiling for women. In my observations, including those of my interview participants and during observations at the mosque or events organized by the Muslim community, I noticed that not all Muslim women wear hijab. When I attended the Muslim Sisters' meetings at the Masjid Al-Iman, I observed a variety of veiling practices; at one event, a young adult

woman simply kept her head and hair covered with the hood of her sweatshirt. At the same meeting, another woman wore a burka-style outfit – only the skin of her face and hands were visible; the rest of her body was draped in dark turquoise cloth that flowed around her body, obscuring her shape. A component of my participant observation included attending the *Muslim Sisters' Reverts and Friends* monthly event; this meeting is specifically designed for converts, reverts, and those interested in Islam – it includes a lesson and the opportunity for questions and discussion with socialization afterwards. During one of my visits to mosque, there was a commotion, and two younger women came down the stairs and burst into our meeting room. “There is a woman in the mosque without her head covered,” one of them announced, sounding alarmed. The leader of our group reassured her, saying, “It’s okay, she was just visiting and is on her way out.” It turns out a new convert had invited her mother to observe the sisters’ group; to “meet” the community in which her daughter was now involved. Although the guidelines (including instructions for visitors listed on the mosque’s website) request that women wear a head covering, and although it may be engrained in the social etiquette of the mosque, it seems the new convert’s mother did not cover her head but was still welcomed to attend the sisters’ group in the basement.

Outside of the mosque, my interlocutors were varied in their attire; some wore a hijab to our interview, others did not. My interviews each began in a similar fashion; after reviewing my ethical responsibilities and obtaining consent, I launched into the key qualifying questions: “Do you consider yourself Muslim, and do you ever eat halal food?”. All my interlocutors replied in the affirmative to both questions, but a couple of them were quick to qualify their statements.

I met Hana, a married mother of three and immigrant from Libya, in a coffee shop on a quiet Monday morning. She wore an oversized peach striped flannel shirt, loose black slacks, and a purple headscarf. She replied “yes” to both my questions and added, “I eat *only* halal food. I never eat any other food. Maybe by mistake, but intentionally, or if I knew... never” (Sept. 11, 2023).

Joy, the married Filipino student whom I highlighted at the start of this chapter, wore a loose pink sweatshirt, long skirt, and her head was uncovered. She answered: “Of course, I consider myself 100 percent Muslim and I just eat halal food” (Sept. 9, 2023).

Joy was dressed modestly, yet she did not wear clothes that would inherently signal to others that she is Muslim – still, she expressed that she is “100 percent” Muslim. Hana wore a hijab to our coffee shop meeting, and in later conversation, she explained her outward expression (wearing a hijab) as essential to her identity. Both women prioritize what goes into their bodies via their halal food practices, but they have different approaches to adornment as Muslim women, based on my observation of them in a public setting.

While veiling is a valuable point in the discussion of Islamic practices, it is complicated by the differing opinions that Muslims have on whether or not women are required to wear hijab. Mahmood (2012) describes veiling as a symbol of both piety and politics in her discussion of Egyptian Muslim women. Veiling might be practiced as a continuation of tradition or out of habit, yet it may also be strictly mandated by fundamentalist Muslims. Feminist movements have produced divergent veiling practices among Muslim women; some claim veiling is a sign of subordination and oppression, and they refuse to veil (sometimes at extreme risk to their wellbeing); and other feminist expressions within Islam view choosing to veil as a reclamation of religious rights and identity. For example, in Iran, women-led protests inspired by feminist scholarship are opposing the treatment of girls and women based on the government’s “moral code” that deems hijabs compulsory (Molana, Ranjbar, and Razavi 2023). However, in Egypt, political suppression of religious practices sparked a revival of young adult Muslim women endeavoring to assert their religious rights and identity by wearing hijab as an act of righteous indignation and defiance to secular-liberalism; and in Britain, some young adults perform their Muslim identities “to practise both rebellion and conformity”(Michael 2011, 209). The 2024 summer Olympics in Paris highlight the intensity of political involvement regarding hijabs, with France banning their athletes from wearing a hijab during the games, despite admitting that they cannot enforce this ruling upon visiting competitors (Ahmed 2024). The varied perspectives behind veiling (or whether one considers veiling an essential practice) suggests that inexplicit practices may be influenced by ethnic traditions, politics, or individual piety, or a combination of these.

Similar to Mahmood’s examination of veiling practices, I explore the minutiae of eating halal food, including how my interlocutors have been socialized (or not) to eat halal. I attempt to unravel and present the structures embedded in halal food practices,

all which are open to interpretation, habit, identity and political influence. Simultaneously the ever-adapting essence (and oftentimes execution) of these practices reinforce, shape, and transform how my interlocutors exist in, and make their worlds. I explore who my interlocutors are, and are making themselves to be, through their engagement in halal food practices. As stated earlier, food is communicative – it is a tactile and visceral representation of one’s history, memories, and affiliations; further, the way one eats and who one eats with is equally communicative. As such, I look to practice theory as a framework for unpacking halal food’s multidimensional composition, and how it can both reinforce meaning, but also have its meaning redefined through individual practice.

2.6. Performing ‘Muslimness’ Through Halal Food Practices?

In her 1988 article about performativity and gender, Judith Butler describes how acts and performances of an individual are part of “becoming” and inhabiting a particular identity. In this case, she posits gender as constructed through repetition; identity that is “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). According to Butler, bodies are not only something that we are, but we “do” our bodies, and each person enacts this differently as a result of individual interpretation, and I would add, individual agency. From Butler’s theorization, ones’ gender, or as per the example, being “woman”, is not a given; it is enacted and revealed through performance, and this performance is affected by social constructs and practices. Performance may be accented or enhanced by clothing, physical presentation, and behaviours or practices, but these only cause a “woman” to do a presentation of a woman; thus, revealing how “becoming” a woman is embodied individually, according to one’s history, culture, and social network (Butler 1988).

In a critique of Butler’s work, Kath Weston (2002) suggests performance theory relies on the premise that an innate or “underlying essence” of one’s identity is non-existent (57). However, while people might dress or present a similar way in performing their identities, the meaning which they individually internalize could be different (62). This complicates Butler’s argument which suggests that how one presents their gender is socially constructed and happens in relationship to other people. If one’s identity relies primarily on visual aspects of presentation, and through repetition of practice one both self-identifies and is relationally identified as a particular gender, then performativity

could be interpreted as mechanical (87). Mahmood's (2012) discussion about Islamic practices presents contradictory examples of whether a pious Muslim is created by the performance of veiling, which for some is believed to be an essential practice to demonstrate modesty. Some of Mahmood's interlocutors expressed that as they perform a pious act, they are becoming pious, even if they do not feel it; others argue that modesty is about character – it is internal, perhaps granted to them by Allah, and thus not created by an action (23).

Within the confines of the mosque, social conformity aids the performance of Muslim womanhood. Here, there are expectations of how to dress, eat, and behave as an observant Muslim (or, a respectful guest). A new convert might perform Muslim identity, and through practices, make for themselves a new life or reality in which they are a follower of Islam. Part of becoming Muslim involves commitment to learn how to engage practices they understand as Islamic, both by reading Islamic texts, and learning from respected Muslim teachers and elders (mullahs and sheiks). This type of instruction and demonstration was evident in the sisters' group which I observed. My interlocutors, most of whom have followed Islam throughout their lives, draw from a repertoire of behaviours to perform their identities and construct their worlds as they negotiate being Muslim in their public and private lives. Arguably, even Muslims who have been born into a Muslim family must learn, negotiate, and internalize what it means to be Muslim. Through practices, they continually make, remake, and unmake their Muslim identities (Butler 1988; Ortner 2006).

In the case of eating halal food, one of my interlocutors, Hana, was adamant about its importance in her life – I asked, “What does halal mean to you? What does it mean to eat halal?” She immediately connected it to Islam; to her belief system, and that by eating halal she would be spiritually pure.

Like for me, spiritual purity, like, consuming halal, how can I say it?

Like, when you feel like you are adhering to the Islamic dietary, following, that gives me the spiritual purity, like I feel I am pure, I feel like I am doing direct things, you know.

(Hana, Sept. 11, 2023)

Both Butler's and Ortner's theories aid my analysis in understanding the meaning of halal food practices to performing and constructing Muslim identity. Similar to

Mahmood's discussion of veiling, which demonstrates Islamic practice as complexly understood and individually interpreted, eating halal food might be an act of obedience and commitment to Islam, to make oneself a better person and a better Muslim. Still, halal food practices are diverse; and despite being founded within set guidelines which result in similar restrictions, Muslims who practice eating halal may internalize different meaning based upon their cultural and religious backgrounds (Rouse and Hoskins 2004).

Some Islamic practices, like only eating zabiha meat or wearing hijab can highlight diversity among Muslims; diverse practices stem from varied interpretations that are subject to myriad influences. Like veiling, halal food practices that are not explicitly defined might signal identity, however, vastly different individual motivations for veiling or eating halal exist, even within one location, such as the community of women from the Masjid in Victoria. Participation in a multicultural Muslim community has implications both on how lifelong Muslims practice, but also on the process of "becoming Muslim" and learning Islamic practices for individuals who come to Islam later in life. Bolognani and Mellor (2012) unpack the complexity of using a "religion versus culture" framework in their discussion of British Pakistani Muslim women's marriage choices. While a fundamentalist view of Islam argues a universal, "pure" Muslim identity that is rooted in the belief that Islam is both timeless and universal, the lived experiences of Muslims exemplify the impact of social and historical context upon practices, and subsequently, identity (223).

2.7. Conclusions

I began this chapter with a short vignette about Joy, a Filipino Muslim student, living in Victoria with her Turkish husband. As my very first interview, I was intrigued to learn that Muslims, even within the same household, may hold different interpretations of how to eat halal. By exploring the halal food practices of a small number of self-described observant Muslims, I endeavor to reveal the intangible qualities of halal food that stem from centuries of history and ethnic tradition yet are inevitably influenced by current social and geographic factors. In turn, my interlocutors literally and figuratively build their lives with the halal food that they eat (Ortner 2006). Still, my interlocutors' individual halal food practices are distinct – despite each being recognizable in the category of halal food. By examining the details of halal food experiences, my data presents personally

navigated and interpreted practices that are part of the story of who they are and how they exist as Muslim women.

Chapter 3. Dining on and Defining Halal Food

3.1. BC Halal Food Festival



Figure 3. Our halal meal from Jerusalem Grill

Smoke rises from a large, raised charcoal grill as a man in a black and white striped apron twirls sizzling skewers of meat at the Indonesian 'Dugan House' booth. There's a long line up of eager customers waiting under sunny skies in the grassy field that is filled with white tents, each with different offerings for the BC Halal Food Fest. A woman wearing a lavender coloured headscarf, long-sleeved blue and white striped tunic, and loose beige pants hurries between the cash register at the front of the booth and

silver-coloured food warming pans set on an adjoining table. She calls out orders to the two male 'grill-masters', then hurriedly fills take-out containers with rice, meat, and dumplings, and delivers them to customers. My significant other (who joined me for this important and delicious fieldwork), and I opt to sample both types of dumplings, one with minced chicken and the other, beef, served with a chili-garlic sauce. We make our way to an opening in the makeshift dining area – a section of white, wall-less tents, set up with folding tables and chairs and filled with people eating many different sorts of foods.

It's nearly five o'clock and crowds are teeming around the dozens of food stalls, looking for dinner. There's incredible variety available: Texas style BBQ, shawarma and kabobs, fried chicken, burgers, bubble tea, hot dogs, stir-fried noodles, Turkish ice cream, and more. The visitors to the food festival are equally varied; I see families with small children, adult couples walking together as if on a date, groups of teens and young adults, and there are many seniors – most of them attended by younger adults within a family group. Approximately half of the women I see are wearing headscarves, some colourful and loosely dangling down their backs, and there are a small number of women covered head-to-toe in black burkas. The constant thrum of conversation dotted with laughter fills the air, and I hear multiple languages spoken. Apart from some stressed-looking parents managing cranky, demanding young children, most festivalgoers are engaged, enjoying both the company of friends and family, as well as the tasty treats that surround us.

The festival, taking place at Holland Park in Surrey, BC, is mostly made up of food vendors, many of which display a halal emblem next to the name of their shop on the banner above their stall. One end of the loop has rides, a bouncy castle, and a stage, and the other end has information booths of both vendors and sponsors, including displays from the Muslim Food Bank, the BC Muslim Association, and Muslim Student Associations from local universities. Small cylindrical tins or plexiglass containers with a slot for money are set out on the counters of most booths with labels or placards that suggest a donation for future Eid celebrations.

We make a couple laps around the food stalls, contemplating which dishes to sample next. I'm drawn to Jerusalem Grill, where a glass partition shields trays of tabouleh, rice, salad, and spiced meats including chicken, lamb, and beef. After making our selection, we return to the ever-busy dining area. I alternate mouthfuls of salad with tender morsels of well-seasoned lamb, topped with a cool and creamy tzatziki sauce. Across the shared table, a young boy lifts a drumstick to his shiny lips, biting into crunchy golden chicken skin, while crumbs fall into the 'Mary Brown's' cardboard container, onto the table, and, presumably, into his lap. Parked at the end of our table, a toddler sits in a stroller, face sticky and lips smacking as she licks an ice cream cone. With only a couple grains of rice remaining on our shared paper plate, I announce to my partner that it's time to find some dessert.

(Fieldnotes, BC Halal Food Fest - July 8, 2023 – Holland Park, Surrey, BC)

A food festival seems an appropriate venue in which to explore a fulsome selection of halal cuisine; however, despite enjoying a delicious variety of dishes, including drinks and desserts, one would not necessarily know exactly how to define halal food practices simply by attending this event. As such, before discussion of my interlocutors' halal food practices, I first explain how halal food is defined. Next, I examine how halal food is selected (for instance, is halal food widely available?) and I describe my personal experience of committing to eating only halal for a few days. Lastly, I present what it looks like for my interlocutors to choose to eat halal food.

3.2. Defining Halal Food

3.2.1. Background

Prior to my fieldwork, I searched the academic literature for research discussing halal food. Very quickly, I learned that halal simply means “permissible”; the term “halal” is often used to refer to meat that is raised and slaughtered according to guidelines provided in the Quran. However, in my fieldwork, when I asked Muslims what halal food is, they often told me what it is not. But before I get ahead of myself, I first review some of the relevant literature concerning halal food.

For devout Muslims, daytime fasting during Ramadan, and following Islamic dietary laws, which I refer to as “eating halal”, are essential components of being a good Muslim. While the Muslim diet may not appear significantly different than that of many Canadians, the connections between diet, religious tradition, and identity are often strong. Furthermore, food spaces are often gendered spaces for Muslims, where cooking and eating food presents an opportunity for women to meaningfully engage with their faith. By preparing traditional foods that adhere to Islamic dietary laws, women hold a special role in connecting devotion to Allah with their ethnic heritage and love for their family and others .

In theory, the dietary requirements within Islam that Muslims are expected to follow are clearly defined in the Quran. *The Halal Food Handbook* (Al-Teinaz 2020), written for a wide audience by numerous experts in Halal, and backed by the Muslim Council of Britain, provides background and modern instructions for both producers and consumers of halal foods. First, important Arabic terms that relate to food and diet are

translated: *Halal*: “lawful, allowed, or permitted”; *Haram*: “prohibited and unlawful”; *Makrooh*: “disapproved, disliked, hated or detested”; *Mushbooh*: “doubtful or questionable”; and *Tayyab*: “wholesome or fit for consumption” (9). By examining food through the lens of these words, an observant Muslim should be able to discern which foods are desirable for followers of Islam, and simultaneously ensure that they are taking care of their body as an act of submission to Allah (10). The primary source of dietary instruction is taken directly from the Quran. Two other sources inform Islamic dietary law: first, the Hadith (also known as the Sunnah), which describes the words and deeds of the prophet Mohammed, from which Muslims are to draw their example. Another source is Shariah law, which some Muslims see as the ultimate authority that supersedes secular legal systems, and it includes personal rules including dietary instructions (13-14).

Permissible, explicitly halal, foods are abundant because, according to the Quran, Allah has provided all manner of healthy foods on the earth; this includes all plants that are good for humans to eat, and animals that are not classified as ‘haram’. The Quran states: “O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and halal and tayyib (good)” (Qur’an 2:168 in Iner and Baghdadi 2021, 749). Many foods are inherently halal because they contain neither meat nor alcohol (Iner & Baghdadi 2021; Al-Tienaz 2020). Meat certified as halal has several requirements; it should be ethically raised, slaughtered, and processed. It should also be slaughtered with appropriate prayers, and all must be done in a hygienic environment and manner (Iner and Baghdadi 2021, 750). Haram foods are likewise explicitly described in the Quran and the list includes pork and pork products; animals or birds that are scavengers or carnivorous; some types of seafood; and unhygienic, dirty, or improperly slaughtered meat. This is where the words *makrooh*, *mushbooh*, and *tayyab* are significant and can be thought to bring clarity to exactly how one must eat as a Muslim. Essentially, if a food is detestable or questionable, or if its preparation is questionable, “in such cases, it may be wise to avoid the food item”. This criterion integrates with the word, *tayyab*, which provides a standard of adhering to a healthy and wholesome diet as a Muslim (Al-Tienaz 2020, 9-11).

Despite seemingly explicit rules, interpretation of what is “halal” and how to eat halal varies and is influenced by tradition, ethnicity, language, geographic location, and the sociopolitical environment (Brown 2015; Khan 2014; Rhys-Taylor 2017). To the best

of my knowledge, most anthropological research and especially ethnographies about halal food, are from outside of North America. Some centre around centuries-old food-related Islamic holidays in Muslim countries (Curtis 2013), while others discuss the challenges and adaptations of migrant Muslim populations in non-Muslim countries (Brown 2015; 2016; Dorairajoo 2018; Rouse and Hoskins 2004).

Dorairajoo's (2018) research on food and Islam suggests that despite blanket categorization of Thai Malay-Muslim communities as religiously homogenous, the southern provinces of Thailand exhibit a variety of expressions of Islam within distinct communities (270). She explains "diversity characterizes Muslims in Southern Thailand just as much as Islam unites them" (274). In Thailand, Muslims account for between three and four million people and are a religious minority consisting of 4-8% of the population. However, in Thailand's southern provinces, Thai Malay-Muslims account for 60-80% of the population (268). By maintaining their own culture, languages, and being comprised of different ethnicities than the rest of Thailand, Thai Malay-Muslims' religious identification is cause for further segregation from the rest of the country's predominantly Thai-Buddhist population (269). Living in a region where fishing is a prominent source of income, the characteristics of crab has led to its debated acceptability as a halal food choice (275). This is where interpretations can separate groups of Muslims from one another; some refer to what they deem a scientific explanation to disapprove of crab and other shellfish, and others defer to the interpretation of local Islamic scholars and/or community elders who legitimize crab as permissible (277). In a discussion of the dietary rules in Leviticus, Mary Douglas (2002), describes how animals are classified as clean or unclean, and food rules are established to ensure "wholeness" of the physical body for observant Jews (66). However, while the classification of animals is argued to be scientifically based, Douglas calls this a hygienic fallacy and suggests that certain animals were labeled as unclean for cultural reasons, to maintain separateness from the practices of non-Jews (71).

While my interlocutors described eating halal as a healthier way of eating, and that an aspect of halal is to ensure that food is hygienic, their interpretation of Islamic dietary guidelines appears to be centred in religious adherence, rather than scientific basis. For example, Sarah shared how she talks to her children about conflicts between culture or tradition and following Islam: "I tell my kids, well, this is something – it's cultural, but we're Muslim first. So, we're not going to do that" (Sept. 19, 2023).

Brown (2016) compares how the food choices of North African Muslim immigrants in Montreal, Canada and Paris, France, are connected to social integration in a new environment. In Montreal's multicultural environment, Brown's informants described feeling that their minority religious identities were welcomed. This led to an increased level of halal food practices, including becoming "obsessive ingredient verifiers", which Brown suggests shows an investment into religious identity in an environment where multifaceted identities are accepted (202-3). However, in Paris, where public religious expression is discouraged, North African Muslims were found to incorporate adaptations into their food practices and did not exhibit the same level of fastidiousness, since "keeping halal or not drinking alcohol" was significant in signaling them as "outsiders" to Parisians (202).

While certainly not exhaustive, the above review provides examples of the spectrum of adaptations of Islamic dietary guidelines incorporated by Muslims where they form a religious minority. In addition to different degrees of strictness or "level of practice" among individuals, there may be varied interpretations regionally about what qualifies as halal, and what is decidedly haram. Furthermore, even a pool of Muslim participants in one location, such as the community of women whom I met at the Masjid Al-Iman in Victoria, exhibit differences in their interpretation of Islamic dietary practices.

3.2.2. Halal Food, as Defined by my Interlocutors

When I asked my interlocutors about "eating halal", their answers all incorporated the same two indisputable foods that are haram (not permissible): any alcohol product (including vanilla extract which is found in many baked goods) and pork products (including gelatin). One difference between my interlocutors' definitions of halal presented regarding meat, and whether it had to be certified halal, or not.

We eat lamb, we eat beef, we eat chicken. But I can't go – I can't grab a chicken wrap from here and eat it. Why? Because the meat, (even) I eat chicken ...but this is not halal chicken. Why? Because it wasn't prepared in a halal way.

(Hana, Sept. 11, 2023)

One of my interlocutors, Sherin, has a different opinion about meat. Originally from Egypt, Sherin is a mother, PhD student, and also co-operator of a halal take-out restaurant with her husband. She intently explained to me the distinction between

labelling meat as zabiha versus halal, and seemed determined to properly represent what it means to eat halal. She explained that the correct terminology for meat that is prepared according to Islamic requirements is 'zabiha'; this term is specific to how meat is processed as opposed to simply being in the category of halal foods. When meat is classified as zabiha, it aligns with the Islamic responsibility to treat animals humanely, and to care for the environment. While many Muslims describe halal dietary restrictions as avoiding alcohol and pork, this does not automatically assume that they insist that their meat is zabiha, which "refers to eating meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic law (shariah) and blessed" (Ternikar 2019, 147). There are often allowances given for meat that is kosher, and a couple of my interlocutors referenced that the Islamic teachings allow for Muslims to eat meat acquired in a "Christian country" where they believe that meat processing guidelines are similar to zabiha and kosher guidelines (typically meaning that the animal is slaughtered in what is considered a humane manner, and then completely drained of blood). However, several of my interlocutors pointed out that the idea of a "Christian country" is unreliable in a modern context. This also does not address whether meat has been ethically raised.

Even my small sample demonstrates variance among Muslims regarding whether one classifies non-zabiha meat as unacceptable, or if it is a "halal" food, just as lettuce or apples do not need to be certified as halal foods. In this sense, if Sherin was eating a vegetarian dish, she would not likely describe it as "halal food".

...when I say I'm eating halal food, it actually (this is) the wrong terminology that has been very common to be written on products to say it's halal. But (that) in some products, yes, it is that right terminology and I'll explain why.

...when we put it on meat or chicken and say halal, that's actually not supposed to be the right terminology. The right terminology is zabiha.

Zabiha is when it comes to slaughtering the animal – like a cow or a goat or a lamb or a sheep or a chicken – following the traditions of how Muslims should eat it—

—And the reason I'm saying this, because, the opposite of halal is 'not halal'.

(Sherin, Sept. 18, 2023)

When Sherin said, "the opposite of halal is not halal", she posed that one can follow halal guidelines without always eating zabiha meat.

Sherin is the only one of my interlocutors to highlight this terminology; others referred to eating only “halal” meat. Eating exclusively halal meat is certainly not a universal practice for Muslims. Some of my interlocutors described family members who do not share the same commitment to eating halal and ensuring that they eat *only* halal meat. For example, Natalia’s partner, who is from Morocco, moved to Canada and found it “difficult to adjust”, and in terms of committing to eat halal food, he avoids only pork. Also, he indiscriminately eats food at McDonald’s, while his sister who is “very practicing” will “only eat the fish and things like that” from McDonald’s (Natalia, Sept. 11, 2023).

Although a commitment to eating only halal meat may be tied to one’s “level of practicing”, Sherin’s experiences tell a different story. Like several of my interlocutors, Sherin grew up in a Muslim country where “...you don’t think of what is halal”, and “You eat everywhere”. She also said that all meat in her home country is *zabiha*. Sherin described how this norm was first challenged when her brother traveled to the United States and “it wasn’t that easy to get any *zabiha*”. In this case, he chose “vegetarian options or seafood”. Later, Sherin had to negotiate for herself what it meant to eat halal.

For me, when I traveled to the United States with my family – like my little one and myself, and my mom was around that time – I really found that it is not convenient for me to just look for the *zabiha* and that’s when I started searching what is permissible or what is not. What is my options out there?

Sherin consulted a religious scholar from Saudi Arabia, whom she described as knowledgeable and able to give *fatwa*, which, in Islam is “a certain ruling for a specific case”. They responded with the following:

So, the rule is if you live in a non-Muslim country, you’re able to eat the non-*zabiha*. If you’re not happy with it – you’re not comfortable with it – you just prefer *zabiha*, that’s your choice, but it is permissible for people.

(Sherin, Sept. 18, 2023)

This religious endorsement of non-*zabiha* meat is an important factor in Sherin’s halal food practices; it enables her to feel as though she can satisfy Islamic requirements and to hold herself to the standards of proper adherence, whilst having flexibility or leniency in a country where it may be challenging to always get *zabiha* meat.

I'm following that scholars have shown evidence [...] where if you live in a non-Muslim community or country, this means it is not the normal to have the zabiha meat.

So, Muslims who live there have the option to either seek zabiha meat – and this way you know they can eat it as halal if they want...

But also, if you live in that non-Muslim country and you feel like it's either more expensive or inconvenient, or whatever the reasons I have, I can eat both. You are - you have the permission to eat the non-zabiha meat. This means I can eat from a restaurant, or I can eat buying from a grocery store something that is non-zabiha.

(Sept. 18, 2023)

Still, some of my interlocutors described avoiding non-zabiha meat, and classify it as undesirable or off-limits, the same way they might treat haram meats, like pork. Choosing to only eat zabiha halal meat is not always easy, and oftentimes they might opt for vegetarian food when eating out.

...thankfully, there's so many vegetarian options. So, it doesn't matter where I go to eat, because there's always a plan B if there's no halal option.

(Sarah, Sept. 19, 2023)

3.2.3. A Halal Lifestyle

So like very broadly, halal, from my understanding, means what's permissible.

So that could cover like actions, or the way I eat, or the way I dress, or things I can do, or yeah, just like things that would bring me closer to God, things that are good for my soul.

That's the way I see it.

(Sarah, Sept. 19, 2023)

The guidelines for eating halal do not only define categories of ingredients, but according to Iner and Baghdadi (2021), “halal food requirements remind Muslims that the consumption of halal food is a spiritual act, where Muslims acknowledge their responsibility to God, animals, and the environment” (762). They further explain that while there is an understanding that each Muslim is individually responsible for their religious conduct, some Muslims are more sensitive about ethical aspects of how their food is sourced, and others are satisfied if their food meets the minimum requirements,

for example that meat certified halal does not also have to be raised under conditions similar or equivalent to “free range”, or organic (754). In addition to concern about a food’s origins, some Muslims might prioritize eating healthy foods, and avoiding processed food which they believe undermines caring for their body, which is a religious responsibility. Therefore, consuming lawful and *tayyab* (wholesome) food is an aspect of spiritual worship, since “both the teachings of the Qur’an and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad taught that food, eating, and spirituality are intertwined” (752).

Caring for one’s body is believed to directly affect one’s ability to serve Allah. The word *Muslim* is Arabic for “one who submits”, and accepting the Quran as the word of God means submission to the rules of conduct and belief (Al-Teinaz 2020, 12). This direct connection between food, and health of the mind and body, results in food consumption (and fasting) as fundamental expressions of religious commitment (Farid and Basri 2020; Rouse and Hoskins 2004, 229). The spiritual dimension of halal food relates to one of the five pillars of Islam – daily prayers – in that it consists of ongoing, intentional practice. Both practices involve the physical body and are counted as good deeds that will be judged to determine individual status in the afterlife (Al-Tienaz 2020, 12). Ongoing submission of the body, whether in prayers, fasting, or eating *tayyab* food, provides Muslims with the opportunity to store up good deeds (Curtis 2013, 19).

Sarah is a mid-thirties mother of three who grew up in Southern Ontario in a Muslim home. Her husband is also Muslim originally from Egypt, her father is Muslim, originally from Morocco, and her mother is British but converted to Islam when Sarah was a child. Although she considers herself to have been raised Muslim, Sarah’s halal food practices changed over time.

And then eating halal, actually, I did not grow up eating halal. Like it wasn’t a thing in my house. Like I didn’t - I thought it was just, as long as I didn’t eat pork, and I don’t drink alcohol. So that was how we were raised, which was like kind of oh, you have to say bismillah, and your food is halal. Which is like, you know, just saying a small prayer over your food. But then other people are telling me, no, it has to be slaughtered a certain way, like kosher. [...] So the more I looked into it – and then I had to do a paper in school about the fast food industry, and like, how they prep the meat for McDonald’s. And so I was starting to see the wisdom in eating more halal diet. And that’s why I switched over. So, for me, it’s really important. I feel it’s more of a healthy and spiritual way of living.

(Sept. 19, 2023)

Sarah is not the only one of my interlocutors who believes that eating halal (especially zabiha meat) is healthier, and more ethical than 'factory farm' and highly processed foods. Joy described that she felt healthier once she began to eat only halal meat, and she also connected the production of halal meat to ethical standards.

I think the purpose of it basically is that, well, animals were made for human consumption, but the least we can do is to treat them with respect on their last seconds on earth, like the remaining dignity they have. I believe, well, it's not really stated in Quran if that's the reason of Allah, but I believe that simple logic can solve that. If you're going to kill an animal for human consumption, why do we need to make them suffer?

(Joy, Sept. 7, 2023)

Similarly, when Natalia, a new convert was contemplating the practices of Islam, she concluded that the rules about halal meat are about taking care of her body. For example, when she talked about pork being prohibited, she said, "I think like in our religion, it's like it was made wrong for a reason. It's not just kind of like pick and choosing, I don't like this animal, you know" (Sept.11, 2023).

Although eating vegetarian food is an option for Muslims and mentioned as a safe choice when dining outside of the home, eating halal is a practice that demonstrates attentiveness to Islam, which constitutes a higher purpose than avoiding factory farmed meat. My interlocutors make a point to attribute their ethical practices with obedience to a logical religious system, wherein Allah created the world for them to enjoy, but also requires them conduct themselves ethically, and thus provides instructions in the Quran for appropriate meat processing (Iner and Baghdadi 2021; Al-Teinaz 2020).

To summarize, Islamic teachings provide dietary guidelines for observant Muslims in conjunction with the belief that caring for one's body is essential to serving Allah. Following Islamic dietary guidelines means firstly to avoid eating haram foods like alcohol or pork, but also to consider the wholesomeness of foods that are within the "permitted" or halal category. The food practices of observant Muslims are such that they should not only benefit one's individual body, but they should also demonstrate ethical practices that benefit animals and the environment. However, since Muslims are individually responsible for their conduct, there are both varied levels of practice, and interpretations of how to eat halal.

3.3. Halal Food in Practice



Figure 4. Preparing halal Moroccan meatballs for my family

3.3.1. My Halal Food Experiment

Fieldnotes – February 14, 2024

I have known for months that if I am to research the meaning of halal food, and how that meaning is formed, then I, myself, need to (be immersed) in the experience of eating halal food. I have attended dinners with Muslim women, I have made halal meals with Natalia, I even participated in a day of fasting for Ramadan, followed by breaking my fast at the mosque and sharing a meal – Iftar – with Muslim women in attendance. But when I think of committing to a stretch of time to ONLY eat halal food, I am reluctant and

avoidant, and I keep putting it off. I have excuses – like there’s a special event coming up (I want wine!), or I have to travel and it would be annoying to confirm that food is halal, and I’m too busy to have to shop for halal meat – what if I can’t find what I want? And... it might be expensive! There’s also a part of me that recognizes that eating halal could be really good for me. I’ll probably eat less meat and junk food, I won’t be drinking alcohol, and I’ll probably eat more fruit and veggies because they are intrinsically halal. So, what am I waiting for?

After rescheduling several times due to conflicts (i.e. I didn’t want to miss an event that included haram foods), I finally committed to a short “halal food only” stint, lasting a mere three days and nights. As an anthropologist, it is a little embarrassing to admit that my experiment was so minimal; nevertheless, my experience provides some useful insights about how I navigated eating halal food, the benefits or challenges of doing so, and the impact of my eating and cooking only halal food on my household.

My food preferences are influenced, in part, by the following factors: family traditions; specialty foods deriving from where I grew up, and, my world-wide travels from which I have adopted eclectic recipes and meals (for example, on their birthdays my children often request Thai food, the result of our family having lived in Thailand for a year when they were young). My food preferences continue to evolve, and while there are childhood meals that I feel I will always treasure, my tastes shift, adapt, and are also affected by food’s cost and availability, concerns about sustainability, and even my social interactions. By choosing to eat only halal, I had a heightened awareness of haram foods that were normal, everyday foods in my home, and since my family was not following the same dietary rules as me, I felt somewhat isolated. I imagine my experience may have been different if I had been able to share a meal with a Muslim friend, and certainly it would be different within a home that was stocked with only halal foods. Furthermore, while my experiment enables me to understand what it is like to plan for, prepare, and eat halal food in a secular environment, my reasons for eating halal are fundamentally different than those of my interlocutors.

In some scenarios, eating halal food may be “effortless”, especially for individuals who did not work to prepare the food and ensure that it is halal. As previously mentioned, Sherin, who moved to North America to attend university said, “So when you’re growing up in a Muslim country like Egypt, you don’t think of what is halal... You just go to the store. You eat everywhere” (Sept. 18, 2023). Sarah, who grew up in

Canada, described her halal food experiences during travels to the Muslim countries of Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia.

...when I've traveled overseas, everything is halal. It's just unbelievable. It's like you've entered a whole 'nother world. Like you don't have to think about it. You know, you can go into any restaurant, McDonald's, any fast food, you could – there's no limit. Which is mind blowing, you know? Whereas here I have to think, oh, you know, I'm going to have to get the halal meat, then I have to cook it myself and I have to, you know, there's many more steps.

(Sept. 19, 2023)

At the time of our interview, Sarah had recently returned from a trip to Mississauga, Ontario, where she described the halal food options as significantly better than those she experiences living in greater Vancouver. "The halal food options there were like, it was like unbelievable. My mind was blown. It was like everything under the sun, like Chinese, steakhouse, Mexican. I had a burger, and I was like in heaven" (Sept. 19, 2023). In Mississauga, 16.3% of the population identifies as Muslim, compared to 3% in the Greater Vancouver region, and only 1.3% in Victoria (Stats Can 2021; Kapinga 2018). It is likely that the greater the concentration Muslims in Southern Ontario explains Sarah's experience of increased access to halal food at restaurants.

I conducted my halal food experiment in my hometown of Duncan, BC, where the Muslim population is reported at less than one percent (Stats Can 2021). My experience of adhering to Islamic food practices was outside of my norm, required intention and forethought, and resulted in what I experienced as restrictive and avoidant behaviours. When I went out to a café, instead of causing extra work for the busy servers, I did not ask about the ingredients in their baked goods and only drank coffee. Choosing to eat only zabiha meat meant that I went out of my way to shop at a halal grocery store, in Victoria, where I paid more for my meat than usual. And although it was possible for me to purchase more than one meal's worth of zabiha meat, I felt that it was both expensive and impractical. Instead, I chose to either prepare vegetarian food to share with my family, eat a different meal than my family, or I ate the leftovers from the recipe I made with zabiha meat on the first day. I also read every label before eating any packaged food, and one busy morning, I had to forgo eating a protein bar because I discovered it contained vanilla, which usually contains alcohol (an inconvenience since I was out on a hike with my dog and had no alternative snacks).

On a positive note, I ate healthier than I normally eat, especially since fruits and vegetables are halal and I could grab them without thinking. Eating halal caused me to alter less-than-healthy habits (shifting habits would likely have become easier over time), for instance, instead of mindlessly snacking, I took time to consider a food's ingredients, and in the time it took to read labels, I often realized that I was not truly hungry. I also had the opportunity to share a new and tasty recipe with my family and to feel good that the meat was ethically raised and likely healthier for us than factory-farm meat.

While my solo venture had the effect of feeling restrictive, the *BC Halal Food Festival* richly (and tastily) demonstrated that halal food can include food from every region of the world, providing it excludes pork and alcohol. The festival made it possible to enjoy a vast range of foods that would likely be considered permissible by even the most adherent Muslims. Notably, this potential for variety was true for myself when I embarked on my halal food experiment; with halal food there are endless options for creativity and ethnic expression – provided no haram ingredients are used.

3.3.2. Adopting Halal Food Practices

Natalia is an engineering student from southern Ontario in her early twenties. In the fall of 2023, she moved to Victoria to engage in a university co-op term. We first met at a coffee shop for a semi-structured interview, and at a later date we shopped together for halal ingredients, and we cooked halal meals together. Natalia described her halal food practices as “a bit of a journey”.

In the fall of 2021, Natalia applied to go on an exchange semester in Turkey that was taking place the following year. Before her travels, she met her partner, a Moroccan Muslim, and at that time, Natalia decided to stop consuming pork and alcohol. In 2022, during the exchange, Natalia was immersed in the Muslim community in Istanbul; all her friends were Muslim, and she began to learn more about Islam. Most of the time, Natalia ate in the university cafeteria where she noted that “all the food is just automatically halal. So, it's not something that you really think about.”

Natalia returned to Ontario and “started to take the conversion process more seriously”. In the spring of 2023, just before Ramadan, she officially converted to Islam. At first, Natalia kept her conversion a secret from her family, but over time, she adjusted

her eating to more closely align with Islamic guidelines. If eating out, she might choose vegetarian. Also, Natalia explained that her mother tends to purchase “the cleaner versions of meat” for example, “free range for chickens, or grass-fed beef” which Natalia believes to be comparable to the standards of halal meat.

I’ve been trying to eat fully halal – so before, I was living with my parents, it was a little bit. I tried to keep it on the down low that I had converted and things like that, so I couldn’t just tell them I only eat halal meat.

But yeah, since I moved here (to Victoria), that’s kind of one of my priorities for sure.

“Even if you go out to eat with friends who might not know you’re Muslim or things like that, you could always choose a vegetarian thing and no one would bat an eye.

(Natalia, Sept. 11, 2023)

During her semester in Turkey, Natalia was not Muslim, so eating halal food was not being done intentionally. Now that she has converted, she expresses a desire to understand and follow the guidelines and rules pertaining to Islam – including food practices. Learning about Islam entails not only growing familiar with its teachings, but it involves bodily engagement through practices like ritual washing and performing daily prayers and eating halal food. These practices must be learned, and without a foundation of a Muslim upbringing, it is up to Natalia to negotiate how adherent she ought to be among diverse expressions of Islam that exist in a multicultural environment. Natalia explained that learning new practices can be confusing; while attending the Masjid Al-Iman in Victoria, two different women gave her conflicting instructions about proper prayer posture. Regarding halal food practices, Natalia describes how she has mostly learned how to eat halal by using Google. She admits that her partner is not very practicing when it comes to Islamic dietary guidelines, but his sister, who recently moved from Morocco to join him in Canada, takes a strict approach to eating halal, which has enhanced Natalia’s knowledge of halal food options and practices.



Figure 5. Learning to cook a halal meal with Natalia

3.3.3. Maintaining Halal Food Practices

Adherence to dietary guidelines is inevitably more challenging for minority populations, compared to those following a dietary practice in a location where it is the norm. Cappucci (2021) describes the adaptations of kosher dietary practices of the seventh-largest population of Jews in southern Ontario, in the city of Essex Windsor, by surveying fifty adult Jews in the region to learn about their attitudes and habits towards kosher observance. First, he notes that “the specifics of kashrut”, or kosher guidelines,

“are not commonly understood” (411). Without a detailed understanding of the rules and regulations, individuals and/or households tend to follow their own interpretations of what it means to eat kosher, and how rigidly or loosely they will adhere to kosher eating. Attentiveness to kosher guidelines could stem from connection to ethnic tradition, or religious adherence, but even within the latter, there are different practices. When eating outside the home, all surveyed individuals said that they eat at non-kosher restaurants, and those who attempt to keep kosher while eating out said they choose vegetarian and/or vegan dishes (413). While these data do not provide an in-depth look at the motivations, attitudes, and reasoning of why Jews might choose to eat (or not eat) kosher, food practices like shopping, and eating in and outside of the home reveal that a choice to eat exclusively kosher requires forethought and intention, may be costly and time consuming, and it impacts one’s social interactions.

In my home, there were many haram foods, whereas, in a Muslim home where household members are practicing, it is unlikely that there would be haram foods. However, in public settings, whether a grocery store or restaurant, or at a social event, my interlocutors shared that they must actively ensure they do not consume haram food. While Victoria does have numerous halal restaurants and small shops specializing in halal meats, the affordability of halal food and/or zabiha meat can be a concern. Some larger grocery stores, including Walmart and Superstore have halal meat sections, making it more affordable, but Natalia (whom I shopped with) told me that these stores have a limited supply. Unencumbered access to halal food, such as one might find in a Muslim-majority country, is a privilege generally not afforded to Muslim Canadians, as discussed by my interlocutors. However, my interlocutors described themselves as maintaining strict halal food practices, which can require significant effort. Many of the activities my interlocutors described entail extra time, money, and investigation into the ingredients of the meals or the trustworthiness of a restaurant. Since haram foods items (like alcohol or pork products, including gelatin) may not be obvious, my interlocutors describe the following activities as part of their efforts to eat only halal food:

- shopping at specialty shops like a halal grocery store or butcher shop
- reading ingredient labels on food packaging and looking for the halal symbol on food packages and/or on meat from the grocery store
- consulting religious leaders about appropriate halal (or zabiha) options

- asking servers whether food is halal (and then often clarifying to the server that halal mean no alcohol or pork products)
- asking for a “clean cut” when ordering pizza to ensure that their food is not contaminated by a haram ingredient from another customer’s order
- instructing teachers and schools that their child may only eat halal food
- teaching their children how to be on the lookout for haram foods
- consulting with other Muslims about which local restaurants are trustworthy and halal (In the WhatsApp Muslim Sisters’ group, there were multiple occasions when women who were new to Victoria asked for recommendations on which restaurants in the area are halal).
- researching (via Google search, etc.) whether a restaurant or food product is halal
- asking about a food’s ingredients or simply abstaining from eating when presented with food from an unreliable (non-Muslim) source (at work, school, or a social event)

Each of these actions, including explicitly asking “is it halal?” are signals of self-identification; they convey the priority placed on adhering to Islamic dietary restrictions as components of maintaining Muslim identity. Brown (2016) describes how some of her interlocutors, North African Muslims, did not have an awareness they should seek out halal meat until after immigrating to France, because “in the Maghreb everything is halal and does not require reflection or consideration of what the term means” (189). In this example, “the practice of halal was not essential” until eating halal was no longer effortless (190). Upon moving to a location where halal is not the community standard, Muslims may have to develop skills and obtain knowledge to ensure that they maintain this aspect of Islamic practice. Brown also provides an example from fieldwork in Montreal, where practicing Muslims became “obsessive ingredient verifiers; making sure that every single ingredient in every single product they purchased was halal” (202). Similar to Brown’s findings, my data suggest that for Muslims living where they are a minority population, along with new food-related skills, there comes heightened awareness, an increased vigilance to beware of food that is haram.

3.4. Self-Identification Through Halal Food

Variations of dietary adherence suggest differing levels of valuation of the material practices involved in constructing one's identity. Buckser (1999) suggests "different levels of strictness imply different amounts of investment, both of time and money" (199). For those with Jewish heritage, strictly keeping kosher suggests a strong affiliation to Jewish identity and might result in social segregation. However, that is not to say that Jews who do not strictly observe kosher guidelines are no longer ethnically or religiously Jewish or that they are uninterested in maintaining connection to Jewish faith and rituals. Other traditions and expressions, including circumcision, attendance at Jewish community events, and the celebration of Jewish holidays are explicit practices that reinforce Jewish identity. Yet, although how one eats may exist in the "background of daily life" it offers a deeply individualized perspective of identity negotiation (Buckser 1999, 203).

My interlocutors show intention in their efforts to maintain halal food practices which suggests a commitment to reinforcing their Muslim identity. Their experiences also suggest that self-identification involves self-fashioning through bodily practices. The decision to be an observant Muslim, though subject to interpretation, involves increased vigilance in avoiding haram foods, which in turn may be described as exhibiting a "higher level of practice". However, this turn towards vigilance also appears to correlate with location and context. Muslims who live in an Islamic nation are not likely to think about whether they are properly following halal food practices. But being an immigrant to a largely secular country, or being a religious minority, and/or being an eager new convert poses a sphere in which Islamic practices, like choosing to only eat halal food, may become more prominent, and exhibit intentionality.

While Natalia was on her second trip to Morocco, she shared an observation about halal observance:

One thing I was curious about here is the rennet in parmesan cheese. I thought they might have some halal version at the supermarkets but they don't :(

Most Moroccans living here have never had to double check for halal ingredients and they were surprised that cheese can be non-halal.

(WhatsApp message – May 22, 2024)

Natalia appears to have a heightened awareness for ensuring things are halal. This suggests that converting to Islam in Canada, in an environment where Muslims are a minority and Islamic practices are not the norm (or effortless), has fashioned Natalia as a hyper-aware practicing Muslim. The labour to become and to present herself as a Muslim woman demonstrates both sacrifice and resistance on Natalia's part. Brown (2016) describes how Muslim in immigrant locations use food as a "resistant means of showing this identity" (189). She explains that it is not until living in a location where eating halal becomes intentional that Muslims have an ongoing decision to make concerning whether they will engage in "Muslim" food practices. For Natalia, who recently converted to Islam, intentional adoption of Muslim identity through Islamically informed practices is prioritized and explains her heightened conscientiousness in properly eating halal.

3.5. Conclusions

I just want to end the interview saying that people or Muslims who are not conservative or who are not very careful, it doesn't make them less of a Muslim.

[...] It's my own relationship with Allah – and with them, I don't have the right to judge them, that these families are Muslims, but they are not eating halal. It's a sin. I should not judge them because they have their own relationship with Allah and maybe they have their own reasons, or they just don't know about it. So, if someone identifies himself as a Muslim, even if he doesn't pray five times a day, if inside his or her heart, Allah is the only one creator, he's a Muslim. It doesn't make them like 50% Muslim or 25% Muslim"

(Joy, September 7, 2023)

While the basic definition of halal food is not complicated, defining Muslims' individual negotiation of halal food practices, especially in the context a majority non-Muslim environment, is not so simple. For the most part, eating halal orients Muslims to focus on avoiding haram foods; namely alcohol and pork, and my interlocutors employ numerous strategies to ensure that they avoid haram food. By adhering to halal food practices, my interlocutors describe feeling "religiously pure" and as though they are properly following Islamic practices. However, to reiterate Joy's statement, one's level of practicing Islam (or lack of practice) "doesn't make them like 50% Muslim or 25% Muslim" (Sept. 7, 2023). Although Islamic practices may coincide with one's public presentation, and, for example by wearing a hijab or asking if food is halal one might be assumed as Muslim,

my interlocutors demonstrate that being Muslim is about individual interpretation and self-identification.

Chapter 4. Halal Food Practices in the Family and Community

Looking back, it (converting to Islam) seems like a smooth process but it was definitely challenging in the moment. As a bit of background, ever since I introduced my partner to my parents they've always made negative comments about Islam on a variety of topics, especially my mom. I tried providing defensive answers at first but in some instances it just made the situation worse. At this point I had already started doing a lot of research into Islam, and their questions/comments helped me to find more answers on my own time (but of course they didnt want to hear it most of the time).

I had stopped consuming pork and alcohol since we first met, but since they're not really staple diet items it didn't have a noticeable effect on my family and they saw it more as standing in solidarity with my partner.

I converted while I was in Ottawa on a co-op term, so I was free to pray and observe Ramadan as I wanted. My parents knew I was fasting for Ramadan but thought it was another one of those "solidarity" things. I came back over a study term and was scared to tell them just based on the comments theyve told me before. My family is pretty nosy too (such as entering my room without knocking) so it was pretty hard to pray in secret, but I would spend a lot of time at my university and do most of the prayers there. Because eating halal meat is so specific and not even all muslims do it, I thought it would be too obvious to specifically request it (although I did try to make more beef recipes because the type of beef my mom would always buy from the supermarket was halal 🤔).

My dad and brother found out I was Muslim when we started our road trip to BC from Ontario in mid-August of last year and I did my prayers on the lawn of a rest area. Obviously followed by comments, but I think if my mom were there it would've been worse. Once they got back they told my mom so that's how she found out, but by that time I was already living my best life eating halal food in Victoria 😊

(WhatsApp chat with Natalia – June 5, 2024)

If you ask what it takes to be "Muslim", you are likely to encounter a variety of responses. One might identify as Muslim simply because that is how they grew up, and others convert to Islam and "become Muslim". Most of my interlocutors were born into Muslim families, but also describe a transition wherein they became "more adherent" and decided to increase their level of practice. However, this declaration usually coincided with a remark that they "don't judge" and that it is up to individuals how they

follow Islam. Although my interlocutors expressed that being Muslim is primarily about what one believes, they engage in specific activities to present themselves as Muslim. And at some stage of life, they made conscious effort to adopt (or adapt) practices within Islam that enable them to more closely identify with their beliefs. These practices, as per Ortner's (2006) theorization, are part of their processes of making, unmaking and remaking; wherein they negotiate their affiliation and identification with being observant Muslims.

My interlocutors shared varied circumstances in which they established or strengthened their halal food practices, and how this is a priority to be maintained even if other family members are not adherent, or if they live in a community where eating halal food is not the norm. Several of my interlocutors expressed that their religious identity comes first; following Islam is more important than ethnicity, or maintaining cultural traditions, or social continuity.

Hana said, "...my intersectionality is very complicated, but if you ask me, 'identify yourself', I would say, a Muslim woman. ...I am immigrant, I am Libyan, I am a mother, I am a social activist. I am this, I am that, but the first one will come – a Muslim woman." (Sept. 11, 2023).

4.1. Performing Identities

Upon reflection of my religious practices, I recognize their importance in shaping my identity and how these practices changed over my life. I grew up in a Christian home, and thus identified as Christian from a very young age. Still, there were milestones or defining practices that demonstrate whether one is truly a Christian according to my family's denomination. Not only are there one-time, ceremonial events, such as praying 'the sinner's prayer', and baptism (which in my church was a choice made when one reaches the 'age of accountability'); but there are also ongoing practices that define how serious of a Christian one might be considered. These often include attending weekly church services, praying regularly, reading the Bible, and tithing or regularly giving money to the church.

At a certain point in my adult life, having practiced Christianity for over 30 years, I came to reexamine my beliefs and religious practices. As I discontinued certain

practices, my Christian identity seemed to fade. One could say that I was “unmaking” myself, and, over time becoming less of a Christian. The frequency and perceived relevance of my Christian practices correspond to how strongly I identified with being a Christian. Although it may be argued in my former religious community, that one can “become a Christian” on their deathbed if they simply acknowledge Jesus as their lord and saviour, Christians, and I would argue followers of Islam, validate their religious identity to themselves and others through ongoing performance. Therefore, I suggest that through individual interpretation and performance of halal food practices, my interlocutors negotiate, construct, maintain, and may also deconstruct elements of their “Muslimness” (Butler 1988; Ortner 2006).

Converting to a religion typically requires an individual to learn the tenets of faith, and, in the case of Islam, it also requires commitment to physically engage in religious practice by observing the Five Pillars (including daily prayers) and following the example of the Prophet, which includes dietary requirements (eating halal) (Curtis 2013; Al-Teinaz 2020). I suggest that adopting a new identity, including conversion to Islam, requires performance; it involves familiarity with the teachings of Islam, which could be described as a script to follow, it may include bodily practices, there may be special clothing (such as wearing hijab), and there is often a component of performing for others; be it the community of believers, or “outsiders” who may or may not value and appreciate the performance. Butler (1988) describes the performance of identity as “constituting acts, not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (520).

Drawing upon practice theory, which suggests that ongoing practices are what maintain or transform one’s world, I suggest that my interlocutors who were “born and raised” Muslim are not stagnant in their negotiation and performance of Muslim identity (Ortner 2006). Additionally, they describe developing new understandings of, and subsequently placed a higher priority upon their halal food practices – an increased level of performance occurred when they began to distinguish for themselves what it means to be Muslim. Instead of looking to family members for an example, they took individual responsibility to research and discern what being an observant Muslim entails. Resultingly, my interlocutors describe taking a more disciplined path, out of conviction that they are properly adhering to Islamic practices. However, one of my participants, Natalia, did not grow up in a Muslim home; therefore, practices and familiarity with Islam

was not socialized from childhood. The following explores how Natalia navigates and negotiates halal food practices as an expression of her newfound Muslim identity.

4.2. Natalia's Journey

As stated in the previous chapter, Natalia, a new convert to Islam, described her halal food practices as “a bit of a journey”; and, like the experiences of other participants of my research, Natalia's religious beliefs appear to also have undergone a “journey”. However, instead of affirming and increasing her commitment to the religious identity of her family, Natalia shifted to new beliefs and practices.

...I'm not super close with my family members in terms of extended relatives. So, I can see that kind of being a potential thing (eating halal around them) because they also obviously have negative views on Islam and things like that. So it might be a bit difficult to explain to them, oh, you know, I'm trying not to eat meat that isn't slaughtered a certain way.

(Natalia, Sept. 11, 2023)

Although Natalia was likely encouraged and influenced by both the semester in Istanbul, and her relationship with her Moroccan boyfriend, she faced an uncomfortable situation with her relatives, whom she shared, “have negative views on Islam”. Now Natalia is fashioning herself, separate from her family of origin. Not only that, but she is taking Islamic practices more seriously than her Muslim partner does.

Practices, it seems, were part of what drew Natalia to convert to Islam. She explained that when she was growing up, her mom was Catholic and would observe Lent. However, Natalia's mother's “version of fasting is (to) give up chocolate for Lent, or you don't eat meat on Fridays.” Natalia questions this, believing that this rendition of fasting is not an accurate reflection of what would have happened “in biblical times”.

Yeah I guess to add to the whole fasting thing, what kind of drew me to the idea of Islam is, kind of, it's a continuation almost of Christianity. So you have it's building on the same values. You have a lot of things that, like - so in Islam it's very important to follow the example of the prophets. So, it's kind of things like the prophet Muhammad, but also like Jesus, so in Islam he's a prophet, what he used to do.

(Sept. 11, 2023)

Natalia expressed that modern Christianity seems to have strayed from its origins, but by following Islamic practices, she interprets this as a “continuation” of Christianity that adheres to and builds upon biblical values. Converting to and following Islam is not only about what Natalia thinks and believes, but it requires practices of the body to reflect her beliefs and identity as a Muslim. This correlates with the teachings of Islam that instructs followers to treat their bodies as a temple; thus, to ensure that their body (temple) is kept pure, they must follow Islamic guidelines and the example of the prophet. By practicing and performing Islamic behaviours, like eating halal food, and by learning proper prayer posture, Natalia’s body is being (re)formed and (re)constructed; thus demonstrating how her physical body as Butler (1988) describes, “bears cultural meanings”; specifically, the meaning of being Muslim (520). Although reflective of a natural transition during young adulthood, Natalia’s willingness to disengage with the traditions of her family of origin, whether that means not eating polish sausages made with pork or no longer attending mass with her mother, demonstrates the un-making of components of family identity, as she self-identifies with new ways of knowing and being in the world.

There was a period in my life, I guess when I started university, that I wasn’t really practicing anything.

So, it’s definitely been a good change to have that kind of focus in your life, especially, for example, the five daily prayers. Like for me that’s really boosted my time management skills because you’re always aware, like, oh, I need to do my prayers at this time.

...(there’s) a lot of different positive aspects of being more aware of what you’re doing, what you’re eating, how you’re behaving.

It’s kind of just doing all these things to always be cognizant of your religion and being aware of, oh, I’m a Muslim. I do these things differently than some other people. And I do them because this is important to me. So, yeah, I think that’s a good way to remind you every day.”

(Natalia, Sept. 11, 2023)

By incorporating Islamic practices into her life, Natalia demonstrates that religious belief and physical actions are connected; her bodiliness is integral to being Muslim. McGuire (2008b) challenges the typically Western view that “frame(s) spirituality and materiality as dichotomous, in tidy binary opposition”, and instead suggests the interconnectivity of material practice to spiritual or religious meaning (97). Even routine

daily activities that are done for practical reasons, such as eating, “can, over time, effect physical, emotional, and spiritual development for the individuals who engage in them” (McGuire 2008a, 13). Since Islamic practices are new to Natalia, she is self-fashioning her everyday behaviours in an effort to properly perform her ‘Muslimness’; this requires intention, mindfulness, and at times, planning.

When I met with Natalia to make a halal meal together, our time shopping and cooking together overlapped with Salat Al Maghrib, also known as the sunset prayer. She excused herself from the kitchen for about ten minutes and when she came back, water glistened on her hair and her face was freshly washed. Natalia knew I was curious about Islamic practices, and she explained that prayer times are supposed to be preceded by ritual washing. Then she showed me an app on her phone, Muslim: Athan, Prayer Times, that provides an alarm to the daily prayer times. “What if you’re not home when it’s time to pray?” I asked. Natalia told me that there is some flexibility; a window of time in which it is acceptable to complete one’s prayers. However, as told in the WhatsApp chat at the start of this chapter, sometimes commitment to Islam means one might have to pray in inconvenient and/or uncomfortable spaces. During her road trip from Ontario to BC, Natalia chose to pray on the grass outside a rest stop, and this visually signaled her conversion to Islam to her travel mates – Natalia’s father and brother.

One of the ways Natalia practices her new beliefs is by committing to pray at designated times; this demonstrates material engagement, and it also exemplifies her acquisition of specialized knowledge of Islam. In their discussion about the use of technology to navigate prayer times (such as the aforementioned app used by Natalia), El-Sayed et al. (2015) suggest that Muslims who live where a call to prayer is not publicly broadcasted require skilled knowledge to fulfill the Islamic obligation to daily prayers. Adhering to prayer practices involves not only negotiating what to pray and where to pray, but also praying with the correct posture, at the right time. (Timing is affected by geography, since prayer times are scheduled according to the position of the sun in the sky.) Comparably, although a Muslim could eat halal food without drawing attention to themselves, I argue that observing halal food practices in Canada, especially in Victoria, requires skilled knowledge, and this skilled knowledge correlates with cognizance of identifying as Muslim. My data elucidate how commitment and effort is required to ensure food is halal, for example, while shopping (examining ingredient lists);

when looking for reputable halal restaurants; and in taking responsibility to navigate the avoidance of haram food in social settings, both personally, and for family members. Additionally, when posed with circumstances that deter or challenge one's commitment as a practicing Muslim (for example, needing to pray, or declining foods that are haram), I suggest the incorporation of skilled knowledge into Islamic practice may amplify or strengthen Muslim identity.

While in the exploratory phase of becoming Muslim, Natalia described her initial food adaptations as minor since they involved "not really staple items". She stated that her choice to stop consuming pork or alcohol "didn't have a noticeable effect on my family" (June 5, 2024). However, when Natalia was living in Istanbul, she readily consumed only halal food and said, "it's not something that you really think about" (Sept. 11, 2023). Although Natalia was learning more about Islam at the time, her environment in majority-Muslim community meant that she did not have to be cognizant of her eating; she did not put effort into eating halal.

After Natalia's conversion, although she was learning and adopting Islamic practices, the discomfort of revealing herself as Muslim to her parents kept Natalia from eating only halal certified meat. Instead, she justified her choices by expressing that the meat her mother usually bought was "free-from", organic-style meat that is considered ethical, and similar to halal (zabiha) meat. "So I know some people like even if they're not Muslim, they might choose whole meat just because it's kind of healthier. For example, my mom doesn't eat halal, but she likes she always eats like "free from" meat" (Sept. 11, 2023). This justification around her halal eating practices demonstrates that Natalia was indeed cognizant of her Muslim identity as it related to food choices. However, as she enacts this new identity, some practices are still in the developmental phase (including learning how to properly position her body for prayer).

Upon moving to Victoria and living away from home, Natalia endeavored to go "fully halal". In anticipation of her move to the new city, she described looking up the location of the mosque, and then looking up the locations of halal restaurants. Natalia's concern for following Islamic dietary guidelines appears to have developed in conjunction with growing into her new identity as Muslim. As she became more expressive and assertive about her conversion, for example by praying in a public space

where her father and brother became “officially” aware that she was Muslim, Natalia appears to be increasing her level of practicing as it relates to eating halal.

Amid adopting religious practices as a convert of Islam, Natalia’s Muslim identity appears to be ‘flavoured’ by her association with her Moroccan partner, and his family, whom she visited in Morocco on two separate trips. When we met together to cook on two separate occasions, Natalia chose to teach me Moroccan recipes, ones that were similar to foods she has eaten with her partner and his family. Learning to cook Moroccan cuisine connects her to this new family and may not be primarily about following Islam; yet, this desire to focus on cooking and eating Moroccan food likely would not exist without Natalia’s relationship with a Moroccan partner.

Now, it is true that although Natalia aspired to “go fully halal”, this did not take place until she was away from the critical gaze of family members. Also, eating halal food does not have to be as obvious as committing to pray, and Natalia explained that she would “spend a lot of time at (my) university and do most of the prayers there” (June 5, 2024). As for following Islamic dietary guidelines, it is possible to avoid haram foods without too much criticism, for example by choosing vegetarian food. However, Natalia’s enthusiasm and commitment to identify as Muslim demonstrates a living religion that engages her material body in everyday experiences (McGuire 2008b, 97). I suggest that it is through this ongoing performance that Natalia both constitutes and believes herself to be a Muslim woman, while also presenting herself as Muslim to others (Butler 1988, 520).

In the end, we cannot know how much Natalia “feels” Muslim inside, we can only base our perception of Natalia’s ‘Muslimness’ by the things that she does, and by the select thoughts and stories she shared with me. Still, as a case study, Natalia’s conversion to Islam provides insight to the influence of practices, specifically halal food practices, in developing Muslim identity. Further, the effort required by Natalia to perform her Muslim identity is one that is enacted both in private, and in public. Natalia’s development as a Muslim involves skilled knowledge to navigate how to practice, as in the examples of praying, and eating halal.

The labour to “become” and “present” as a Muslim woman demonstrates both sacrifice and resistance on Natalia’s part. Although determination to adhere to halal food

practices might result in differentiation and even social isolation for Muslims in settings where they are a religious minority, this separation can also serve as a source of pride that affirms personal commitment to Allah, which is understood as a spiritual act that generates rewards (Al-Teinaz 2020, 12). For Natalia, observing halal food practices is a demonstrable self-identifier; it means rejecting her family's beliefs, and, either declining or adapting some of the traditional foods of her childhood. This might explain Natalia's appreciation for Moroccan cuisine; not only does it connect her to a new family, but it is traditionally halal, and further integrates Natalia into a family that demonstrates (in their own version), how to be Muslim.

Natalia's "journey", as she called it, is a continuing process. Over time, it is possible that her new religious practices will become second nature; habitus, to use Bourdieu's terminology. However, there will always be potential to shift and adapt, to make and unmake herself, as Natalia, like my other Muslim interlocutors, navigates her identity in an ever-changing environment.

4.3. Joy's Story

Joy, who grew up in a Muslim home in the Philippines, describes a time when she began to study the Quran, and became a more devout follower of Islam, resulting in practices that differed from those of her family. Her newfound convictions altered her understanding of halal food:

But I can say that my family is not that observant about it (eating halal). Well, maybe for me, I think I just started when I was in high school, I guess. But as I mentioned earlier in the Philippines, if it's not pork, it's halal. But the more you study the religion and the more that you compare, and you see what is really inside the Quran, no, it's not like that. It's wrong.

(Sept. 7, 2023)

Joy's updated interpretation of the "proper" observance of halal food practices meant that she stopped eating meals with her family:

My mom reserved an extra pan for me, extra chopping board for me, because she knows that I am really strict with it. And never did my mom question me about it and never did I questioned her about it, because, as I said earlier, I never tried to change other people's perception of

that (eating halal), even with my own family, though I asked them questions.

(Sept. 7, 2023)

Although Joy describes a non-judgmental attitude towards her family and friends' halal food practices, she classifies their understanding of halal food as wrong, and from her experiences suggests "religion (is) practiced by people based on their convenience". Evidently, Joy believes that physical demonstration of being an observant Muslim is necessary, and that strictly following Islamic practices is important. Conversely, being "less practicing" signals a turn towards convenience instead of obedience. When I asked Joy about the benefits of eating halal, she explicitly ties her halal food practices to providing spiritual gains, or "points" that influence the afterlife.

Islam is really a matter of discipline and submission to whatever is on the Quran. And we have the belief that for every good things we do, there is a certain points for that. For example, if I pray alone, I only have maybe five points. But if I pray with 25 other women, it is being multiplied as well. So since we believe in the matter of numbers, quantifiable things, eating halal is a part of that as well. Eating it is simply added to your good points up there. So I think following what is Quran stated us to do, it is with my religion, of course, it is with my belief since it is what I identify myself with. So eating halal food is a big part of that because in the Quran, it says there that our body is our temple. So you should feed it good things or food that you know how is prepared, nutritious food or that's it, I guess.

(Sept. 7, 2023)

For Joy eating halal is essential to practicing her faith and identity as a Muslim – it is enough of a priority that she is willing to differentiate herself from family members. Despite her commitment to "not judge" and her statement that a Muslim is not "less of a Muslim" if they are less observant, Joy's practices and explanations demonstrate a belief that adherence to Islamic practices do indeed affect whether one is an exemplary Muslim, and performance of Islamic practices contributes to one's points or spiritual gains. This correlates with Hana who also says that consuming halal food is a direct action for followers of Islam to be spiritually pure.

4.4. Navigating Halal Food Practices with a Spouse

Joy stated that she and her Turkish husband are equally responsible to ensure that they are eating halal food (they do not have children), but sometimes, she is “more careful compared to him (because) especially if it’s ice cream”.

It was, I think our first week here (in Victoria) and we went to the supermarket to buy ice cream and then he just Googled it. Is this halal? And just one article that says it’s halal. We immediately bought it. Then, when we arrived at home, I checked the ingredients. I wasn’t minding him. The ingredients was gelatin on it.

So I was like, ‘No, this is not halal’.

But it’s okay because we are lucky because the supermarket actually accepted it back. It was untouched and they totally understand, So, it, it’s a good experience but it was a lesson learned just that sometimes my husband tends to, especially if it’s something that he likes. So, there are times that I am being careful. Like before we pay, I am reading the, the ingredients, but sometimes, of course, I slip. But yeah, I read a lot.

(Sept. 9, 2023)

After hearing this story, I reframed my question, asking Joy once again if she felt responsible for how her whole household eats. “Yeah, I guess so”, she told me, while she shrugged her shoulders and let out a breath – halfway between a sigh and a laugh, “I guess I feel that it’s my responsibility. Yeah.”

Joy’s depiction of this experience did not communicate that she was overtly frustrated with her husband, rather, it seemed that she was resigned to a role, perhaps of her own making, since this was not the first time in a family relationship where she followed a higher standard for eating halal (Joy adopted stricter halal food practices than her family in the Philippines). If Joy and her husband are influenced by the common gender roles in which women take on more of domestic tasks, then it makes sense that Joy would take extra precautions surrounding food choices. When she said “I wasn’t minding him” her expression told me that she wanted to communicate her respect for her husband – that she did not want to undermine him. However, as stated, she recognizes that he can be less careful when it comes to treats like ice cream – and this is where she steps in, taking additional care and responsibility.

A similar experience was shared by Sherin, who explained that although she does most of the cooking, her husband is primarily responsible for grocery shopping. I asked if they experience any challenges preparing halal food and Sherin told me how her husband had purchased the wrong kind of vanilla – one that contains alcohol. She said they threw it away, and then, he went to “the other grocery store that we have in the town, that for sure has those high-end vanilla ones. And he got me like three kinds. Like, I don’t need three kinds...” (Sept. 18, 2023).

When Sarah determined to eat “more halal” she admitted that there was “a bit of pushback” from her spouse. After consulting with religious leaders, Sarah says her husband recognized that her interpretation of halal practices was right, “so, he eventually was on board with it”. Sarah also reiterated the theme of keeping oneself pure as an obedient follower of Islam by saying that eating halal enables one’s “acts of worship to be accepted” (Sept. 19, 2023).

Based on my interlocutors’ experiences, eating halal, and more specifically being strict about eating halal, correlates with their religious performance. Although there are varied iterations of eating halal, it seems that my interlocutors’ interpretations are such that they are willing to differentiate and, in some cases, separate themselves from family members, and/or take increased responsibility and advocate for stricter practice than family members, including partners, based upon a belief that they are properly observing halal guidelines. This speaks of the individual negotiation of religious identity for my interlocutors; it aligns with the teachings in Islam that indicate personal responsibility to obey Allah, which may at times conflict with socialized expressions of Islamic practices.

4.5. Navigating Halal Food Practices with Children

While individual interpretation of halal food’s importance and value vary, halal food guidelines may be communicated through what Ochs and Shoet (2006) describe as “mealtime socialization” (35). The family dinner table presents as a sphere in which individuals are socialized into commensality, wherein they are effectively apprenticed into and learn language for “culturally divergent symbolic, moral, and emotional meanings associated with food and eating” (46). Similarly, Freedman (2011) describes how, by eating together, individuals assemble a “cultural toolbox” where food practices and food itself plays a role in how one negotiates their position in the social world (87).

For many, socialization that occurs around the dinner table incorporates religious values; however, while some Muslims may eat halal food in adherence to Islam, others may connect halal food practices to their ethnic origins and familial traditions. What one family deems observant halal food practices might differ from those of another family in the community, or, as follows, difference may be attributed to regional variation of Islamic dietary guidelines interpretation.

Mary Douglas (Douglas 1972; 2002) poses the idea of “deciphering a meal”, suggesting that each home, within its unique community, reveals “the hub of a small world”; here, meals often represent symbolic systems within a family, according to the family’s place in the larger social structure (239). Boundaries and rules, and foods (or preparations) that are included or excluded, communicate messages about values and how one is to relate to their family, and to the outside world (246; 250).

Sarah, a mother of three, incorporates her instructions to her children about Islamic dietary guidelines with healthy eating, which is explained to be a component of eating halal.

I'm always talking about food. So I'm always talking about like, you know, like it's important to eat healthy. It's important to eat lots of fruits, lots of vegetables. You need like a balance. You don't need like, you need to eat different things or variety. And then I'm always talking about like, okay, you know, yes, this thing is not halal and it's easy and convenient. But at the end of the day, is that really something we should be consuming? Because we do have options. We don't have, like, an excuse the way I see it.

And I teach my kids like, this is part of like, this is like also an act of worship, because you're obeying what we're commanded to do. And, you know, and I also explained like, okay, if there's no halal option, you could get a vegetarian thing, or you could even get kosher. Like there's, there's different ways. There's no really like, you can't complain. You guys have options. When I was a kid, there was like, no, no such thing, you know.

(Sept. 19, 2023)

Instructions about halal food starts on a child’s first day at the dinner table, says Hana, who is also a mother of three. Included in these lessons, is guidance on etiquette, like how much to eat, since over-eating is considered a sin in Islam. “You do not put lots of food in your plate, this is number one, you don’t put more than what you eat... don’t be greedy – Islam and greedy – it’s something very, very ,very, very... we take

seriously!” The intensity and passion with which Hana spoke revealed how I might imagine she communicates with her children. “For me like day one, I am - my husband and I'm very strict. I'm very religious, I feel sorry for my kids, but at the end of the day, thanks God, they are very, very well behaved and they are very strong personalities and they know right from wrong, they can distinguish” (Sept. 11, 2023).

Hana mentioned fear – stemming from the fact that her children are not growing up in a Muslim country – as a reason for her fervor.

If I were living in a Muslim society, I would be more relaxed because I know community, society, will teach them a lot..

I was raised in a Muslim society. I was born and raised in a Muslim society, so you learn those things – like day one, your parents they are doing it, the community, neighbour, friends, relatives, TV, school –

So, if I don't follow this ethically, they look down on you – that's shame, you eat in a disgusting way, or you are greedy, that's disgusting...

(Sept. 11, 2023)

My interlocutors, as religious minorities living in Victoria, described upholding the standards of halal food preparation and consumption within their households out of commitment to Islam. Through this, they cultivate both an instructional and enculturating setting; “[...] the dinner table is a place to practice an everyday form of purity and religious discipline, in which women play a central role” (Rouse and Hoskins 2004, 246).

Not living in a majority Muslim country, where food is typically halal and most community members identify as Muslim, requires my interlocutors to develop what Kolata and Gillson (2021) term, “food literacy”. In their example, Kolata and Gillson describe how Japanese Buddhist women monks use food literacy to somatically interpret and communicate the virtues of Buddhism. They carefully prepare meals that not only adhere to dietary rules, but also each dish's presentation and consumption is meant to evoke feeling, “whereby people not only continuously (re)learn but (re)remember how to belong in Buddhist environments” (575). These meals require specialized knowledge combined with practices that extend into ingredient selection, preparation, presentation and etiquette, all of which are associated with religious belonging (570). My interlocutors may not be curating a specific “halal meal” experience, since halal food is not defined by a recipe or presentation; however, I suggest my interlocutors develop and demonstrate

halal food literacy, and communicate this to their children, as well as others with whom they might share a meal. This food literacy enables them to demonstrate and follow the parameters of eating according to Islamic dietary guidelines, which involves both etiquette and avoiding haram ingredients. “Through food literacy, women teach, learn, and practice the meanings and ways of doing Buddhism”, or Islam, in the case of my interlocutors (589).

Teaching children to practice halal food literacy is important in an environment where non-Muslims, like teachers, or, as in the example below, camp leaders, might not know how to support Islamic food practices.

I remember one time they were in a camp. And the camp had marshmallows and marshmallows usually, you know, like that's the norm of most of the products. And I think either I - and my son was the one who said, like, “is this halal marshmallow?” and like she was like I'm not sure, yeah. And they had to read them back at first. It's not. So he didn't. It was hot cocoa with marshmallows. I think my daughter had it because she didn't know and like she loves marshmallow or maybe she knew or maybe she wanted you know to get away with it, but I didn't make it a big deal.

But I think he like, he asked. So again, I feel like, yes, you tell others, but you have to educate your kids because they will be put in situations where you didn't have any control and you may not have predicted, you know, that what will be given. And also the people who are giving them, the adults, may not know, like, maybe I said “no pork” but they, okay, we don't have any ham. But they have marshmallow which they have no idea that marshmallow has gelatin and gelatin is usually made of pork. You know, like the whole story many people don't know that - sure, non-Muslims at least.

(Sherin, Sept. 18, 2023)

When I asked Hana what it is like to teach her children to eat halal, she shared a story about her son. It's a familiar scenario – where a teacher decides to treat her students with candy. My own children's elementary school has a tradition where all the kids line up on Friday afternoons and the school secretary, or sometimes the principal, hands out a celebratory, “it's-the-weekend” candy as the children make their way out the door. But what happens when a child is not allowed to eat that candy?

When he was in grade two and the teacher is like handing candies, and he told her – ‘It's not halal... is it halal?’

The teacher was, like, surprised. ‘What's halal?’

So, my son have to... he explained to his teacher... 'You go Google it'.

My son told her to Google it.

(Hana, Sept. 11, 2023)

Hana's son, being educated on the potential of gelatin (a pork product) in candy, knew to ask his teacher whether the candy she was offering was halal. However, the teacher did not know the meaning of 'halal'. Hana's son's response is almost comical but fitting: "You go Google it". Hana's son now tells people that he has food allergies, because then "people will take it seriously. But if you tell them sometimes, 'because I am Muslim', or 'because my Islamic belief system', they will not take it seriously, they don't care" (Sept. 11, 2023).

All of the mothers whom I interviewed shared concerns about their children attempting to avoid haram food within a secular environment, whether at school or in social situations. In a non-Muslim environment, the potential to be exposed to haram food can appear as innocuous as being offered a candy that contains gelatin, or attending a campfire event where marshmallows are being roasted.

In addition to concerns about avoiding haram food, Hana described the difficulty of accessing halal meat while on vacation with her family:

Hana: Anyways, like a few weeks ago, we went, we go and bought our chicken from Walmart. Now we have a small section in Walmart. Halal chicken, halal lamb meat, everything. You know, halal in Walmart. Here, you can find it. Even Langford, even Costco, when I was here. Here, but look again, Costco here in Victoria, Langford. Halal meat up to Langford. Okay, you find halal meat in the stores, but goes like, you know, halal food going up north, up island, goes like this. (holds arms up in the shape of a triangle) As you go,

L: Less and less?

Hana: Less and less until you go zero. We went to Port Alberni. So we were on a road trip. I have all my kids in the car, my husband, and halal food zero because I'm in Port Alberni. There's no way halal food to go and sit and eat halal food in a restaurant. Anyways, so we went, let's like, so the kids, they said, okay, let's just go and have some like maybe, yeah. And we have been eating on those like croissant and pizza and kids we need, you know. So I said, so we went to Walmart. There is no zero halal. No halal. What, come on. There is no Walmart. They have a huge Walmart there in their (??). No halal, didn't exist. And

it was like the only person with me and the girls like, (points to head scarf) and all those like, we were like.

L: You were like a tourist?

HA: I was like - the only person of color maybe, or Muslim. I don't think so in Port Alberni, there is any Muslim. We did this, we stayed there for a while, but there is nobody and people were staring at us as if we were like coming. Oh my God. But it's nice. It was nice. Nobody was rude, to be honest, but like people were all, and there is no halal food. We couldn't find, we were like hoping to have some chicken. Maybe they cook like some breast chicken for them or do something very good for the kids. No halal food, zero. Walmart carries all the kind of halal food. No, Port Alberni zero.

Hana expressed frustration at the ignorance of many people, including teachers and restaurant staff, and attributed a lack of understanding about halal food, and subsequent accessibility, to the “very white” population in Victoria and across Vancouver Island.

4.6. Eating Halal Socially

Joy's commitment as a practicing Muslim not only differentiates her from family members in the Philippines, but she also described challenges in connecting with other immigrant Filipinos in Victoria. She claimed that she lacks the “energy” to both explain that she is Muslim (despite not wearing a hijab), and she does not want to have to discuss why she will not engage in certain activities (like joining their regular Friday night “drinking session”). This avoidance is furthered by Joy's belief that being an observant Muslim should involve separation from people engaging in unhealthy (or sinful) activities.

Yeah, because in the Quran it stated as well that you should be careful of the people you're around. If they do things that will make you maybe commit something not halal or sin, then you need to go and establish your distance away from them. So, it's part of the discipline as well.”

(Sept. 7, 2023)

A theme that emerges in Joy's descriptions about observing halal food practices is one of avoidance or abstinence. Joy described not eating with her family, at her childhood home. She also shared that she stopped eating at a widely popular fast-food restaurant in the Philippines:

I mean, Jollibees (is) Filipinos favorite, but it's not halal. The only halal thing there is the ice cream and the French fries because they are cooking it separately, but it's not halal at all. So, when I started like slowly being observant and strict about it, it was difficult for me actually, because I cannot eat that anymore. So, I tried to maybe I can cook like my own spaghetti or something. So yeah, it was difficult. It was challenging.

Now, living in Victoria, Joy's social events are selective; she is unlikely to spend time with co-ethnics from school or work, and instead, because her husband is Turkish, she chooses to spend time with Turkish Muslims – with whom she must navigate a language barrier. The affiliation of Muslim identity and following Islamic values appears to outweigh her willingness or desire to socialize with non-Muslims or be in a position where she must be on the lookout for haram foods.

Joy also remarked that she feels frustrated that public food spaces in Victoria lack awareness of halal food guidelines.

So for example, there are some examples in our cafeteria because I was really hungry yesterday. I asked if it's kosher. The thing is, the staff doesn't know halal. But when I say, but is it kosher? Then he said, yeah, yeah, it's kosher. But you put alcohol on it? No. You put vanilla on it? Yes. So yeah. So it's one of the challenges here. I think that kosher is, it's new for us that it's not really halal.

And second, I realize now some people doesn't know what is halal. Like even this restaurant, if you're a restaurant owner or if you because in here I've read or that you can serve people if you have a serving rights certificate. Like you need to undergo certification. Why doesn't that certification educate this waitress or this you people in hospitality about kosher, about halal? It's not so many. Vegetarian, gluten-free, LGBT. Everything's covered. It is so hard. So how can they not know? How can they not identify if it's halal or not? Do you have halal certification? We don't know halal. Somehow it's offensive because in Philippines, it's a common knowledge. At least they know what is halal, that Muslims eat that. But in here, they'll give you a quizzical look. Like am I the first one who asked this?

(Sept. 9, 2023)

While it is likely that lack of knowledge of halal in the food service industry in Victoria is connected to the low density of Muslims in Victoria, Joy's experiences demonstrate that she feels like her dietary restrictions as a Muslim are treated as an inconvenience.

When I spoke with Hana, I asked if there are any circumstances that might affect who she eats with:

Hana: I remember when my, yeah, when I graduated, and I our like, oh, I can't speak now, on our graduation day for my master's...

L: The convocation?

Hana: The convocation, exactly, our cohort went for lunch and drink after the, so I didn't go. I could, sometimes I would go and leave before they start drinking, I could have done that, but I didn't go because I know that we have very strong relationship with my cohort, and they would rather, oh no, Hana, I can't go, but I didn't go because I know they will drink, so yeah.

L: And you would prefer not to even sit next to somebody when they're doing that?

Hana: Oh yeah, with eating, it's okay, I go with my friends out to eat, but with the drinking, I can't handle that. I feel I don't be really there.

L: And what is it that makes that different? I can assume, but why is it so different when they're drinking versus maybe eating bacon on their burger?

Hana: Because when they are eating bacon, number one, I will not smell it, number two, they will not act out. Eating pork will not make them drunk or making them lose their minds, but for me, because also the practice around the drinking is different than eating. When you're eating, you are eating in your plate, mind your own business, you know, everybody's eating in their plates. But like drinking, sometimes, you know how they do, open the beer, I know what they do, and too much, and they smell, and sometimes, you know, people from the second sip, they lose their minds and start saying things, and some people will start, you know, yeah, so..

L: So it's the behavior that you prefer not to be around?

Hana: Not to be around, and I respect my friends, and I wanted to keep the connection, so I don't want anything to happen to change their picture in my mind, you know. I wanted to keep the connections with them, so I go with them when it's permissible for me, and avoid the places where it will maybe create friction.

(Sept. 11, 2023)

Based on Hana's understanding of adhering to halal food practices, eating halal is not only about what one consumes, but is clearly about what one avoids, about

separation from potentially polluting things. In this case, Hana is not concerned about what she personally ingests, but what she might be exposed to if she spends time with people who are drinking alcohol. Douglas (2002) describes cultural beliefs to be responsible for constructing ideas of pollution; what one believes to be materially unclean guides behaviour through implicit and sometimes explicit parameters on what is pure and impure, and how one might maintain 'holiness' (9). In this case, Hana's understanding of alcohol is that it can "from the second sip" cause people to "lose their minds and start saying things". Hana, along with several other interlocutors, described being Muslim and following Islam as a way of life, and Islamic dietary guidelines are integral to this lifestyle, to support their physical and spiritual health. Resultingly, halal food guidelines, and specifically the understanding that alcohol is haram, does appear to impact my interlocutors' willingness to eat socially with those who are not observant.

4.7. 'Performing' Halal Food Practices

Butler (1988) suggests performative acts may at times unsettle "existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements" (527). For example, an individual in drag observed on stage is understood to be performing an act; however, an individual who is in drag on the bus or in the street might be labeled as "dangerous" and, to some, can compel "fear, rage, even violence" (527). Butler states "gender reality is performative [...] it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (527). Likewise, I suggest that one's religious identity is performative. While one might internalize beliefs and experience them on an intellectual or spiritual level, it is through practicing (which may include the way one eats, or how they dress) that one constitutes, and "lives out" their religious (or gender) identity (McGuire 2008a). To reiterate, I agree with Weston's (2002) critique of Butler, arguing that performativity cannot be simplified to a mechanical understanding wherein one's identity is solely socially constructed through performance (which ignores an individual's distinct internal process) (62). However, one's performance is essential in the context of practices whereby outward acts are influential in making and unmaking one's identity (Ortner 2006). Based upon this premise, the manner in which religious performative acts are perceived publicly matters to individual constitution of identity and can also impact one's sense of acceptability and/or safety in society. Similar to Butler's example of drag, there are practices related to Islam that may invoke adverse responses if performed in public, versus privately or in a mosque. In the opening chapter I shared

how a news truck in Toronto allegedly promoted Islamophobia by sharing images of Muslims who appear to be praying (Draaisma 2024), and I have demonstrated how veiling is politicized, and in some cases criticized as a sign of oppression or symbol of extremism in some locations (Ahmed 2024; Michael 2011; Molana, Ranjbar, and Razavi 2023). While eating halal does not have to be as visible (or public) a performance, and it may not overtly signal that one is Muslim, I suggest that eating halal can provoke similar discrimination or controversy in some settings, and at the very least, result in discomfort for practicing Muslims.

Natalia expressed hesitancy to transition to eating exclusively halal in front of family members, and Hana and Joy both described circumstances where eating halal posed a challenge in public settings. Hana indicated that her son's school is more receptive to uphold a dietary restriction for the sake of an allergy versus for a religious belief. Likewise, Joy expressed frustration that some food service workers do not seem open to learning about halal food requirements, despite being knowledgeable about the needs of "vegetarian, gluten-free, LGBT..." people (Sept. 9, 2023).

I think it just in this country, I think it is making my connection with people challenging because, you know, I just, I just don't have the energy [...] So I don't think I have the energy to connect with my own fellow men, then explain how this thing works (eating halal) or introducing myself that I am Muslim even if I'm not wearing a hijab and I cannot do this or I cannot do certain things with you.

(Joy, Sept. 9, 2023)

It is true that eating halal does not have to be obvious or difficult in public, and there are likely Muslims who do not feel as though their adherence to eating halal is challenging in social settings. However, Hana stated, "all this life is a test", "we have to put in effort" (Sept. 11, 2023). Eating halal is a component of practicing Islam that she feels must be enacted every day, whether it is convenient, or not. My interlocutors describe following Islam as a lifestyle which inevitably intersects with daily decisions about where to eat and who to eat with, and resultingly, there are occasions when they experience religious othering by choosing to eat only halal food (Moore 2022). It is possible that some of the behaviours and opposition they encounter is connected to harmful stereotypes projected onto Muslims, which results in opposition to supporting Muslim practices like eating halal food. As such, this makes the performance of Muslim identity through the act of eating halal potentially challenging in some public settings.

4.8. Conclusions

In Islam, responsibility is placed upon individuals to adhere to rules and guidelines; however, in the domestic sphere Islamic ideologies involving dietary laws influence bodily practices (Curtis 2013). As such, food preparation can be a religious activity that allows women to both influence and meaningfully connect to religious life (Sered 1996, 87). Although Muslims are varied in whether they only eat halal food, and how they define halal food, one's "level of practice" is up to personal conviction and individual responsibility. However, my interlocutors' roles in their immediate family relationships appears to impact the standards of Islamic food practices within their households, which causes them to take on additional responsibility for family members. From the examples provided, it seems that a Muslim women might engage (or even challenge) her spouse on what it means to properly follow Islamic dietary laws. Hana's story suggests she feels it is acceptable to instruct her son to lie about having a food allergy so that he can avoid haram food. And each of the mothers I interviewed described the importance of early learning and integration of halal food practices for their children, so that they might navigate maintaining halal food practices in a secular environment. Based upon my interlocutors' experience, eating halal is a lifestyle choice that intersects with their public performance of being adherent Muslims. While this can be a point of celebration and pride, for example through sharing halal cuisine at an event like the BC Halal Food Festival, sometimes choosing halal food in public may be faced with ignorance, dismissal, and even disdain.

Chapter 5. Finding Meaning in Halal Food Practices

...I'm a practicing Muslim and I want to practice Islam. And I'm being a Muslim, meaning you are submitting – you're submitting to Allah and his commandments. So, if he tells you to eat something or you don't eat something, I follow it.

...I'm just saying people who are practicing Islam, why they would seek halal versus not halal, it's just to say that Allah told us what to look for, or the prophet told us what to look for and what to avoid.

(Sherin, Sept. 18, 2023)

Tonight, I am making falafels for my family, from scratch – a process that began by soaking dried chickpeas for 24 hours, then processing them with fresh dill, parsley, cilantro, garlic, onion, and spices. Once fried, I will serve them with fresh veggies, including lettuce from our garden and a creamy garlicky sauce, all wrapped up inside of a freshly warmed pita. This “authentic family recipe” (according to the website) is from a cook who grew up in Egypt. And not only is this a nourishing, satisfying, and flavourful vegetarian meal, but it is also halal. I might remark on this at the dinner table, a point of discussion connected to my ongoing thesis work that has occupied my mind for the past year. But neither my family members, nor I, find meaning or purpose in eating halal food, apart from the possibility of feeling as though we are encountering an ethnic or cultural experience.

This leads me to review the meaning of halal food for my interlocutors who demonstrated motivation to consume halal food, while proactively avoiding haram foods. Their motivation, or their purpose for eating halal food, stems largely from a sense of piety; a commitment to follow Islam. Additionally, they, and other Muslim women whom I encountered at the masjid during my fieldwork, may be motivated by a sense of belonging to their community, and a desire to maintain ethnic and familial traditions. Admittedly, I cannot definitively argue what motivates my interlocutors to follow Islamic dietary guidelines; however, I can look to the stories told by their halal food practices to suggest their meaning in their day to day lives.

5.1. Learning and Practicing Eating Halal

My data indicate that practices of eating halal are often passed down among families, through mealtime socialization; but they may also be influenced by proximity to the greater Muslim community, and involvement with a mosque. In the case of special events, like fasting during Ramadan, followed by Iftar meals and Eid, individual dietary practices are reinforced, celebrated, and made meaningful in community (Mehdi 2008; Ochs and Shohet 2006; Curtis 2013).

For both Natalia, as a new convert, and the other women whom I interviewed, eating halal has been a journey; that is, my interlocutors described changes to their halal food practices. In some cases, my interlocutors' level of adherence changed – they mentioned studying the Quran for themselves, and/or looking into the details of Islamic dietary requirements and then concluding that they should become stricter out of obedience to Allah. However, Sherin's experience differed: when facing the challenges of living as an immigrant in a majority non-Muslim environment she found precedent for flexibility in her meat consumption. Instead of only eating halal (or *zabiha*) meat, as long as she was **not** eating haram meat, she felt that she was in line with the requirements. My interlocutors emphasized that one's adherence to Islam, and in particular how they follow halal food practices, is personal and an individual responsibility. Based on these data, it appears that following halal food practices is not simply about proper ingredients (or avoidance), but it connects to intention.

Rouse and Hoskins (2004) examine community picnics among predominantly African American Sunni Muslims, where a fusion of soul food and Middle Eastern cuisine is shared. Here, "food was found to be a central medium for expressing religious commitment, and for positioning oneself in relation to a history of slavery and new forms of liberation" (229). In this community, the importance of "connecting consciousness with practices" is stressed, as it relates to food consumption. In my fieldwork, I heard from participants that as observant Muslims eating only halal food is a central expression of religious commitment; and while this might incorporate ethnic or familial traditions, religious adherence is the utmost priority.

5.2. Community Impact on Halal Food Practices

While eating halal can be simple, and a practicing Muslim could opt for vegetarian food when eating outside of their home, my data indicate that there are challenges to maintaining halal food practices in Canada, in locations like Vancouver Island, where Muslims are a minority population. My interlocutors spoke of their vigilance in avoiding haram foods, both while shopping at the grocery store, and when eating out with family or friends. A desire to maintain halal food practices may lead to differentiation: Joy chooses to prepare and eat separate meals from her family when home in the Philippines; Joy and Hana described avoiding social situations when alcohol (a haram food) is involved; and some of my interlocutors' children have opted out of foods (candy, marshmallows) being served to their cohort. So, although eating halal is personal and individual, a choice to be adherent can seem restrictive or isolating, despite the belief that adherence is an act of worship with spiritual (and physical) benefits. Alternately, I observed how halal food has the capacity to draw diverse people of all ages and ethnicities together; connection and belonging are facilitated by sharing food at the mosque and through events like the Moroccan dinner and the BC Halal Food Festival.

5.3. Concluding Thoughts

As I shared at the start of this thesis, food has the capacity to encourage connection between people, whilst simultaneously communicating the story of who we are. In this study I attempted to better understand my Muslim neighbours by learning about and how to make halal food; observing activities involving halal food; and of course, by eating halal food. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I became aware of the importance of maintaining halal food practices to my interlocutors; yet these practices are varied as a result of personal interpretation and history. While it is true that maintaining a halal diet does not have to feel restrictive, nor is it inherently difficult, I learned that my interlocutors encounter challenges and barriers to eating halal, especially as religious minorities in a largely non-Muslim community.

One recommendation that arises from my fieldwork is the promotion of inclusive food education that covers religious dietary restrictions, for the public arena (i.e. in schools and in food service environments). Although halal adherence means different things to different Muslims (for example, whether one eats only zabiha meat), religious

dietary restrictions should not need to be disguised as allergies to be taken seriously. As my research is limited to a focus on a select sample of observant Muslims, further research could be done in a Canadian context on halal food practices of diversely adherent Muslims, including experiences of immigrant communities. Additionally, as noted in the introduction, I observed a variety of events and activities where the Muslim community tied food to social action. This would also be a fascinating arena of research.

My final (and more practical) recommendation is to try new foods! Visiting restaurants and/or attending food-related events of varied ethnic or religious communities is a low-barrier opportunity to engage with and learn about others, and it can be a deliciously insightful experience.

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