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Pandemagogy and Online Teaching: A Case for Public Internet

Shehnoor Khurram

Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) is not merely a medical crisis; it is also a social one. It has paralyzed all aspects of public life, leading to closures of all "non-essential" public spaces, chief among them, schools. Universities across Canada have shut down and moved online in an attempt to halt the transmission of the deadly virus. What many initially thought would be remote learning for just a few weeks, turned into months. Now, for the foreseeable future, remote learning will be the new normal. However, this poses unique challenges for educators and students, because there is no universal access to high-speed internet in Canada, which means that those who have access to it can transition online with ease; while those who do not have access are left behind. In an effort to work through these challenges, this reflection paper offers an autoethnographic account of online learning and its associated challenges during COVID-19. It makes the case for public internet and pandemagogy.

Keywords
COVID-19, Internet Access, Public Internet, Digital Divide, Critical Pedagogy, Pandemagogy, Online Teaching

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had extensive consequences beyond the transmission of the disease itself; and the measures employed to mitigate its spread carry significant social, political, and economic ramifications. The multi-layered strategy of public health emergency responses has paralyzed all aspects of public life. The closure of all "non-essential" spaces, including schools, has been one component of this approach. Millions of students have had their education disrupted by the deadly virus, as universities across Canada have shut down and moved online in an attempt to lower the staggeringly high contagion rates of COVID-19. What many initially thought would be remote learning for just a few weeks, has turned into months. Now, for the foreseeable future, remote learning will be the new norm.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore a crisis that has been quietly brewing in Canada for many decades: the digital divide. With the widespread disruption to everyday life, the internet has emerged as a panacea to tackle all education-related issues. But this poses unique challenges, because there is no universal access to high-speed internet in Canada, meaning that those who have access to it can transition online with ease, while those who do not are left behind.

Migrating Online

I am a fourth-year doctoral candidate and teaching assistant in the department of Political Science at York University. In March 2020, I received an email from my department's chair announcing that in-person instruction would be cancelled for the rest of the winter semester, and that all classes will be moving online. I have been an educator for many years now and during this time, I have dealt with various kinds of crises; but never before have I felt such an acute sense of dread and uneasiness. Transitioning to virtual learning, especially during times of indefinite uncertainty, is no easy feat. For educators, this crisis is a challenge of adaptation, revision, and transformation, because there is no manual to guide the process. We must design and create responses in the moment, as the pandemic wreaks havoc on all.

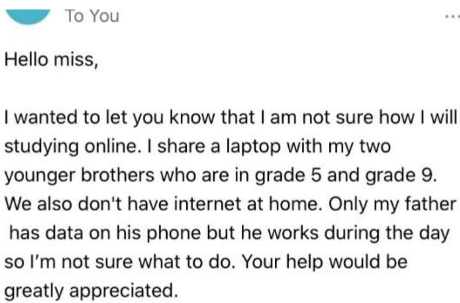
I am deeply committed to public education. Teaching forms the very basis of my revolutionary politics. Inspired by the works of Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Henry Giroux and others, I believe that education is "coming to know, act, and engage the world" (Dei and Simmons, 2010: p.3). Education is political and has the potential to transform oppressive relations of domination and subordination. It can be emancipatory because it develops a critical consciousness, which can empower students to take action to build a more just world. I teach first- and second-year courses on Canadian politics with the explicit aim of sharing Canada's violent histories of genocide, racial slavery, settler colonialism, anti-Black racism, neoliberal capitalism, and more. I encourage students to consider the present in light of the past, to make sense of the current state of Canadian politics by locating its historical origins, and considering how broader structural movements impact their everyday lives. My aim is to urge students to think about structures of oppression, alienation, and exploitation at the level of praxis in ways that put their lived experiences in conversation with theory and history.

A vital facet of this process is getting students to reflect on their positionalities, and tackle issues of inequality, difference, and power through the lenses of class, race, gender, ability, Indigeneity, religion, sexuality, and more. For many students who have thus far only received the province-approved middle and secondary school curricula, critical learning can be shocking. It is together as a class that we do the difficult work of unpacking these legacies of violence, questioning institutionalized power and privilege, and discussing the limitations and possibilities of politics. Engaging in these sorts of conversations requires building relationships of trust and compassion in the classroom. In addition to the contexts, cultures, histories, and meanings that they bring to the classroom itself, the critical education that my students and others at York University receive promotes civic courage and social responsibility. This has the possibility of igniting bravery within them to realize that they have the power and the duty to challenge the existing unjust status quo, and to dream of new worlds.

With the transition to online teaching, I initially questioned how I would accomplish any of these goals when digital learning platforms add major communication barriers that make it hard to know when to talk or how to read important non-verbal communications, like body language and facial expressions. I wondered how I would inspire students to come together and share the vulnerable parts of themselves in service of cultivating solidarity and community when we are not even in the same room.

Getting students to participate in difficult conversations is already a challenge under ordinary circumstances; but it is intensified tenfold during remote learning. I worried that the authentic moments of connection that I have come to value as an educator would become few and far between. I worried that teaching and learning would become a solitary and detached responsibility, rather than a shared human experience in which we could all lean on each other. I worried I wouldn't be able to feel their palpable rage or discomfort when discussing issues in Canadian politics, like racism and white supremacy, in the ways I used to during in-person instruction. I worried that teaching would now feel hollowed out and empty.

All of these concerns swirled in my head, until I received an email from a student a few days before my very first online tutorial. The email read:


To You ...

Hello miss,

I wanted to let you know that I am not sure how I will studying online. I share a laptop with my two younger brothers who are in grade 5 and grade 9. We also don't have internet at home. Only my father has data on his phone but he works during the day so I'm not sure what to do. Your help would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you,

Immediately, I realized that my worries about teaching online were secondary to the real concern: digital access. Questions of critical pedagogy in the online classroom are useless if students cannot even log on.

The Digital Divide

Like most things, the jarring social inequalities within the Canadian society were exposed in the first few days of the pandemic: online learning is not universal, and students face a host of systemic barriers that prevent them from attending their new mode of schooling. My above student, for instance, struggled to keep up with coursework because he could only access the internet during certain times of the day, and through his parent's cell phone. Additionally, he shared a laptop with two other siblings, all of whom were learning at multiple levels. The consequences of these factors led to his continued absence from tutorials, and lengthy delays in submitting class assignments. Unfortunately, his experience is not unique, and similar situations are unfolding nationwide.

The pandemic has unveiled the longstanding technological gulf that exists in Canada. Students who lack the resources that they now need to learn are facing serious long-term academic disadvantages – this is referred to as the digital divide. The concept of the "digital divide" is a reference to the growing gap between various socioeconomic groups and regions with or without access to communication technologies (i.e., laptops) and the internet (Steele, 2019). Canada does not have a national broadband plan; and class, race, gender, disability, citizenship status, and geographic location, among other things, impact a person's ability to access digital connectivity, tools, and skills (Campana, 2020). For students, access to eLearning is dependent on a host of factors, such as personal and familial financial means, geographic location, and intersecting social identities. Many people don't have access to high-speed internet. These people are disproportionately poor and rural (Stewart, 2020).

Limited or no access to technology creates serious impediments for students; but even those who have access to technology encounter many critical challenges. This is because the digital divide is also embodied and physical. For students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and/or mental health disabilities, remote learning can pose significant questions of accommodation and accessibility (Peter, 2020; Weissman, 2020). In the scramble to shift to online learning, barriers to disability supports have increased, compounded by the fact that many online course designs are simply not accessible. Assistive technology is unreliable and irregularly used by educational institutions who purport to be accessible, and learning is made harder through the use of anti-cheating software and proctored exams (Leoppky, 2020). For some, asynchronous learning has facilitated greater independence and self-accommodation by allowing them to learn without leaving their homes and created more flexible schedules. For others, it has been inaccessible in new or worse ways. Given that technological design and use do not centre inclusion and accessibility, the internet is now becoming a new means of increased discrimination in the university and beyond (Kent, 2015; Anderson, 2020).

Further, it is troubling to note that students with disabilities in Canada have been advocating for remote accommodations for many years; but they

have faced insensitive opposition from university administrators, on the basis that such a transition would purportedly be too expensive and time-consuming, and it would require educators to undertake additional training (Anderson, 2020). However, it is ironic that when the university needed to shift to online teaching for its own survival during the pandemic-induced lockdown, suddenly a transition to eLearning not only became a real possibility but also took a short week to accomplish. What this demonstrates is that although many students with disabilities are benefitting from this transition, it is clear that the increase in access is completely unintentional, and not designed to accommodate their specific needs.

The combination of these factors has created a situation where students who lack the resources to learn at home cannot fully participate and engage in online schooling (Campana, 2020). With the digital divide dictating who can and cannot access remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are effectively creating a two-tier stratification of the educational system in which marginalized students needlessly suffer. Previously, students without access to Wi-Fi at home could go to the library, community centres, coffee shops and/or other restaurants for internet access (Vargas, 2020). But with all non-essential spaces closed to limit contagion, the issue of the digital divide becomes a pressing and urgent complication that must be dealt with quickly and systematically, factoring into every governmental emergency planning.

The Case for Public Internet

While the total shift to virtual learning is new, the inequitable access to technology (internet access and devices) has been an enduring feature of Canadian society for decades. Previously, the internet was a luxury, a place for those who could afford it to watch funny cat videos, shop from the comfort of their homes, and play games with others. But 2020 has demonstrated with stark clarity that the internet is now a necessity for all of us living in this highly digitalized world. Access to the internet is now as important for our well-being as is electricity (Vargas, 2020). The internet has become a permanent fixture in our everyday lives; a medium through which we work, learn, communicate, entertain, and relax. This is especially true of the pandemic, when the internet has helped us maintain our collective well-being during a period of prolonged isolation brought on by social distancing and lockdown.

The internet has become so vital that in 2016, the United Nations (UN) declared internet access a fundamental human right (Vargas, 2020). An amendment was made to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.). This article is also concerned with "the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet", through which it tackles the global digital divide and provides 15 recommendations for member countries, including Canada, to implement (Howell and Darrell, 2016).

The Canadian government quickly followed suit with the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) announcing that broadband internet access is a right for all Canadian citizens[1] (Pedwell, 2016). However, there is a significant difference between recognizing access to the internet as a human right and ensuring that everyone has access to it. While it has been recognized as crucial, it has yet to become truly accessible for all (Vargas, 2020). Despite creating plans, the Canadian government has thus far been slow to act on it. The pandemic is now demonstrating that the gap between these two realms of access is ever-expanding, with government rhetoric in misalignment with government action. Although, in the 2019 federal budget, the Liberal government devoted $5-$6 million for a Universal Broadband Fund, with the aim of achieving 100 per cent connectivity across the country by 2030, the crisis is unfolding now – waiting until 2030 is just not an option (CBC, 2020). This difference in the internet landscape has meant that, according to Statistics Canada, 1.4 million households with less than

[1] While CRTC has used the term "citizens", it is important to note that this wording leaves out all those with precarious statuses as well as sovereign Indigenous communities. Further, citizenship itself is mediated through race, class, gender, disability, Indigeneity, and more, and its privileges are not evenly distributed amongst and between different social groups. Given that the internet is now considered a human right, it should not be sought through or limited to citizenship.

$20,000 yearly income do not have landline internet (Sharpe, 2020). Sixteen per cent of all households in Canada do not have access to high-speed internet; and the number jumps to 63 per cent for rural households. High-speed internet connectivity is a human right that must be readily available and accessible to everyone, not just those who are able to afford the unreasonably expensive prices set by the telecommunication industry's giants.

Despite its necessity during the current crisis, the federal government has not included high-speed internet in any government relief package. Various municipalities and individual schools have attempted to combat the issue. In Toronto, the city announced their #ConnectTO initiative that aims to expand internet access to underserved residents by using existing resources like fibre cables, and to have new resources provided by private sector partners to offer reasonable prices (Rocca, 2021). This includes Wi-Fi installment in 25 private residential neighbourhoods for a year; however, the installment itself will take quite some time (Vargas, 2020). York University has set up a laptop borrowing service that allows registered students, faculty, and staff who are in good standing[2] to access a university-owned laptop. But these measures still leave many behind, and do not address the situation systematically. At best, these solutions are temporary, and therefore do not challenge the inequitable access to the internet in meaningful and wide-reaching ways.

It is also abundantly clear that the private sector is not going to close the digital divide. Not only will they not close the divide, but they are actively working to exacerbate it. They have lobbied for deregulations that would intensify the rift, treating the internet as an “exploitable luxury good” (Bode, 2019). The Big Three of the Canadian telecoms industry, Bell Canada, Telus Communications, and Rogers Communications have a de facto monopoly on the internet in Canada; and they are protected by state-enforced restrictive foreign ownership rules that aim at eliminating competition. This has led to outrageously high prices, low consumption rates, and uneven connectivity (Jackson, 2018). In response to the pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the two largest internet providers in Ontario (Bell Canada and Rogers Communications) have both removed data usage caps on home internet plans; but they have neither offered to drop overage charges on cell phones, nor created unlimited mobile data plans (Sharp, 2020).

Ultimately, our outdated national internet infrastructure is incapable of withstanding a crisis of this nature. We need a more inclusive arrangement. Everyone deserves dependable, high-speed internet; and access to it should not be mediated based on location, social identity, or ability to pay. It should not be a price-gouging, profit machine for corporations. We must break up the monopolies of the big telecom providers, and move towards publicly owned and democratically controlled, open-access broadband networks (Gilbert, 2020; Moreton, 2020). We must treat the internet as a necessary public utility that everyone deserves as a fundamental human right. Alejandra Ruiz Vargas (2020), an advocate with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) Canada, sketches one possible route to achieve this: expanding the federal government’s existing Connecting Families initiative to offer free Wi-Fi in all public spaces and private home plans to be available for just $10 per month.

Pandemagogy: A Note to Educators

In light of the digital divide, there are two points for all educators to consider: first, internet access is yet another realm of COVID-19 in which the government has failed to act, leaving people struggling to find solutions. The federal government’s stimulus package does not even address the digital divide, even though nearly all Canadian universities and colleges are physically closed. Governance in Ontario has demonstrated that what matters most to them is corporate Canada’s needs and interests, rather than those of students. We cannot rely on these policymakers to step up to the challenge. It is up to us as educators to apply pressure from below that can lead to change from above. We must take decisive steps to prevent the learning gap from further widening. We should include public internet in our demands as a redline stipulation that we are unwilling to negotiate on, as we wage a battle against the Ford government’s harmful school re-opening plans. In-

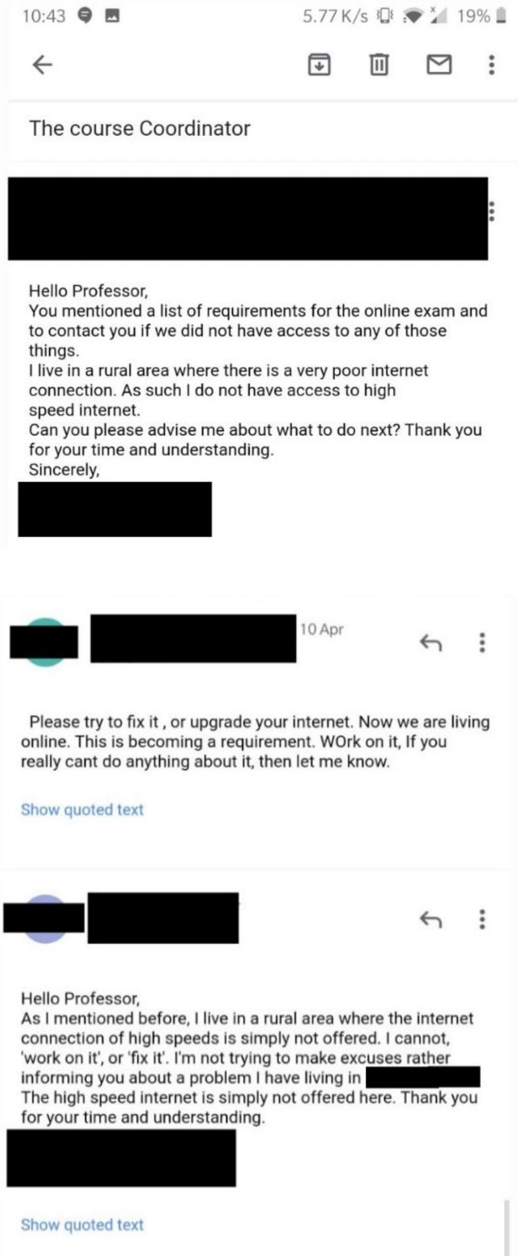
[2] At York University, and beyond, the “good standing” conditionality has historically been used as a punitive measure to target student activists, who are overwhelmingly BIPOC and international students; this was especially evident in the aftermath of the CUPE3903’s 2018 strike. Moreover, in order to access such equipment, students and staff have to travel to campus, which is not an option for many.

person instruction will likely not resume for another year; and with classes all pivoting online, we need to act immediately to ensure that no student is left offline.

The second factor to consider is pandemagogy. To make sense of this challenging moment, educators have been coming together to have collective discussions and to create a community on Twitter. Out of these conversations emerged the term pandemagogy: pedagogy during the pandemic (Kamenetz, 2020; Morris, 2020). Kamenetz (2002) defines pandemagogy as teaching during extraordinary times, whereby educators must bridge the gap between in-person instruction and online learning amongst the deadly Coronavirus. Sean Michael Morris (2020) argues that previous modes of online learning that were dominant pre-pandemic uphold the neoliberal status quo. Driven by austerity politics and market fundamentalism, these forms of eLearning prioritize technical, behaviourist, and positivist approaches that treat students like customers. Education becomes less about a knowledge community developing critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the world, and more about individual students acquiring certain credentials that will make them competitive in the job market. In this equation, students become consumers, and the university becomes a business that can standardize requirements to attain those credentials. The development of critical thinking is undermined to achieve simple benchmarks because it is easier for the university to quantify, transforming higher education into a purchasable degree instead of the acquisition of knowledge. Structural barriers, like the digital divide, are ignored, and success/failure in attaining credentials becomes the responsibility of the individual student. The neoliberal university thus becomes analogous to a factory assembly line that mass-produces uniform students, prioritizing efficiency and output.

This cannot work for pandemagogy. We are in an uncertain state of flux (Ravitch, 2020). Students have novel and unprecedented concerns about their academic plans and career goals. As Sharon Ravitch (2020) argues, there is an urgent need for a humanizing and student-centric educational approach that is founded on kindness, compassion, patience, flexibility, understanding, and solidarity (also see Morris, 2020). Critical pedagogy offers a framework for responding to online teaching during pandemagogy, because it requires the teacher to "read the world and respond/teach accordingly" (para. 4). It encourages responsive, compromising, and flexible learning and knowledge production by creating safe spaces, strengthening mutual trust, and empowering the agency of all in the virtual community. Unfortunately, however, it does not seem that Canadian universities are thus far willing to adopt such a framework around teaching.

To this point, the following is an email exchange between my younger cousin who lives in rural Ontario, and his engineering professor at Ryerson University:


10:43 5.77 K/s 19%

The course Coordinator

Hello Professor,
You mentioned a list of requirements for the online exam and to contact you if we did not have access to any of those things.
I live in a rural area where there is a very poor internet connection. As such I do not have access to high speed internet.
Can you please advise me about what to do next? Thank you for your time and understanding.
Sincerely,

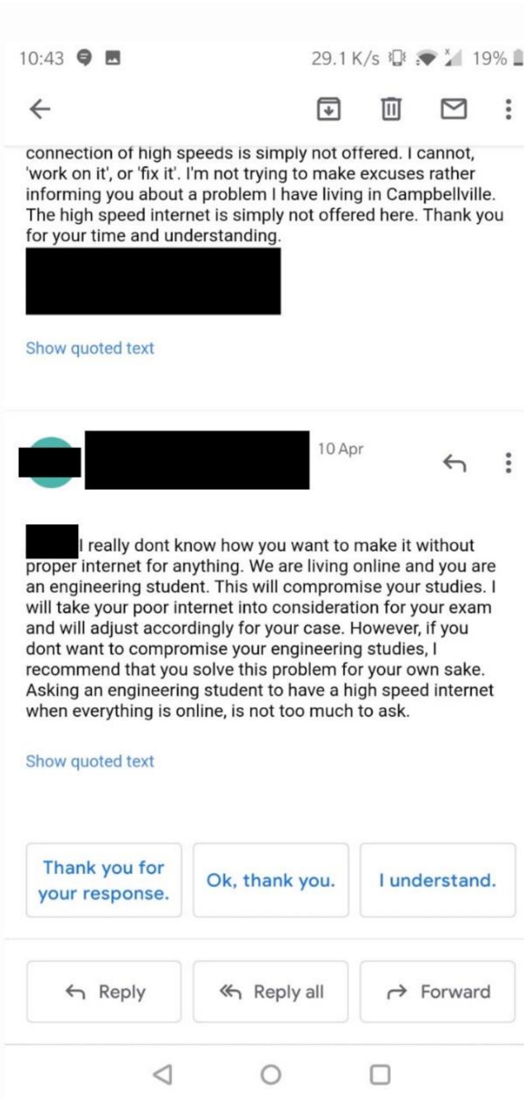
10 Apr

Please try to fix it , or upgrade your internet. Now we are living online. This is becoming a requirement. WOrk on it, If you really cant do anything about it, then let me know.

Show quoted text

Hello Professor,
As I mentioned before, I live in a rural area where the internet connection of high speeds is simply not offered. I cannot, 'work on it', or 'fix it'. I'm not trying to make excuses rather informing you about a problem I have living in
The high speed internet is simply not offered here. Thank you for your time and understanding.

Show quoted text



The attitude of this instructor is shameful, appalling, and disgraceful. Such behaviour individualizes the structural issue of inequitable access to the internet. Placing the burden of internet access onto students is unfair and unethical, given that it is often not under their control. Educators who engage in this kind of blame-and-shame behaviour allow the government to evade its responsibility to students to ensure that they have access to the internet. Critically, we must reflect on the socio-economic and political contradictions and tensions that underlie the educational experiences of students during COVID-19 so that we can craft responses that account for systemic inequalities and are attuned to their unique circumstances. The digital divide means that marginalized students are going to struggle the most. We must extend grace to them and assume good faith. We must practice active listening and proactive communication to create a supportive environment in which all students can thrive. Ravitch (2020) highlights numerous pedagogical frameworks and strategies that educators can employ when constructing their courses: trauma-informed pedagogy, brave space pedagogy, and racial literacy pedagogy. A collaborative, student-centric approach to teaching is what's needed now. Asking for compassion during a global health pandemic *is not too much to ask.*

We as educators must also make accessibility a cornerstone of our pandemagogy, ensuring that eLearning is inclusive for students with disabilities, while resisting the ableist discrimination of the university. Educators who use virtual teaching platforms like Zoom Video Communications should use accessibility features such as external text-to-speech software compatibility, screen reader support, and closed captioning (Kent, 2015). Moreover, instructors should take the time to learn about universal design principles, which can aid them in designing inclusive courses and adapting them to the online environment. As a standard, we should aim to make our courses as universally and systemically accessible as possible to reduce the onus placed on students to have to ask for accommodations individually; the latter makes them vulnerable and reliant on professors as generous benefactors.

For those of us committed to critical pedagogy, we must aim at a political transformation for the purpose of justice. We must build the groundwork for a world where every single student and worker has access to high-speed internet, regardless of their social identities. Everyone should have unmonitored, uncensored, and unlimited access to the virtual world. We must seize this crisis as an opportunity to address the digital divide, inside and outside of the classroom.

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Author biography

Shehnoor Khurram is a Ph.D. candidate at York University studying political Islam, international political economy, state theory, critical security studies, and political ecology. Her research engages with contemporary intersections of imperialism, empire, militant Islamism, neoliberalism, and environmentalism with a focus on transregional linkages between the Middle East, South Asia, and West Africa. She holds a (Hons.) B.A. in Political Science from the University of Toronto and an M.A. in Political Science from York University. Her M.A. research project is titled, "Welfare as Counter-Hegemony: Examining the Electoral Successes of Islamist Movements." Her doctoral research examines how militant Islamist movements respond to neoliberal globalization and its corrosive impact on the social life, ecology, and political economy of the Muslim world. Her writing has been published in the Huffington Post, Canadian Dimension, Routledge (forthcoming), Africa World Press, and more.