



WATERLOO REGION, LET'S TALK. PULSE, ORLANDO.

This report was authored by Anik Islam (a5islam@uwaterloo.ca) and edited by Brian Schram (brschram@uwaterloo.ca). It summarizes the discussions and outcomes of the public panel, “Waterloo Region, Let’s Talk. Pulse, Orlando.” that was hosted at the Kitchener Public Library on November 10, 2016. Special thanks go to Shannon Dea. (Photo credit: Victoria Pickering)

Note: The words “LGBTQ+”, “queer”, and “Muslim” are used in this report as umbrella terms, but their usage here is meant to be neither all-embracing nor exclusionary. We acknowledge that others may prefer different terminology.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2016, 49 people were murdered and 53 others injured in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando—the deadliest incidence of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in U.S. history. While this tragedy has been met with somber condolences and outpourings of support for those affected by the violence, it has also invited misgivings against those who share religious or racial similarities with the perpetrator.

Concerned by the politicization of the Orlando tragedy, and fearing how it could further alienate religious, gender and sexual minority groups within Canada’s cultural mosaic, two residents of Waterloo, Ontario, felt the need to initiate dialogue between local LGBTQ+ and Muslim community members. They organized a public panel that could address the divisive rhetoric permeating news and social media in the wake of the attack on Orlando, the earlier attacks in Paris, and the Syrian refugee crisis.

PARTICIPANTS & SPONSORS

Over a period of four months following the attack, co-organizers Anik and Brian reached out to student groups, staff, and faculty at the University of Waterloo, and to external community groups, to find activists and scholars who would were willing to speak as panelists and foster a public discussion on the Pulse incident. A panel was composed of the following individuals (biographies included in Appendix):

- El-Farouk Khaki (Co-founder & Imam, Toronto Unity Mosque);
[Biography](#)
- Sunna Murphy (Director of Community Engagement, SPECTRUM);
[Biography](#)
- Corey Johnson (Professor, Recreation & Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo);
[Biography](#)
- Fauzia Mazhar (Community Organizer, Waterloo Region);
[Biography](#)
- **Moderator:** Shannon Dea (Associate Professor, Philosophy, University of Waterloo);
[Biography](#)

Several on and off-campus groups were interested in supporting and/or engaging with the proposed panel event.

University of Waterloo partners: Women's Studies ([link](#)), Status of Women and Equity Committee ([link](#)), Department of Religious Studies ([link](#)), Department of Sociology and Legal Studies ([link](#)), Community Relations ([link](#)), Graduate Students Association ([link](#)), Glow Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity ([link](#)), Muslim Students Association ([link](#))

Off-campus partners: Kitchener Public Library ([link](#)), SPECTRUM ([link](#)), Waterloo Region Rainbow Coalition ([link](#))

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The following are high-level summaries of the themes explored by the panelists during the program and the Q&A session. Thanks go to Sarah Wallace for helping us take notes.

GRIEVING ORLANDO

The attack on Pulse was a violation on many levels. It was an assault on a queer safe space and on queer persons of colour. Through the media coverage during the U.S. presidential elections, it became an assault on the heritage and the religious beliefs of Muslims and racialized immigrants.

Because the Pulse incident is situated in the broader climate of bigotry, homophobia and xenophobia in which we live, it prompted visceral reactions of shock and grief. Beyond the immediate grieving lies an opportunity to work towards healing and building bridges between marginalized groups. Part of this work involves recognizing the politics of grieving. Why are some lives grieved more than others? Who can afford to grieve openly without reprisal? How and when is grieving used for political leverage?

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY

There is a lot of pain that exists between religious and queer communities. Queer people sometimes presume to be hated by those who hold religious views and distance themselves accordingly. Likewise, although mainstream religious communities can be respectful of queer folk under a secular framework of human rights, they distance themselves from their own members who identify as being both queer and religious. Rejection from both sides leaves those with intersectional identities feeling fractured.

One of the positive outcomes of the discourse surrounding Pulse is that it brought visibility to queer Muslims who otherwise continue to exist at the margins of both the LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities. Whether they can find their space within these communities going forward, or must create a space of their own, remains to be seen.

ADVOCATING REFORM

While gay bars have historically been considered safe spaces, the panelists recognize that the notion of a safe space is amorphous, contextual, and constantly shifting. Even queer-friendly spaces can be unwelcoming to queer women and queer people of colour.

In the wake of incidents like Pulse, we have the opportunity to redefine safe spaces to accommodate intersectional complexities of race, religion, gender, and sexual identity so that no one feels the need to leave behind aspects of themselves in order to belong.

Panelists also recognized the need to move away from religion practiced as a means of inculcating rigid and exclusionary views, towards religion practiced as a means of connecting with people through their shared humanity—a means of recognizing that everyone is created in God’s image, irrespective of their gender and sexual identity.

MOVING FORWARD

The marginalization experienced by queer folk in a largely heteronormative society parallels that of racialized Muslims living in a largely white, and culturally Christian society. Within religious communities, women who have struggled with the misogyny ensconced in religio-cultural practices can likewise sympathize with queer persons who struggle against homophobic interpretations of faith. It is perhaps through the recognition of these shared struggles to belong—both within their own marginalized groups and with the outer community at large—that relations might be bridged between the LGBTQ+ and Muslim communities.

To foster meaningful change in how we relate to one another, the panel stressed the importance of not only having more inter-community dialogue, but establishing close personal relationships with those whose identities seem unfamiliar to us. In doing so, we must remember to afford people the space to learn and grow as they wrestle with their biases. We must also make better efforts to give voice to those who are most affected most by incidents like Pulse—those who lie at the intersections of minority groups.

EVENT RESPONSE & IMPACT

As part of the free registration process for this event, people were asked to indicate their affiliation by choosing from one or more of the following categories: LGBTQ+, Muslim, Ally/Advocate, or Other.

Out of the **130+** people who registered, approximately **60%** identified as allies/advocates or others, while **40%** identified either with the LGBTQ+ or Muslim communities. Of that **40%**, **10%** identified as both LGBTQ+ and Muslim.

The final number of attendees was estimated to be around **120**. In addition to strong representation from local LGBTQ+ and Muslim groups, there was significant turnout from other supportive members of the community including faculty and staff from the University of Waterloo, the City of Waterloo, and Waterloo Region Police Services (keen on working with minority groups to encourage the reporting of hate crimes).

The co-organizers received several questions intended for the panelists in advance of the event, as well as comments affirming the need for public dialogue on the important, yet under-discussed topics of racial, religious, and queer identities and their intersections.

There was a palpable sense of engagement between people on and off the stage at the Kitchener Public Library, particularly during moments when the panelists shared their personal experiences of being marginalized. Several audience members stayed past the end of the event to connect personally with the panelists.

As a direct result of heartfelt discussions prompted by this panel, a secret circle was formed in Kitchener-Waterloo for queer-identifying Muslims and their allies, which (to our best knowledge) has never existed in the region until now. Though envisioned primarily as a confidential support group, its members are already exploring the possibility of starting an inclusive, LGBTQ+ affirming Muslim congregation in the area.

APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHIES

El-Farouk Khaki: El-Farouk Khaki is a spirituality activist, human rights and social justice advocate, and refugee lawyer. Founder of *Salaam: Queer Muslim Community* in 1991, and co-founder of *el-Tawhid Juma Circle* in 2009, he is the coordinating imam of the Toronto Unity Mosque. In 2003, he organized Canada's first female led Muslim congregational prayer.

El-Farouk spearheaded the representation of asylum seekers fearing persecution because of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, gender, and/or HIV status. He is a public and media speaker on Islam, LGBTIQ issues, the Immigration and Refugee system, human rights, racism, politics and HIV/AIDS. He is co-owner of the Glad Day Bookshop. (back to [Participants & Sponsors](#))

Sunna Murphy: Sunna Murphy, BA, MSW is a registered social worker, trauma therapist, community organizer and poet. She is the community engagement director for SPECTRUM, Waterloo Region's Rainbow Community Space, and co-founder of Nourish, a community-based wellness collective.

Sunna is featured as a 'Queer Elder' in the 2014 documentary film 'Rainbow Reflections' and has been involved with LGBTQ advocacy and community organizing in Waterloo Region for over 15 years. She has organized large-scale academic conferences, contributed to unique community events that merge art with social justice, and lends her passionate and engaging voice to topics of diversity, inclusion, anti-poverty, and social justice. (back to [Participants & Sponsors](#))

Corey Johnson: Dr. Corey W. Johnson is a Professor in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. He teaches courses on inclusive recreation, social justice, and gender and sexuality, among others. Dr. Johnson's research focuses on the power relations between dominant and non-dominant populations in the cultural contexts of leisure, providing important insight into the privileging and discriminatory practices that occur in contemporary leisure settings.

His scholarship has been published in journals like the *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure Sciences*, and *the Journal of Homosexuality*, to name a few. He has also worked to create safer environments for LGBT youth in institutional settings such as detention centers, camps, secondary schools, and universities. (back to [Participants & Sponsors](#))

Fauzia Mazhar: Fauzia Mazhar has worked in the local not-for-profit sector in various roles ranging from employment counsellor to program coordinator since she arrived in Canada 15 years ago. Fauzia has a BA in Education and Economics from Pakistan and a BA in Psychology and Masters in Social Work from Wilfrid Laurier University.

Her professional portfolio includes management, program implementation, and community development and organizing. She currently works as the Coordinator of the Family Centre in Kitchener. Fauzia's passion is to bring people and groups together to build a welcoming, inclusive, safe and vibrant community. She is a founding member and current chair of the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW. (back to [Participants & Sponsors](#))

Shannon Dea: Shannon Dea is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at the University of Waterloo. Her research runs the gamut from the history of philosophy to contemporary issues relating to gender, sexuality, and reproduction. She is the author of *Beyond the Binary: Thinking About Sex and Gender* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2016), and regularly gives public talks and media interviews on matters related to gender and social justice. Please give a warm welcome to Shannon. (back to [Participants & Sponsors](#))

APPENDIX: PHOTOS¹



¹ The empty chair was meant for El-Farouk (panelist), who arrived shortly after the photos were taken.