

A Forced Reckoning:

The *Vivre Ensemble* Memorial Commemorating the Victims of the Québec Mosque Shooting

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Abstract:

On December 1, 2020—nearly four years after the January 29 Québec Mosque shooting—Québec City unveiled *Vivre Ensemble* [Living Together], a memorial to the six victims of the attack and a tribute to the more than 40 people who suffered injuries, their families, and their community. This paper analyzes the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial as a forced reckoning concretizing the activist mobilization of grief. Against the scaffold of community organizing and mobilizing to keep the issue of Islamophobia and its victims in the public limelight, this paper explores how the design of the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial interpreted and animated this grief. The text draws on an interview with the artist of the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial to discuss its symbolism and intended effects on the community and the city. Finally, this paper places the memorial within the ideological underpinnings of Québec City, considering specific cultural factors such as the virulent Islamophobic talk radio shows that exert significant ideological influence within the city and laws that infringe on the Muslim community's rights. It interrogates the imaginary of an inclusive Québec City, highlighting the discord between what the memorial exhibits and what it conceals.

Keywords: Islamophobia, mosque shooting, Québec, Canada, memorials, online memorial campaigns, Islamophobia, Muslims, activism, violence, political sovereignty, anti-Black colonialism, memorialization, racial terror

On January 29, 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette, a young White Québécois male, stormed into the Québec Grand Mosque and shot six Muslims—Abdelkrim Hassane (41), Khaled Belkacemi (60), Aboubaker Tahbti (44), Azzeddine Soufiane (57), Ibrahima Barry (39), and Mamadou Tanou Barry (42)— while injuring 14 others. Bissonnette was subsequently arrested and charged with murder. The mainstream media reported the far-right terrorist attack as an aberration, an anomaly in Quebec society despite the reality that Islamophobia has been and continues to be rife in Quebec (Helly & Dubé, 2014) and more pronounced than elsewhere in Canada (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). The collective grieving that ensued on- and off-line as Muslims and other Canadians erected memorials across the country recalled the history and sedimented acts of Islamophobia in Quebec and Canada as a whole (Jiwani & Al-Rawi, 2020).

In this paper, we focus on the construction and unveiling of a memorial commemorating the victims of the Québec Mosque shooting, situating it within the larger context of Islamophobia in Quebec society. In particular, we argue that the collective grief of Muslim and allied communities propelled the government to commission the building of the cenotaph. The memorial itself is examined in terms of the artist's conceptualization of it and its symbolic representation of integrative propaganda (Ellul, 1973). Integrative propaganda projects an image of tolerance, benevolence, and an embrace of difference. It is propaganda in that it is designed to inculcate in citizens and observers a strategic view that reflects Quebec's society as a positive, harmonious, and welcoming imagined community.

We begin with a contextual background on Islamophobia in Quebec, highlighting specific incidents that gesture to the intensity, amplification, and circulation of anti-Muslim hostility and bigotry. Thereafter, we discuss the community mobilization that undoubtedly influenced the commissioning of the cenotaph. We highlight the process of consultation that resulted in the design of the memorial and the artist's perceptions of how the memorial signified particular meanings. We conclude with an examination of the current state of affairs in Quebec vis-à-vis its Muslim minorities since the Mosque shooting. We contend that while the memorial was created in good faith and as a way to address Muslim and other allied communities' concerns, it has done little to reduce the intensity and escalation of Islamophobia in Quebec. Hence, the memorial, despite being the result of a forced reckoning with Islamophobia, remains but a concretized symbol of Quebec's imagined benevolence.

Islamophobia in Quebec

In August 2022, Statistics Canada released its annual report on police-reported crime in Canada. Police-reported hate crimes targeting the Muslim community had increased by 71% within the year, escalating to the highest point in the same year as the killing of the Afzaal-Salman family in London, Ontario in 2021. In Québec City specifically, Statistics Canada reported that the number of hate crimes had increased for a fourth consecutive year, noting that Québec City is one of the Canadian cities in which hate crimes are the most prevalent (CBC News, 2022).

In her quantitative study surveying negative attitudes and patterns of prejudice towards Muslims in Canada, sociologist Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme (2018) found that although Islamophobia exists across Canada, “negative attitudes can be found on average more among Québec residents” (106). Several scholars have analyzed the particular sociopolitical context that influences Quebec’s views on Islam, highlighting the complicated and far-reaching implications of the province’s history with regard to its treatment of Muslims (Stasiulis, 2013). Sirma Bilge (2012) explores the self-portrayal of Quebec as “a vulnerable minority national swamped in the ‘anglophone sea’” (308), leading to fears that adopting multiculturalism will further increase this vulnerability. She explores Quebec’s nationalism and “trauma with religion” (310), which adds the preoccupation with “gender-justice based” worries, such as the portrayal of Muslim men that “stand for their alien (and barbaric) religion” and “act as ghostly apparitions capable of drawing Quebec back into horrendous times of pre-modernity, the Grande Noirceur (Great Darkness)” (310).

The reasonable accommodation debate in 2007 illustrates this urgent sociocultural tension in Quebec, focusing on the politics of belonging to the Québécois nation while asking questions on assimilation and the aspects of immigration deemed “dangerous to the nation” (Bilge, 2012: 304). Alan Wong (2011) further describes the debate of “reasonable accommodation” in reference to Quebec’s Bouchard-Taylor Commission (Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences [2007]) launched by Liberal Premier Jean Charest in response to the heightened tensions in the province regarding the accommodation of religious practices. He argues that the Commission showcased “how reason and racism became intertwined during the course of this debate over rights, identity, and citizenship in Québec” (Wong, 2011: 145). Darryl Leroux (2010) discusses how the Commission consulted with experts, individuals and organizations on identity, integration and religion and produced 37 recommendations to adopt in order to limit these frictions and anxieties among Québécois, such as prohibiting public servants from wearing religious symbols and proposing “interculturalism” in contrast to Canadian multiculturalism (Cooper, 2020), and emphasizing “equality between the cultures in Quebec [through] francisation and secularization of the public domain” (Proulx-Chénard, 2021).

Several authors point to the salience of the Hérouxville Code of Conduct that arose in response to “reasonable accommodation” debates, which was a municipal code of conduct passed by the small town of Hérouxville that, in particular, prohibited “killing women by lapidation or burning them alive in public places, burning them with acid, excising them, infibulating them or treating them as slaves” (Leroux, 2010: 112; Zine, 2009). These rules were based on harmful stereotypes about Islam and targeted Muslim newcomers into Quebec. Monika Kin Gagnon (2007) adds that six surrounding municipalities declared solidarity with this statement despite having little to no immigration within their towns. These examples highlight the complex and multifaceted relationship between religion, language, and Othering in Quebec that contribute to an environment of ambient animosity towards Islam. These fears at once take into account Quebec’s past and religion-phobia due to the “Great Darkness,” as well as its future and worries about the loss of language and cultural identity. These widespread worries remain close to the surface and invoke heated debates when applied to scenarios dealing with these accommodations (Gagnon & Jiwani, 2012).

Mediated Islamophobia

Within Québec City, virulent Islamophobic talk radio shows exert significant ideological influence, continuously demonizing Muslims. The targeting of Muslims by these talk shows began long before the Québec Mosque Shooting and did not relent even after tragedy had struck the city. One of the most prominent examples of what critics call “radio poubelle,” or trash radio, is CHOI 98.1, also known as Radio X, which is the top-rated program in Québec City’s 25-54 demographic (Porter, 2021). Other popular stations include FM 93 and NRJ. The overwhelming success of this “trash radio,” conservative talk-radio stations that lean heavily into controversy, is due to Québec’s car culture. The city has the lowest share of residents who take public transit out of Canada’s eight largest metropolitan areas, meaning almost 90 percent of commuters drive to work (Curtis, 2022). Radio X’s influence on both provincial and federal politics is staggering: a host’s support can propel a party to victory or a politician to popularity. A striking example of this influence is former FM 93 and Radio X host Éric Duhaime’s rise to the top of Québec’s Conservative party, for which he was voted the leader in April 2021 (Le Chef, 2021). In addition to supporting particular political figures or parties, these stations set their own political agenda for discussion, choosing topics like Islam and talking about them repetitively until they become an issue of concern for the listeners (Elghawaby, 2019). Islam is a common topic for Radio X host Dany Houle, who regularly makes statements such as “All the terrorists who threaten the world right now, they’re all Muslim” (Curtis, 2022). These tirades are not without consequences for the Muslim community.

In June 2016, less than a year before the Mosque Shooting, during the period of Ramadan, a pig’s head was left at the door of the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec, with a note saying “bonne [sic] appétit” in direct violation of Islamic prohibition against the consumption of pork (Radio-Canada, 2016). Boufeldja Benabdallah, who co-founded the Centre, comments that “the message was clear: Your kind is not welcome here” (Curtis, 2022). The incident, which made national headlines, did not escape the reaction of these “trash radio” stations: Éric Duhaime commented that it was not a hate crime or even an Islamophobic prank but simply a “dumb joke,” asking, “Where does it say, in the Criminal Code, that I can’t give someone a pig’s head?” (Curtis, 2022). Downplaying the significance of such an event was par for the course for this station. At the same time, however, radio hosts expected Muslims to repeatedly prove their loyalty to Quebec. For instance, Radio X host André Arthur brought Benabdallah on his show several times to denounce the actions of Muslim terrorists all over the world. When Benabdallah was not denouncing the attacks quickly or systematically enough, Arthur took the opportunity to insinuate that the community implicitly agreed with these attacks (Curtis, 2022). Through these practices, prominent stations in Québec City repeatedly portrayed Muslims as outsiders and threats in the years leading up to the Québec Mosque Shooting.

The January 29, 2017 attack was not even enough to stop the vitriol. The climate cooled immediately after the attack, and an FM 93 host even stated that he felt that he had not lived up to his duty as a radio host because he had not been open to dialogue with the Muslim community (Grondin, 2017). However, just a few months after the attack, the station returned to its anti-Muslim ways, with host Dominic Maurais ad-libbing during a St-Hubert ad,

They put a lot of pork in there. As far as I know, you've got the whole pig in there. Well, you're only missing the head but, the head, you give that to foreigners. The head you give to foreigners. (sortonslespoubelles, 2017 [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

By making light of the pig's head incident just after an Islamophobic massacre had occurred in his city, Maurais reiterated the fact that despite the widespread messages of unity following the attack, Muslims would always be "foreigners." Soon after, in July 2017, a package containing a defaced Qur'an and a hateful note was left at the door of the Québec Mosque. In August 2017, a car belonging to the president of the Québec City Mosque, Mohamed Labidi, was set on fire in his home's driveway; several days after, excrement was thrown at the Mosque's doors (The Canadian Press, 2017).

The climate of hostility perpetuated by these stations day in and day out contradicts Québec City's imagined community as an intercultural haven of harmony. Rachid Raffa, former president of the mosque, recalls that despite the goodwill of the people of Québec, "he didn't expect to see this resurgence of racism so soon after the catastrophe," including Muslim bashing on trash-talk radio, which he says "carries a disproportionate weight" that is amplified through these echo chambers (Bruemmer, 2022).

In 2018, the former mayor of Québec City at the time of the shooting, Régis Labeaume, told the press that "certain talk radio shows" give Québec City a bad name, insisting that although there are fewer hate crimes than in other parts of the country, the city's airwaves act as "distorting prism" that make the city seem more racist and xenophobic (Béland, 2018). Here, his reference to Québec's imagined community is apparent, for even though the statistics of racist incidents in Québec were lower at the time, they did not reflect the reality on the ground. Labeaume later acknowledged the danger of the constant controversial content of stations like Radio X to Muslim minorities (Nadeau-Lamarche, 2020).

Despite the climate of Islamophobia within the province, the coverage of the Québec Mosque Shooting allowed Québec's media to showcase solidarity and unity, downplaying Islamophobic tensions to create an imagined community that is benevolent and accepting. High-profile ruptures to the social order, such as the Québec Mosque Shooting, provide an opportunity for the media to repeatedly display the values that make up an imagined community through mediatized rituals, which "mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be" (Cottle, 2006: 415).

Mediatized death rituals that follow tragedy call on members of the imagined community to memorialize the deceased through collective grief, which performatively enacts the values of their nation (Gibson, 2007). The media portrayal of the tragic deaths then becomes a political resource for the state to incite feelings of social cohesion (Mahrouse, 2018) under a framework that pushes a "this is not us" narrative (Rahman, 2020: 365). In such instances, the media struggles to explain and analyze how tragic events can happen within the imagined community in spite of its outward values (Pantti & Sumiala, 2009).

In her comparative analysis of the press coverage of the Québec Mosque in *La Presse* and *The Montreal Gazette*, Aurelia Talvela (2019) found that these media outlets “emphasized the fact the majority population strictly condemns the events and strongly supports the Muslim community” (55), to “exert agency in the public life of the society and shift public perceptions for the benefit of politicians and the elite” (56). In other words, it was left to Muslims in general to change the perception of the dominant society towards them and Islam as a whole.

Moreover, in the coverage following the Québec Mosque Shooting, the media disproportionately focused on “outpourings of support” instead of the racial violence of the shooting itself (Mahrouse, 2018). Sociologist Gada Mahrouse found, through a survey of English-language newspaper headlines in the four weeks following the shooting, that the word “love” was used twice as much as “grief” and “sadness” and that “fear” and “solidarity” appeared equally. This clearly illustrates the tendency of media to focus on compassion and solidarity, as often or more than grief (Mahrouse, 2018: 473).

In her analysis of a TVA talk show, Mahrouse also found that the Muslims interviewed were forced into a position of expressing gratitude to Quebec society. Any expression of outrage against the rampant Islamophobia was quickly disciplined. Despite expressing sympathy for the victims of the Québec Mosque shooting, the media’s insistence on the surprising nature of the tragedy overshadows the very factors that led to it. In effect, this demonstrates the media’s role in amplifying the integrative propaganda of the Quebec nation.

Mobilizing Community

Following the Québec Mosque Shooting, the Muslim community and its allies created several online campaigns to hold the media and the government accountable for this tragedy. Hazel Kwon, Monica Chadha, and Feng Wang (2019) analyzed 673,561 tweets posted on Twitter in response to the attack and found that a large number of these tweets called for accurate coverage by the media and initiative from the government. Similarly, Yasmin Jiwani and Ahmed Al-Rawi (2020) found that the tweets they analyzed separately showed solidarity for the families and community of the victims while also critiquing the government’s inaction. In addition to serving as a space for activism, Twitter served as a vehicle for online memorialization for the Muslim community across the country.

As Aaron Hess remarks, online or web memorials “offer an individual and vernacular form of memorializing, which highlights the interests of ‘ordinary people’ and their personally situated interpretations of national tragedy” (2007: 815). This display of lived experience, separate from the overall narrative of the state, leaves room for more varied and personal responses to tragedy. Online memorials also allow for the preservation of spontaneous memorials by sharing images that offer an unfiltered look at immediate reactions to tragedy (see Figure 1). For example, the tweet below shows the spontaneous memorial in proximity to where the murders occurred.

"Islam = peace, love."

A memorial is forming near the shooting at a mosque in Quebec.



2:07 PM - Jan 31, 2017 - Twitter Web Client

Figure 1:

Tweets showing the spontaneous, informal shrines that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Québec Mosque shooting (Twitter, 2017). For ethical reasons, we do not share individuals' usernames (franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess, & the Association of Internet Researchers, 2020).

In addition to informal online memorials, several coordinated online and offline campaigns emerged in the months following the attack as the community turned its grief into activism. One such virtual campaign was based on a Twitter hashtag, #RememberJan29, with an accompanying website, rememberjan29.com, a Twitter page, an Instagram page, and two Facebook pages (Jiwani & Bernard-Brind'Amour, 2023). The campaign, launched on January 27, 2018 by Syed Hussan and Aliya Pabani to commemorate the first anniversary of the Mosque Shooting, asked individuals to recount where they were on the day of the attack and its impact on their lives as a tactic to fight erasure (Hussan & Pabani, 2018). In response, the hashtag #RememberJan29 was used over 14,000 times between January 2018 and February 2020 (Trackmyhashtag.com), showing its scope in the memorialization of this event.

In the summer of 2018, soon after the #RememberJan29 campaign, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) and the Canadian Muslim Forum launched another online campaign, similarly titled #IrememberJanuary29, to draw attention to the 30 recommendations of Motion 103. Introduced by Liberal Member of Parliament Iqra Khalid on December 1, 2016 (debated February 15 and March 21, 2017), M103 focused on documenting and raising awareness of Islamophobia. Although M103 was introduced before the January 29 attack, CJPME and the Canadian Muslim forum sought to continue the conversation on Islamophobia in Quebec through the lens of the Québec Mosque Shooting and to ask Members of Parliament to recognize January 29 as a day of commemoration. The multifaceted campaign included both online and offline components, including the circulation of posters, postcards sent to Members of Parliament, and news releases as well as a website and hashtag (Jiwani & Bernard-Brind'Amour, 2023). On January 28, 2021, the Government of Canada announced its intention to make January

29 a National Day of Remembrance of the Québec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia (Canadian Heritage, 2021).

In January 2020, three years after the attack, Hussan and Pabani launched #SinceJan29 to sustain the commemoration effort they had started with #RememberJan29. They encouraged individuals to use the hashtag to reflect on and discuss whether conditions had changed for the Muslim community in Quebec since 2017. These forums led to further dialogue on the lack of steps taken by the Quebec government to acknowledge and fight Islamophobia in the province, in spite of its public displays of solidarity.

Finally, also in 2020, the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) and the Islamic Cultural Centre of Québec introduced the Green Square Campaign. This initiative asked members of the government and the public to wear a green square during the week leading up to January 29, symbolizing “the green carpets of the Québec City Mosque where the victims last stood to pray” and the fact that the deceased are “God willing, in a garden green” (“What happened,” n.d.). These green squares showed solidarity with Québec’s Muslim community, commemorated the event, and initiated discussions on its repercussions in Quebec as the campaign continued in 2021 and 2022 (and to the present).

All of these initiatives were widely shared online, sustaining media attention on the Québec Mosque Shooting throughout the years. These campaigns each encouraged a personal connection to the attack, whether by sharing their stories in the case of #RememberJan29 and #IrememberJan29, wearing a symbol of remembrance on their clothing for the Green Square Campaign, or reflecting on the role of Quebec’s political policies in the Othering of Muslims in the #SinceJan29 campaign. Using a variety of online and offline tactics, these groups fought against the erasure of Islamophobia and the attacks on Muslims by sustaining attention on the prevalence of Islamophobia in Quebec and the country at large. Their dual focus on community unity and grief as well as activism is emblematic of online memorializing practices.

In the following section, we discuss the memorial that resulted from this continued activism and the Quebec state’s need to represent itself as a benevolent and caring imagined nation. We pay particular attention to the design, construction, and consultation that resulted in the memorial. We draw from and integrate into this analysis our interviews with and the media coverage of the artist, Luce Pelletier, who created the memorial.

The *Vivre Ensemble* Memorial

Although online and offline activism and memorial practices serve as invaluable spaces for mourning and creating change, physical memorials serve the purpose of acknowledging loss in the nation’s recorded history and providing a space for community connection and reflection. In her analysis of the Air India disaster, Angela Failler conveys the sentiments of filmmaker Eisha Marjara after she attended the unveiling of a public memorial for the disaster in Toronto. Marjara recalls the story of meeting a man who, like her, was supposed to be on board the flight that crashed. At that moment, the memorial and those visiting it helped her realize “in [her] bones, how connected they all were” (Failler, 2009: 165). In the same way, activists in Québec

needed a physical place to feel connected to their community as well as official recognition by the state in the form of a solid memorial. On January 29, 2019, on the second anniversary of the Québec Mosque shooting, the City of Québec issued a press release announcing that the artist Luce Pelletier had been commissioned to construct a memorial that would pay homage to the victims of the attack and their families. Pelletier, a Québec City-based multimedia visual artist specializing in sculpture, installations, and photography, had created over 20 works of public art commissioned by multiple municipalities throughout Quebec.

In a press conference following the city's announcement, Pelletier presented a model of the memorial to the families of the victims and the press. Through a detailed description of her memorial, titled *Vivre Ensemble* or Live Together, she explained the inspiration and intentions behind the various symbols found in the three sections of the memorial. On December 1, 2020, the monument was unveiled in a high-profile and widely publicized event (see Figure 2). Régis Labeaume, former Mayor of Québec City; Joël Lightbound, the member of Parliament for Louis-Hébert; Joëlle Boutin, member of the National Assembly of Quebec for the Jean-Talon district; Luce Pelletier, the artist behind the memorial; and Boufeldja Benabdallah, co-founder of the Québec Mosque, were all in attendance and all delivered words of condolence.



Figure 2:

The three components of the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

Composed of three areas for reflection, the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial spans both sides of the Route de l'Église, bordering the Québec Islamic Cultural Centre and the Notre-Dame-de-Foy Church historical site. Pelletier specializes in art incorporating nature, a theme that runs through

this memorial. Nearest to the Mosque, three stone podiums hold six delicate patterned aluminum leaves, each paying tribute to a victim of the attack. On each pillar, two victims' names are written in the Roman and Arabic alphabets. Each leaf displays a pattern inspired by the particular ornamental traditions of the victims' countries of origin. Near these pillars, two circular areas of reflection and meditation mirror each other on both sides of the street. The two areas are each built around and near a tree.

On the side of the Islamic Cultural Centre, a short, curved wall dedicates the memorial to the victims of the January 29 attack. It is inscribed with a quote by the poet and author Khalil Gibran, which reads, "Nul ne peut atteindre l'aube sans passer par le chemin de la nuit [One may not reach the dawn save by the path of the night]" (Gibran, 1926) in French and in Arabic. Mayor Régis Labeaume had opened his speech with this phrase during the public funeral for Ibrahima Barry, Mamadou Tanou Barry and Azzeddine Soufiane that was held at the Québec City Centre des Congrès on February 3, 2017 (Sociologie de l'intégration, 2017), and he was widely applauded when he said this. The selection of a quote by Gibran, a non-Muslim author, to reference Labeaume's speech suggests an emphasis on the political public relations following the tragedy, rather than a connection to the Muslim community. The incorporation of the well-recognized Gibran, the third-best-selling poet of all time (Acocella, 2007), is a neutral addition to the memorial without making a political statement. Hence, it serves to appease the Muslim community (Gibran being of Lebanese origin), while also reaching the Francophone community given Gibran's stature. Nonetheless, while the inclusion of Gibran's words was obviously meant as a solace, telling victims that surviving through a metaphoric night of violence will lead to a dawn of hope, it says little about the violence of Islamophobia and its constant, corrosive, and debilitating effects.

Returning to our description of the memorial, surrounding the wall are circular benches where visitors can reflect and meditate (see Figures 3 and 4). On the side of the wall, a description of the monument states:

A symbol of life, the tree is at the heart of this memorial deployed on both sides of the Route de l'Église. Rooted in the earth and looking to the future, the tree evokes the resilience of the citizens of Québec, united in their diversity and united in adversity. At the top of three large pedestals, six tree leaves evoke the cycles of life and are decorated with motifs inspired by the countries of origin of the victims of the attack of January 29, 2017. On the ground, two circular shapes borrow from ornamental traditions, Québécois and Islamic, and encourage intercultural dialogue. [Translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour.]

Throughout her design for the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial, Pelletier incorporated symbolic details to create a space that at once reflects the community's grief, illustrates the sorrow of the wider Québec community, and provides a physical space for reflection and mourning. Explicitly and implicitly, the description conveys the elusive harmony of intercultural relations. It foregrounds the mirage of the dominant society (Quebec) and minoritized religious groups (like Muslims) as being on the same level playing field. To further understand the meaning of the memorial's various components and the process of Pelletier's collaboration with members of Québec's Muslim community, we contacted the artist through her artist website, lucepelletier.com. As

well, on September 12, we carried out a Zoom interview with Pelletier. In the following section, we draw on our interview findings and the artist's interviews with Québec media outlets surrounding the announcement and unveiling of the memorial.



Figure 3:

The curved wall and seating area of the Mosque side of the memorial surrounding the maple tree.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.



Figure 4:

The mirrored stone facade featuring a Khalil Gibran quote.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

On the Symbolism of the *Vivre Ensemble* Memorial

Pelletier's art practices rely heavily on the theme of nature in several figurative ways apparent throughout the three sites of her memorial. As her practice is tinged with plant motifs and her art reflective of the landscape, she was attuned to the use of trees as “a symbol of life.” This theme manifests in the wind-blown leaves that are erected at the top of the podiums to pay tribute to each victim. Leaves from the elm and maple trees on either side of the street are cast in aluminum and embedded into the benches like leaves falling from the trees, bearing witness to the cycle of life and to the strength and resilience of nature.

The leaves of the trees from the Church and Mosque sides of the street are intermingled (see Figure 5) in the memorial, signifying the unity between the two cultures (Le Soleil, 2019). One could argue that they also signify the end of life—as in fallen leaves, symbolizing the lives that have passed. As well, the “fallen” nature of the leaves could also symbolize migration—the movement from one place to another—of those who have passed on.



Figure 5:

Elm and maple leaves are cast into the memorial's bench.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

A bench on the Mosque side of the street, which features these intermingled leaves, reflects Pelletier's conceptualization of this section of the memorial as “an intimate space where people can sit and reflect” (Inauguration, 2020). Her idea was to encourage introspection and to create “a place where it's nice to go and think” (Inauguration, 2020). Its tactile nature is indispensable to Pelletier, who highlights the traditional Islamic motif that paves the circular seating area. In her interview with Radio Canada, Pelletier commented,

With the benches, we're invited to sit down, and as soon as we sit down, we're in front of several visual cues that we can't ignore. ... It's also very tactile, putting your feet on a paving stone that represents a traditional motif— you can't be indifferent. It calls out to you, you are inclined to touch the leaves around you, there are trees nearby ... you also feel that you are between the two places. If people linger there, if they sit down, they enter this universe. The written indications also allow them to access the content and the gravity that the spaces symbolize. (Inauguration, 2020 [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

The circular-shaped benches and traditional pavements echo each other on both sides of Rue de l'Église, conveying harmony between the cultures “living together” in Québec. On the Church site, the paving stone shows a circular traditional Quebec motif with a pattern reminiscent of the “ceinture fléchée” (arrow belt), an ancestral symbolic object of Francophone culture in America associated with craftsmen of French Canadian and Métis cultures (LeBlanc, 2007). This circular pattern echoes the Islamic motif paving the Mosque site (see Figures 6 and 7). Both incorporate orange tiles to tie back to the theme of nature further and evoke natural materials like terracotta, which have often been attributed to the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region.

A tribute to humanitarian workers spreads a message of peace, its plaque displaying several casts of leaves that mirror those on the Mosque-side benches (see Figure 8). Overall, the two sides form parts of a whole, amplifying the vision Pelletier conveys about the various cultures that make up Québec City. Moreover, and reading into the design, it can be argued that the circular motif is reflective of the earth and its diverse peoples. The circular design is common in both Islam and Christianity.

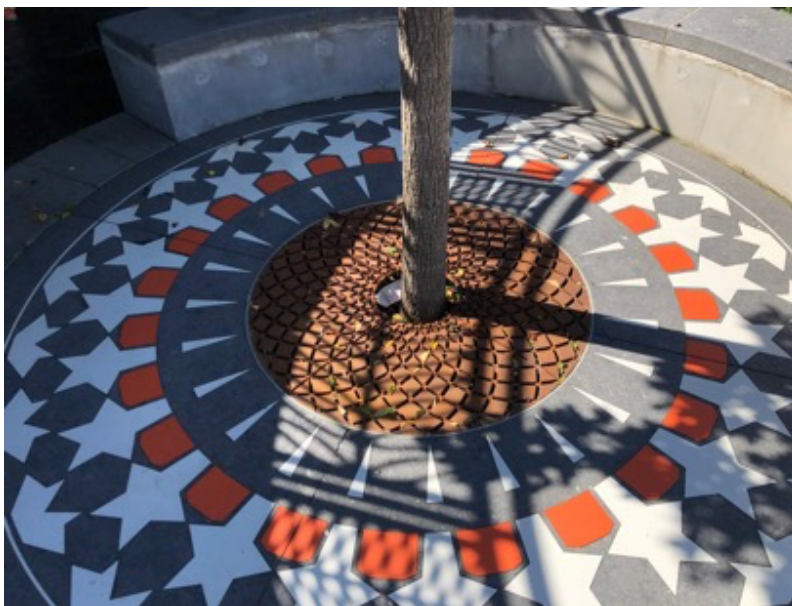


Figure 6:

The Islamic motif that surrounds the tree on the Mosque side of the memorial.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

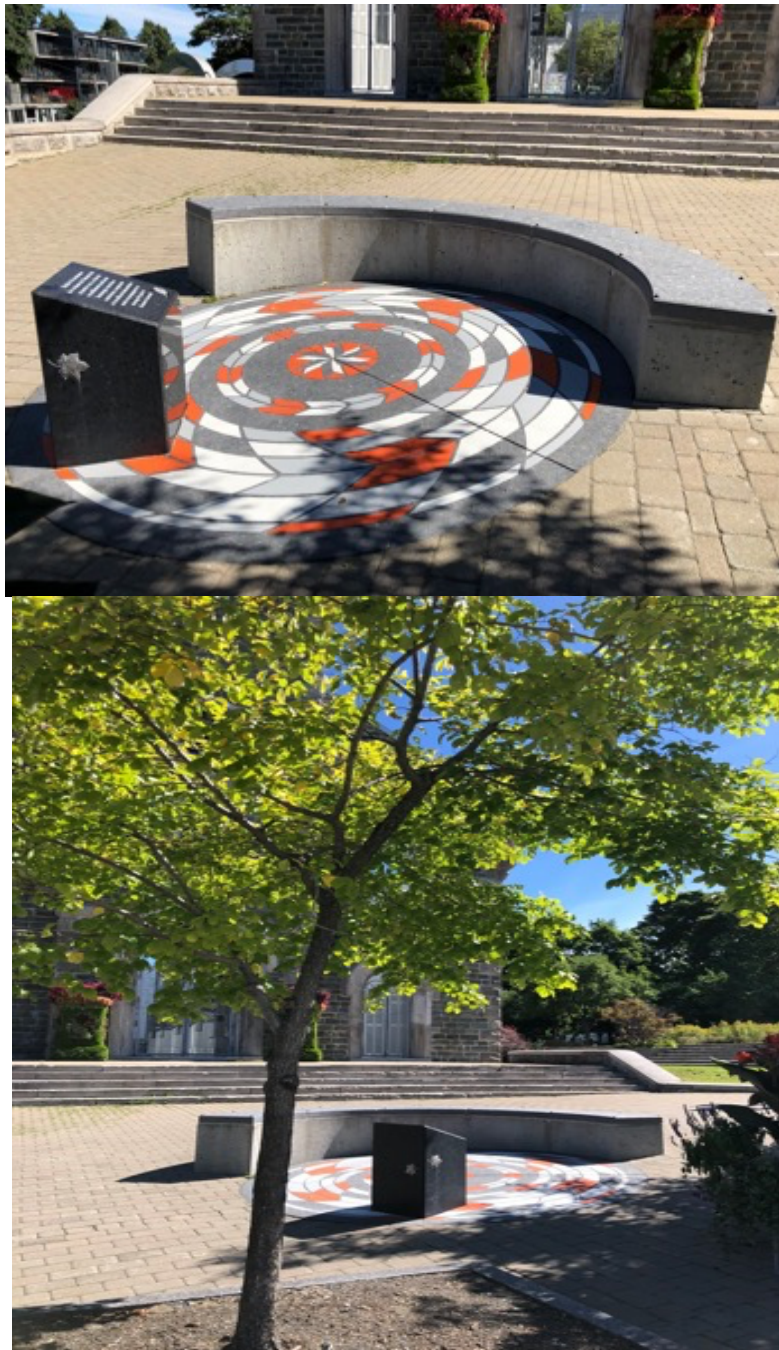


Figure 7:

The traditional Québec paved motif on the Church side of the memorial and its accompanying curved bench near the elm tree.

Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.



Figure 8:

Elm and maple leaves adorn the plaque situated on the Church side of the memorial.
Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

The Lasting Impact of a Physical Monument

According to Pelletier, the importance of a communal gathering place was essential from the start of the design process. To complement the elements of nature in her work, she leveraged the symbolic meaning of stone and its physical strength to convey the community's resilience and the significance of a long-lasting tribute. In her interview, Pelletier stated that

a memorial has to be durable, and stone is a strong symbol. I had never really worked with this material, but I understood that the stone would dominate the work—that was the first constraint, in a way, in relation to the materiality. (2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

The robust, long-lasting symbolism of creating the memorial out of stone inspired Pelletier's creativity. She explained,

The use of the stone, well anchored in the site, probably guided the whole project. Starting with carefully placing a stone—not just anywhere, any way—then the interaction of the site with the tree and the stone built up around it. Interaction

with the space is so important in public art. The space was a little vacant area, a little uneven, with the tree. Everything in the environment contributed to the ideas. (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

In particular, the trees on either side of the street—a maple and an elm—serve as anchors that translate the lasting impact of spontaneous memorials to this physically long-lasting stone memorial. As Pelletier reflected,

I was inspired by how people, on the night of the tragedy, had occupied both spaces, both sides of the street [The Church and Mosque on either side of Route de L'Église]. I was told to use both sites for the memorial because that's where people went to lay flowers after the attack. When the city told me about the site with the tree—I'm someone who already does nature-inspired work, so of course it's impossible to uproot a tree or cut it down—so I integrated it, it became the center. I played on the symbolism of the living; I found it interesting to talk about the cycles of life, to be able to live in the moment, for those who want to mourn. Living in the moment and being anchored in this reality of the cycle of life. (2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

As a double symbol—to commemorate the spontaneous shrines and to portray hope and the cycle of life—the trees on either side of the Route de l'Église were utilized by Pelletier in their full affective power (see Figure 9). Finally, as previously noted, Pelletier added further representative details in the seating space around the tree where the tree and stone interact. She discussed the use of the stone around the seating area circling the tree in the sense of literal and metaphorical reflection, highlighting that

the treatment of the stone itself is very mirror-polished on the inner side of the wall [facing the tree on the Mosque side], to go with this idea of introspection. We see ourselves, but we also see the victims' names at the same time. (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

Pelletier's consideration of the memorial and her conception of how it would be received by visitors, conveys her vision of the site as an inviting place of healing, in which visitors can spend time to meditate and grieve. As she emphasized, it was essential to her that mourners could return to a physical site regularly, explaining,

[Mourners] can always go back, it will stay. It's also important for everyone to see that it was an act of gratuitous violence—we must not forget that. They were humans, Quebecers. That's why I used the symbol of the leaf, an image that can be recognized anywhere on the planet. I like the tactile relationship. (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])



Figure 9:

A spontaneous memorial following the attack, top (Twitter, 2017).

For ethical reasons, we do not share individuals' usernames (franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess, & the Association of Internet Researchers, 2020); Pelletier's memorial incorporating the tree.

Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

Finally, as a physical site of mourning, Pelletier's memorial also serves as a space in which yearly commemorations can be held, continuing to convey its symbolic power through time. Since the project's start, the timeline of the memorial's construction was planned to open in time for the January 29, 2021 commemoration. Pelletier incorporated into her design the memorial's use for televised and in-person gatherings through the years. In her view,

The pedestals holding the six leaves impose and embody the individuals. As I saw it, this was the right place for press conferences. I went this year and saw that it was all set up, and I even saw that a bouquet had been left. It comes alive in its environment! (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

As a backdrop for formal memorialization as well as individual mourning, the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial expresses a message of strength and hope within a space that aims to reflect and respect the realities of Muslims in Quebec. It carries the responsibility of simultaneously representing grief and hope to those within and outside the community. To ensure that her

memorial appropriately presented these intended symbols on behalf of the Muslim community in such a public way, Pelletier maintained a dialogue with members of the Muslim community throughout the process of its creation.

Dialogue with the Québec Muslim Community

Public memorialization brings together three types of memory, according to Scott Stroud and Jonathan Henson (2019): individual, social, and collective memory. Individual memory involves the personal act of remembering, while social memory is the way in which a community tells its own story, and collective memory refers to “the circumstance in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other at all, nevertheless recall the same event—again, each in her own way” (Casey, 2004, as cited in Stroud & Henson, 2019). As such, the memorialization of an event requires the participation of the affected community and its invaluable contribution in terms of individual and social memory.

Interestingly, there was no open call for awarding the commission, nor any attempt by the city to reach out for a Muslim artist to undertake the work. Instead, it seems that asking Pelletier to undertake the project was a more acceptable, less contentious, option. Pelletier, a non-Muslim artist, is part of the “collective” memory of the event in the wider Québec context but could not have designed the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial without crucial input and collaboration with the community directly affected by the Québec Mosque Shooting. As a non-Muslim, Pelletier’s work in designing the memorial required the techniques that Julian Bonder (2009) cites as an ethical framework in memorial design: “precise, dialogic, and committed attitudes toward design, toward techniques and materials, toward sites of memory, history, and the voices of others” (65). Bonder asks, “How can we make room for the voices of those others to ‘appear’ in public without attempting to speak for them?” (2009: 65), and points to the necessity of “ethical deferral” and “self-effacement” (67). The city’s selection of a non-Muslim artist thus requires heightened attention to the process through which Pelletier consulted with the community to carry out an ethical process of memorialization as an “outsider.” The following section will examine Pelletier’s crucial process of consultation with members of Québec’s Muslim community.

In order to create a memorial that would hold her intended symbolic meaning for Québec’s Muslim community and avoid solely conveying her own viewpoint, Pelletier consulted with community members along multiple points of her design process. From the start, she presented her ideas to members of the Québec Mosque, including its co-founder and president, Boufeldja Benabdallah. She remembered the initial meeting during which she introduced her plan for the layout of the memorial:

We had a meeting with Mr. Boufeldja Benabdallah, founder of the Québec Islamic Cultural Center [The Québec Mosque], and another member of the board of directors. He was there to lend his point of view and for technicalities if they occurred. Both were consulted to learn about the project. They liked it a lot— we wanted to know if it was something that spoke to them, that was moving. Right away there was a good reception. Mr. Benabdallah is expressive, he expresses his

emotions and feelings well—it was very transparent. (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])

Members of the Québec Mosque also helped guide Pelletier's chosen visuals to represent each victim in each leaf perched atop the pedestals (see Figure 10), assuring that these truly resonated with the diverse families and communities that were united in their grief. She stated,

When I talked about the designs that I was going to use [in the leaves], the symbols from the different countries, we had another meeting where they specified each of the victims' communities and the more specific regions so I could really use the traditional designs from the victims' countries. I then worked on the patterns and presented them to the group, and one of the patterns I chose was not quite representative. So, when I left they gave me books on the different communities so I could be more accurate in my choices. From there, I went looking even deeper for the specific visual traditions that I could include—the rugs, the architectural ornamentation, the graphic elements. (L. Pelletier, 2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour])



Figure 10:

Each leaf representing the visual traditions of the victims' countries of origin: Abdelkrim Hassane, Algeria; Ibrahima Barry, Guinea; Azzeddine Soufiane, Morocco; Khaled Belkacemi, Algeria; Mamadou Tanou Barry, Guinea; and Aboubaker Thabti, Tunisia.

Credit: Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour and Yasmin Jiwani.

Applying her conversations with members of the Québec Mosque, Pelletier incorporated elements of memorialization that could genuinely speak to visitors of the monument, encouraging a deeper emotional connection. Pelletier remembers her excitement and anxiousness when presenting her work to the victims' families, hoping that her work would resonate: "During the presentation of the model, I saw the families for the first time. People were touched, happy, they shook my hand, I felt that my mission was accomplished" (2022, personal communication [translation from French by Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour]).

Pelletier's acknowledgement of the importance of cooperation and the harmony of cultures is a crucial part of this multifaceted memorial which manages to convey what is often ignored in Quebec's media: the complicated mixture of grief and hope that textures the experience of Muslims in Quebec. Even years after the Québec Mosque Shooting, this mix of grief and hope remains as aspects of Quebec's institutions continue to sustain Islamophobia in the province. Yet, despite Pelletier's good intentions and her collaboration with the Muslim community, one is left to wonder why a Muslim artist was not selected to undertake or collaborate on this work.

The Persistence of Islamophobia in Quebec

Today, six years after the Québec Mosque Shooting, Islamophobia in Quebec remains largely unaddressed by the current government. Despite messages of love and acceptance to members of the Muslim community following the attack and the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial's implicit calls for the recognition of Islamophobia, change in the province is glacial. In 2019, just two days after the second anniversary of the attack, Premier François Legault stated that it was unnecessary to devote a day to action against Islamophobia in Quebec because he did not believe Islamophobia was a problem in the province (CBC News, 2019). This remark sparked a series of angry responses from politicians such as the former Liberal Member of Parliament Pierre Arcand (2019), Québec Solidaire's Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois (La Presse Canadienne, 2019), as well as activists such as the Québec City Mosque's president Boufeldja Benabdallah, who feared the premier's comments downplayed the views of an "active fringe of society that is feeding Islamophobia" (Authier, 2019).

Similarly, Ishaan Gardee, executive director of the National Council of Canadian Muslims, contended that Legault's comments were "clearly out of touch with the realities of Islamophobia on the ground in Québec," a feeling that was echoed by Karim Elabed, an imam at a mosque in Lévis near Québec City (Shingler, 2019). Following the backlash, Legault's team clarified that he did not want to give the impression that Islamophobia was a systemic issue throughout Quebec. However, he did acknowledge that some Islamophobic incidents had occurred in the past within the province (CBC News, 2019). Despite the semi-closure of this argument, Legault still has not acknowledged systemic Islamophobia or systemic racism in Quebec. Such reluctance to recognize a widespread issue combines with his party's recent political decisions to further Other Muslims.

Recent laws and policies in Quebec contribute to these tensions that disproportionately affect marginalized groups and intensify Islamophobia. Quebec's National Assembly passed Bill

21, also known as the secularism law, on June 16, 2019, prohibiting civil servants from wearing “clothing, a symbol, jewelry, adornments, accessories or headwear” (National Assembly of Quebec, 2019) that symbolize any religious belief. Critics have pointed out that this legislation unfairly targets Muslim women. For example, a study released in 2022 by the Association for Canadian Studies and the polling firm Leger showed that, since it was adopted in 2019, the law has directly increased feelings of alienation and hopelessness, especially among Muslim women (Rukavina, 2022). Seventy-eight percent of the Muslim women surveyed stated that their aspirations, sense of well-being, and ability to fulfill their aspirations had worsened since the bill was put into law, while 73 percent said they felt less safe in public (Rukavina, 2022). Finally, 83 percent had less confidence in their children’s future since Bill 21 passed, illustrating the destructive effects of such a bill on the long-term well-being of Muslims in the province.

More recently, on June 1, 2022, the Quebec National Assembly passed Bill 96, also called “An Act Respecting French,” as an update to the 1977 Charter of the French Language. This bill caused further tensions within the province through its exclusionary elements. Among several other points, the law states that government agencies can only provide services in a language other than French for the first six months after someone has immigrated into the province. Further, the Office Québécois de la Langue Française was granted powers of search and seizure to ensure businesses comply with the law. Most importantly, through a notwithstanding clause, the bill bypasses the rights of equality ensured in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms for Canada and Quebec, meaning that no one can use the articles of the charter to challenge the bill (Magder, 2022). Simply put, the bill sets a dangerous tone within the province, portraying immigrants as threats and adopting far-reaching powers to ensure the bill is closely followed. The bill’s message clearly sets French-speaking, so-called “native” Québécois as threatened by cultural differences. As with the *Charte de la Langue Française* in 1977 (Jiwani, Bernicky, Dutremble-Rievet, Talvela, & Youngs-Zaleski, 2021), Bill 96 plays into fears of French vulnerability and once again brings up the “reasonable accommodation” debates that have circulated since the early 2000s in the province.

Despite adopting beautiful and meaningful symbols of unity and “living together” such as Pelletier’s memorial, the government of Quebec’s actions also contrast this sentiment by sustaining prejudices and misrepresentations of Muslims through its institutions. These tensions continue to worry members of the Québec City Mosque. In January 2020, the Mosque’s administrative committee announced significant renovations that would make the Mosque more representative as a place of worship by displaying Islamic architectural aspects. For example, a minaret that would echo the former Notre-Dame-de-Foy Church’s bell tower located on the other side of the street was set to be built. Kamel Kheroua, who was an architectural advisor for the project, stated that he wanted this to create “a kind of link between these two places of worship, although they belong to different religions” (Duval, 2020), an idea that was very reminiscent of Pelletier’s memorial, which symbolically connected these cultures as well.

However, the reason for the Mosque’s renovation was twofold. In addition to serving as an opportunity to revamp the outside of the building, its goal was to heighten security to prevent any further violence towards their community. When the COVID-19 pandemic prevented fundraising goals from being achieved due to the prohibition of gatherings (Rémillard, 2020), the focus shifted to security instead of beauty: the number of emergency exits was doubled, and the

vulnerable glass exterior was changed to masonry and safer doors, adding extra space for the safe and fluid circulation of devotees (Duval, 2020). The Mosque also invested in more locks and an advanced security system (Lau, 2020). Three years after the attack, despite repetitive government claims that Islamophobia is not a pervasive issue in the province, the political atmosphere continues to prevent Mosque attendees from feeling safe in their place of worship.

Coda

The *Vivre Ensemble* memorial conveys a potent message of solidarity in Québec, providing a space for grieving, memorializing, reflecting, and serving as an implicit reminder of the dangers of the Islamophobia that exists in Quebec. It reflects Quebec's outward values of "living together" in harmony, with equal attention to and respect for traditional Quebec culture and the cultural aspects of Islam. Pelletier's meticulous attention to detail and symbolism, along with her cooperation with Québec City's Muslim community, serve as examples of cross-cultural exchange and the possibilities beyond the barriers of reductionist laws, institutional discrimination, and racist radio shows that permeate Quebec society.

However, although the *Vivre Ensemble* memorial exhibits the potential for a Quebec that has come together in solidarity, much work is left to be done toward the full inclusion of Muslims in the province of Quebec. This does not mean that there is absolutely no genuine sympathy and identification with Muslims in Quebec. There are numerous examples that suggest otherwise. Pelletier's own commitment to an inclusive vision of the monument and her reaching out to the Muslim community is reflective of a sentiment of solidarity. Nevertheless, in terms of the power to define, to create, and to name, Muslims are left outside of the picture. They can, just as they are represented in Quebec media, only be acceptable as grateful immigrants. And to wit, the monument created in Québec City is an exemplar of this kind of conditional recognition. The fact that the Québec Mosque could not afford to implement the kind of architectural changes it desired reflects this. The Mosque, unlike other places of worship, functions as a multifold place of gathering and learning. It is the Islamic Cultural Centre, and yet, it could not obtain the funding that was needed to complete the renovations that were desired by the Muslim community in Québec City. In the end, the hollowness of a propaganda of integration is rendered more apparent.

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