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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In recent years, anthropological scholars have documented a convergence of women's rights and anti-Muslim discourses in Western Europe (e.g., Farris, 2017). Anti-Muslim racism is pervasive, it is highly gendered, and increasingly voiced "in the name of women's rights" (Farris, 2017). This thesis asks, how this political and discursive context is shaping feminist alliance building in Austria. To shed light on this question, I examined the Frauen*Volksbegehren and its alliances with other Austrian feminist actors. The Frauen*Volksbegehren was a significant, non-partisan feminist petition that was initiated in 2017 and garnered almost half a million supporting signatures from Austrian voters. To achieve its success, the petition's activists forged strategic alliances with a broad spectrum of feminists throughout the country. This spectrum encompasses anti-racist activists and Muslim feminists, but also feminists who hold anti-Muslim sentiments. How did the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists navigate these complex terrains? This thesis argues that within their alliance building processes, the petition's activists strategically enacted racialized differences and Muslim identities, allowing them to justify both strategic inclusions and strategic exclusion of racialized feminists in their movement. Further, this thesis examines the justificatory narratives surrounding these inclusions and exclusions. In doing so, it will be shown that the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists strategically *included* and foregrounded an activist, whose racialized differences they could enact as Muslim or as non-Muslim in different situations. It will be argued that the *inclusion* of this activist was crucial to the Frauen*Volksbegehren's self-portrayal and self-understanding as a racially inclusive and "intersectional" initiative, which was relevant for building alliances with anti-racist feminists. It will be further argued that the simultaneous intentional *exclusion* of Muslim feminist activists, especially those who wear a hijab, served the strategic purpose of not jeopardizing alliances with feminists who hold anti-Muslim sentiments. By examining the narratives surrounding these inclusions and exclusions, this thesis traces processes of racialization, showing how racialized differences become enacted as Muslim. This thesis thereby argues that within the strategic alliances between the Frauen*Volksbegehren and other feminist actors, Muslim identities did not operate as stable entities. Instead, racialized difference and

Muslim identities were selectively and strategically “enacted in moments of tensions” (M’charek, 2010, p. 313).

Overview

The present and first chapter introduces the Frauen*Volksbegehren as well as Muslim feminist activists and provides more insight into the research questions. Following this introductory chapter (I), chapter II discusses the history and present of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobic policies in Austria, providing an overview of the political context my research is situated in. By engaging with anthropological and other selected social science literature, I then explore the genderedness of anti-Muslim racism in Western Europe and discuss how anti-Muslim narratives currently intersect with women’s rights discourses. Chapter III highlights different theoretical approaches in the anthropological study of anti-Muslim sentiments, contrasting different concepts such as *Islamophobia* (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2020), *Muslimophobia* (Cheng, 2015), *cultural racism* (Meer & Modood, 2012), and *neo-racism* (Bangstad, 2015). Eventually, I elucidate why I choose to work with the term *anti-Muslim racism*. Finally, I introduce my theoretical approach and contextualize my research within racialization studies. Chapter IV provides a description of my research process as well as a discussion of the research methods chosen, mainly policy analysis methods as well as semi-structural interviews. This chapter also provides a reflection of my positionality. Finally, chapter V and VI present my research findings and provide answers to my research question, which asks how Muslim identities are strategically enacted and racialized in the alliance building processes between the Frauen*Volksbegehren, Muslim feminist activists, and other feminist actors. The presentation of my findings and their analysis is divided into two chapters. Chapter V examines how the Frauen*Volksbegehren's early team strategically enacted Muslim identities justifying the *exclusion* of Muslim feminist activists. In chapter VI, I discuss how the Frauen*Volksbegehren's team strategically enacted an activist's Muslim identity to justify her *inclusion* in the team. Chapter VII summarizes the arguments presented and concludes this thesis.

Introducing the Frauen*Volksbegehren

In this thesis the Frauen*Volksbegehren is referred to as a petition, rather than a referendum. In Austria there are two types of referenda,¹ which are both phrased as simple yes/no or this/that questions and can only be initiated by political authorities (Bundesministerium Inneres, n.d.). A petition (*Volksbegehren*), like the Frauen*Volksbegehren, on the other hand, contains a legislative proposal and can be initiated by whoever is eligible to vote in Austrian national legislative elections. A *Volksbegehren* is considered formally successful, when it reaches a threshold of 100,000 declarations of support (given by eligible voters), or it must gain the formal support of a sixth of the eligible to vote population of three federal states. If the petition successfully reaches this threshold, it does not become legally binding, but it gets a parliamentary hearing (Parlament Österreich, n.d.).

The Frauen*Volksbegehren was initiated in early 2017 in Vienna by a group of feminists who had met through the women's career network *Sorority*.² The official registration week for supporters to sign the petition took place in early October 2018. In a country with about six and a half million voters at the time, the Frauen*Volksbegehren gained the formal support of close to half a million people.³ The petition thus clearly exceeded the minimum threshold of 100,000 signatures a *Volksbegehren* must reach to be considered formally successful. In total about 7.5 percent of eligible voters signed the petition, making the Frauen*Volksbegehren the thirteenth most supported petition ever filed in Austria.⁴

Given that even a successful petition is not legally binding, collecting a high number of supporting signatures becomes of particular interest, to be able to argue convincingly that the proposed policy changes should be implemented by policy makers. It thus lies in the nature of this democratic instrument, that its primary goal is to mobilize largely and broadly among

¹ Firstly, there is the popular vote (*Volksabstimmung*), which is legally binding; secondly, the popular consultation (*Volksbefragung*), which is not (Bundesministerium Inneres, n.d.).

² The "Frauen*Volksbegehren 2.0" was openly supported by the activists behind the 1997 Frauenvolksbegehren, but it was initiated and led by a different, newly formed group of feminist activists who had met through the women's career network *Sorority*.

³ The Frauen*Volksbegehren was signed by 481,959 voters.

⁴ The Frauen*Volksbegehren's parliamentary hearing, which followed its formal success, took place in December 2018, which is when Austrian citizens had already elected the far-right ÖVP-FPÖ government. To the shock of the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists most ministers from this governing coalition left for the parliamentary hearing. Among those leaving, were chancellor Sebastian Kurz, vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, state secretary Karoline Edtstadler, and even the Federal Minister for Women, Juliane Bogner-Strauß (Egyed, 2018). So far, none of the petition's policy claims have been realized. Today the Frauen*Volksbegehren still exists as an association and as a political actor, taking public stances on questions surrounding gender equality and women's rights.

eligible voters. To reach this goal of gaining support from a broad spectrum of citizens, the Frauen*Volksbegehren strategically built alliances with a wide range of feminist organizations, women's groups, and related civil-society actors, which had already existed and were well-established at the time of the petitions campaign. For this reason, the Frauen*Volksbegehren was chosen for this research project, which examines the question of how the political context of gendered Islamophobia affects feminist alliance building. The following section contextualizes the research questions by discussing the political context at the time of the petition's initiation.

Outline of the Political Context of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's Initiation

In October of 2017, the year of the Frauen*Volksbegehren initiation, national legislative elections were held in Austria. The Christian-conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), at the time newly led by populist politician Sebastian Kurz, emerged as the clear winner. The election campaign of the "New People's Party" (as the party referred to itself after Sebastian Kurz had taken over the lead), strongly relied on the populist buzzwords migration and security, which are closely entangled with anti-Muslim racist tropes (Gökkaya, 2017). ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz promised, that if elected new chancellor, he would "finally" enforce tough migration and asylum policies (Meinhart, 2017). After the elections the ÖVP quickly formed a coalition with the far-right FPÖ. It was only the second time in Austria's post-war history that the Christian-conservative ÖVP and the far-right FPÖ joined forces in a governing coalition. What followed the formation of this far-right governing team were two years of recurring antisemitic scandals, attacks on worker's rights, a wide range of anti-feminist measures, as well as an increase in anti-Muslim political rhetoric and policies (Das Gupta, 2019).

Against this backdrop, and in the same year, another political event was to repeat itself in Austria: In April 2017, for the second time in Austria's history, feminist activists announced a *Frauen*Volksbegehren*, a feminist petition. With only an asterisk added to the original title, a feminist grassroots movement thus reappeared on the Austrian political landscape in 2017, 20 years after the initial *Frauenvolksbegehren*.

During our conversations the Frauen*Volksbegehren's initiators contextualize their decision to start a feminist petition in a time of a global political shift to the right and a backlash in

progressive and feminist politics, which they had decided needed a strong feminist response. In 2016 Donald Trump had been elected President of the United States and in 2017 Austrian citizens elected the abovementioned far-right government. In addition, across Europe policies and political rhetoric regarding migration and asylum had rapidly become more radical with the so-called *refugee crisis* of 2015.

While the so-called *refugee crisis* fueled anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourses in Europe, Islamophobia had already been on the rise throughout Europe prior to 2015. In anthropology and related social science disciplines, different concepts, such as *neo-racism* (Bangstad, 2015), *cultural racism* (Meer & Modood, 2012), or *femonationalism* (Farris, 2017), have been applied to contextualize and shed light on the different facets of this phenomenon. Despite conceptualizing Islamophobia differently, the aforementioned scholars agree that resentment and discrimination against Muslims runs rampant in Europe.

Researching how feminists navigate Islamophobic discourses is pertinent, as Islamophobia is highly gendered and increasingly justified “in the name of women’s rights” (Farris, 2017). In her study on digital Islamophobia, anthropological scholar Karina Horsti (2017) traces the transnational production and circulation of Islamophobic tropes and conspiracy theories. Horsti shows that the Islamophobic construction of Muslim men as inherently misogynistic and violent is intimately intertwined with the construction of pure, feminine whiteness (Horsti, 2017, p. 1452). Through these narratives Muslim men are painted as hypersexual and violent threats to *white* “unveiled women,” and with them to the *white* ethno-nation (Horsti, 2017, p. 1449). Muslim women, on the other hand are constructed as the mirror opposite to the Muslim man: oppressed, sexually secluded, and unfree, while fundamentally incapable of admitting their own oppression and emancipating themselves from their *cultural shackles* (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Yeğenoğlu, 1998/2009). These gendered Islamophobic tropes are not exclusive to the far-right. In her highly influential book *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (2017) scholar Sara R. Farris describes how in today’s Western Europe “three very different political actors—right-wing nationalists, certain feminists and women’s equality agencies, and neoliberals—invoke women’s rights to stigmatize Muslim men” (Farris, 2017, p. 3). Farris thus deploys *femonationalism* to capture the involvement of prominent feminists and femocrats in how Islam is currently framed as “a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture.” (Farris, 2017, p. 4)

In this context of converging anti-Muslim and women's rights discourses, I am interested in its effect on feminist alliances. My thesis therefore examines, how this political context of intense anti-Muslim racism voiced through women's rights vocabulary shaped the strategic alliance building processes between the Frauen*Volksbegehren and other feminists, particularly Muslim feminist activists, in Austria. In my analysis, I focus on strategic processes and practices of racialization, which, I will argue, were crucial in the Frauen*Volksbegehren strategically navigating its alliance building processes with other feminist actors.

Introducing Muslim Feminist Activists

This thesis examines feminist alliances between the Frauen*Volksbegehren and other feminists in Austria. A group of feminists that is central in this research, are who I refer to as *Muslim feminist activists*. Who are Muslim feminist activists? When mapping networks of Muslim feminist activists in Austria, it is crucial to not only include formal organizations, but to also consider informal networks. As will be more thoroughly discussed in chapter II, anti-Muslim racism in Austria is perpetrated by political parties and governmental institutions. At the same time, Muslims who politically organize against the discrimination they are facing, are constantly at risk of being criminalized by governmental institutions. In this hostile political context, where identifiable organizations and networks are at constant risk of being criminalized, it is crucial to look at *informal* networks when trying to grasp Muslim feminist activists as a social group. The individuals who fall under my definition of Muslim feminist activists, therefore, are not part of a joint organization; some of them are not formally organized at all. They work in different fields and are using different media and tools for their activist work. Some of them are artists, others are authors, or social scientists. Some are community organizers, some are social workers, others work in education; only a few are founders and active members of activist NGOs. Considering the vast diversity among Muslim feminist activists, by what criteria do I still define them as one group?

In her acclaimed book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* Linda Martín Alcoff argues that "identity does not entail an ascription of sameness that elides group difference" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 86). Instead, identity implies "a constitutive relation of the individual to the Other, as well as between self and community." (Alcoff, 2006, p. 86) Accordingly, my definition of Muslim feminist activists does not aim at identifying a homogenous group with clear-cut boundaries. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that "identities are individual and collective narratives

that answer the question ‘who am/are I/we?’” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). Therefore, my definition of Muslim feminist activists refers to a network of individuals and organizations that understand themselves as *we* in the narratives that emerge in the dynamic of their strategic alliance with the Frauen*Volksbegehren.

Given the hostile political context, and in particular the fact that Muslim feminists in Austria are at risk of being criminalized for building activist alliances at all, I ask the reader’s understanding for choosing to abstain from including a thorough mapping of Muslim feminist networks in this thesis. Since Muslim feminist networks are not the subject of my thesis, this is not an obstacle to building my overall argument. Of importance for this thesis is my definition of Muslim feminist activists, which in the context of this research project, encompasses networks of Muslim feminists who understand themselves as *we* in the dynamic of their strategic alliance with the Frauen*Volksbegehren.

The following chapter is dedicated to outlining the political context just mentioned, which is a context of intense (gendered) Islamophobia in Austria.

CHAPTER II

Providing Context: A Brief and Recent History of Islamophobia in Austria

Islamophobia is widespread in Europe. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez, editors of the European Islamophobia Reports (published annually since 2015), define European Islamophobia as a form of “normalized racism,” arguing that the manifestations of this racism are deeply rooted in European institutions, societies, and states (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 9). According to the authors it is no longer only right-wing extremists who rely on Islamophobic populism and discourse, but increasingly also conservatives, as well as liberals, leftists, and social democrats⁵ (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 9).

When it comes to stark Islamophobia in European countries, Austria is no exception. Yet, scholars have argued that compared to other European countries (like France or the Netherlands), Islamophobia in Austria spread late (Hafez, 2017, p. 392). In 2010 Austrian historian Klaus Hödl described widespread Islamophobia in Austria as a “quite recent

⁵ Anthropologist Andre Gingrich has argued accordingly that the designations “‘left’ and ‘right’, the traditional political terminology of the modern era” may no longer be sufficient tools for understanding the present sociopolitical landscapes of Europe (Gingrich, 2006, p. 198).

phenomenon,” arguing that before 2005, it was hardly noticeable in public discourse (Hödl, 2010, p. 443). Populist politics pre-2005 were usually “directed against foreigners in general, and not so much against Muslims in particular.” (Hödl, 2010, p. 444) Although anti-Muslim sentiments certainly existed prior to 2005, Hödl argues that these views used to be held by a minority. Anti-Muslim sentiments prior to 2005 were “sporadic,” and stand in contrast to the “full-fledged Islamophobia” we have witnessed developing since (Hödl, 2010, p. 444).

While Hafez attributes this later arrival of Islamophobia in Austria to Muslims’ legal status in the country (Hafez, 2017, p. 392), Hödl attributes it to Austria’s collective memory and history, of which he argues Muslims and Islam are integral parts of (Hödl, 2010, p. 444). In 1908 Bosnia-Herzegovina was annexed by the Habsburg Empire, leading to the incorporation of a large Muslim community into the Monarchy’s population (Hödl, 2010, p. 444). Four years later, in 1912, Islam was formally recognized as a national denomination, guaranteeing Muslims rights as a religious group (Hafez, 2017, p. 392). In the 1970s, when many Turkish so-called *guest workers* came to Austria, this legislation became the legal foundation for the establishment of the *Islamic Faith Community* as part of public law in 1979 (Hödl, 2010, p. 445). This legal status ensures the Faith Community a range of privileges, including “access to public media and being consulted by the government on all issues concerning Islam and the Muslim population on an equal footing.” (Hödl, 2010, p. 445) Both Hafez and Hödl argue that this position and perception of Muslims as part of the national corpus became increasingly questioned after 2005. Both authors locate the starting point of this shift at the split of the far-right populist *Freedom Party* (FPÖ) from the ruling coalition of the Christian-conservative *People’s Party* (ÖVP). As part of this split populist Jörg Haider founded the right-wing populist *Alliance for the Future of Austria* (BZÖ). According to Hödl, it was in this political context, that the new FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache started increasingly instrumentalizing Islam and Muslims in his populist rhetoric, mobilizing against minarets, or Türkiye’s EU accession (Hödl, 2010, p. 446). Building on Hödl’s historical analysis, Hafez argues that this marked the starting point of a “a race to be the most Islamophobic group, radicalizing people not only on the far right but also parts of the political centre [*sic*] and left to adopt Islamophobic discourse strategies” (Hafez, 2017, p. 393). Anthropologist Matti Bunzl observes the same shift in Austrian political discourse from a more general xenophobia to Islamophobia. However, Bunzl locates the harbingers of this change earlier, in the mid-1990s (Bangstad & Bunzl, 2010, p. 220). In a conversation with anthropologist Sindre Bangstad, Bunzl defines Islamophobia as the

“rejection of a population on the grounds of their Muslimness,” arguing that while far-right populists used to reject, for example, Austria’s Turkish population *as foreigners (Ausländer)*, they have since come to be rejected *as Muslims* (Bangstad & Bunzl, 2010, p. 220). Bunzl aptly summarizes this shift in saying, “these are the exact same people, but now they are Muslims, and their Muslimness is now seen as a problem, even *the problem*.” (Bangstad & Bunzl, 2010, p. 220)

Today, Islamophobia is institutionalized in Austria in various ways and is often exercised by the state.⁶ Political decision-makers justify these political measures by publicly framing Austrian Muslims as a “security threat” to the liberal political order (Hafez, 2022, p. 98). The year of the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s initiation, 2017, is also the year in which Austrian voters elected the far-right coalition between the *Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP)* and the *Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)*. In the new coalition’s government program *political Islam* became a major focus of internal security (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 61). Through this notion of *political Islam*, Islam is distinguished from other religions and framed as a political system. This reframing creates an antagonistic opposition between Islam on one side and the Austrian political law and order on the other (Hafez, 2017, p. 401). According to Hafez, this *topos* assumes that in contrast to and in defiance of national law, Muslims adhere to a *Sharia law* (Hafez, 2017, p. 402). In the European Islamophobia Report 2017, Hafez thoroughly analyzes the policy-related developments that followed the new coalition program and its focus on fighting *political Islam*. He writes:

The individual measures (...) reveal who the two electoral winners subsume under “political Islam”: Muslims. The program is about “ensuring a comprehensive control of the presentation of the Islamic doctrine.” This sounds strange for the first time, as state authorities are not allowed to intervene in the interests of recognized churches and religious communities. The coalition program also requires that essential sources of faith such as the Koran be submitted in an authorized translation. Beyond that, the program reiterates a “ban on foreign financing,” a “criminal law against political Islam”

⁶ There are only estimates as to how many Muslims live in Austria today. A report published by the Austrian Integration Funds in 2017 estimates that in 2016 approximately 700,000 Muslims were living in Austria, and it can be assumed that the number has increased since then (Goujon et al., 2017, p. 7). After Catholicism, Islam thus represents the second largest denomination in Austria (*Österreich*, 2023a).

and demands “value and orientation courses for asylum seekers. (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 61)

Based on these political and legal developments, Hafez argues that Muslims in Austria are not approached by the state on a human-rights-basis, centering their rights to religious freedom and their vulnerability to racism. Instead, the state approaches them as a potential danger to be contained by means of repressive and discriminatory security policy measures (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2018, p. 61). Hafez contextualizes these anti-Muslim policy developments in a historical continuity by analyzing letters, political programs, press releases, speeches, and so forth of the Habsburg Monarchy. Based on this research he argues that the current anti-Muslim policies aim at upholding the liberal white order, secured by the nation-state (Hafez, 2022, p. 98). He thus argues that these policies aim at defending privileges, such as whiteness, access to wealth and property, and gender norms against racialized Muslim Others. Hafez thus draws a continuity from the Habsburg Monarchy to today, from colonial narratives to the narratives referring to the *War on Terror* (Hafez, 2022, p. 98).

Although the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy joined the colonial project late (at least formally speaking), contemporary Islamophobia can be traced back to colonialism. The lasting impact of colonialism on Austria, according to the author, is reflected in various social spheres, such as migration and trade policy, popular culture and art, and knowledge production, including anthropology and geography as disciplines that were shaped by and in turn strongly influenced the Austrian colonial project (Hafez, 2022, p. 98). Anthropologist Andre Gingrich also highlights that in the late 19th century it was *Austrian* anthropologists who played a crucial role in big-scale colonial expeditions and in the “construction of European colonial, missionary, and orientalist supremacy over the rest of the world.” (Gingrich, 2019, p. 367) Moreover, crucial ideological concepts such as *race* (*Rasse*), which would later play a major role in shaping the Nazi regime, were developed during and through colonialism (Hafez, 2022, p. 98). Both Gingrich’s and Hafez’ research underlines, that colonialism is deeply entangled with Austria’s history and present, and with contemporary expressions of anti-Muslim racism. Highlighting that today’s Islamophobic tropes are rooted in colonial continuities is crucial; not only to enhance our understanding of these tropes, but also because Austria has not critically worked through and uncovered its colonial past (Hipfl & Gronold, 2011, p. 29). Austria’s colonial history is not part of Austrian collective consciousness, which is why, according to

Hipfl and Gronold, it still strongly informs contemporary Austrian migration and asylum policies (Hipfl & Gronold, 2011, p. 29). Rather than colonialism being part of Austria's collective memory, it is nostalgic and romanticized images of the Empire that form a central basis for contemporary Austrian identity (Hipfl & Gronold, 2011, p. 29).

Researchers Vista Eskandari and Elisa Banfi, who study Islamophobia in Switzerland, also trace contemporary Islamophobic tropes back to colonial power relations. Switzerland compares to Austria in that its role in colonization was mostly profiting off the oversea extraction of land, labor, and resources. Although Switzerland, did not directly *have* oversea colonies, scholars Eskandari and Banfi still identify a strong impact of colonial narratives on contemporary Swiss Islamophobia. The authors thus conceptualize Switzerland as "having a colonial past without colonies," yet again underlining how all of Europe is profoundly shaped by colonial power relations (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 55). The Austro-Hungarian Empire was the only major European power without oversea colonies.⁷ While colonialism shaped all of Europe, anthropologist Gingrich carves out three main differences in the Orientalist legacies currently present in "European countries with a territorial-imperial past," which includes Austria, compared to the "'classical-colonial' mainstream" of European countries, which directly *owned* oversea colonies (Gingrich, 2004, p. 169). First, Gingrich shows that the Oriental *Other* was and often still is a pervasive constant in both "'elite' cultures as well as 'folk' cultures" throughout Austria (Gingrich, 2004, p. 169). Second, Gingrich argues that this Orientalism directly influenced the rise of nationalisms⁸ in Austria, highlighting the historic and colonial continuities at the root of current racist stereotypes and narratives. Third, Gingrich argues that in now Austria, the Oriental *Other* was not portrayed as a distant inferior. Rather, it was seen as a "close, dangerous, potential intruder of almost equal, albeit very different skills." (Gingrich, 2004, p. 169) Hafez identifies a continuity from this colonial fear of the dangerous Oriental Other(ed) to today's policies directed against *political Islam*. In doing so, he provides the following example:

The most powerful colonial governor, Benjámín von Kállay, feared the 'Mahometan political nation', and the media stirred up fear of a pan-Islamic movement working in

⁷ However, it pursued a policy of expansion, leading to the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, which eventually resulted in the annexation of said territory in 1908 (Hafez, 2022, p. 98; Hödl, 2010, p. 444).

⁸ Here the author refers to both, the pan-Germanic nationalism that led to Nazism and to the imperial-loyalist patriotism that turned into "clerical republican nationalism" after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918 (Gingrich, 2004, p. 169).

secrecy. The colonial empire implemented repressive measures (...). In postcolonial Austria, the ÖVP introduced the notion of 'political Islam' to portray Muslim religiosity (...) as a security threat. When proclaiming to fight 'political Islam', Austrian governments (...) closed mosques, and raided the homes of Muslim civil society leaders (Hafez, 2022, p. 109)

This quote draws a direct line from colonial power relations to contemporary political measures. While the preceding section traced colonial continuities, the subsequent section delves into specific recent anti-Muslim policies, which were introduced in recent years since the Frauen*Volksbegehren's initiation. These examples are presented to emphasize the pervasive presence of anti-Muslim racism in the Austrian political sphere and to shed more light on the context the Frauen*Volksbegehren was navigating while building strategic alliances with other feminists, including Muslim feminists.

Outlining Recent Islamophobic Policies in Austria

In recent years, several political measures were enforced that have promoted the stigmatization, surveillance, and criminalization of Muslim civil society in Austria. In justifying these anti-Muslim policies, policy makers strongly mobilized women's rights rhetoric.

One particularly pertinent example is an Anti-Face-Covering-Law which was introduced in 2017, the year of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's initiation. This law was publicly referred to by politicians and media as a "burqa ban" (*Was Sie über das „Burka-Verbot“ wissen sollten*, 2017). The law's introduction can only be described as a populist spectacle: It was accompanied by a major public debate, led by the then ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz, who only a few years prior had responded to the FPÖ proposal to ban religious face coverings, by asserting that he refused to participate in what he had deemed an "artificial debate." At the time, Kurz argued that the minimal number of people actually wearing religious face coverings rendered it a non-issue (Marchart & Reisinger, 2017). Only a few years later, the same Kurz spearheaded the introduction of the *burqa ban*, mobilizing women's rights arguments and anti-Muslim tropes to further his populist agenda. This example highlights how anti-Muslim measures and the debates surrounding them concern core feminist issues—in this case questions of women's oppression, and bodily autonomy. These political developments significantly shape the context in which feminist alliance building is embedded.

Another example for anti-Muslim measures implemented in recent years is the so-called *Islam Map* (*Islam-Landkarte*), which was presented by the Minister for Integration, Women, Family and Youth Susanne Raab (ÖVP) in 2021. The *Islam Map* is an openly accessible website, mapping over 600 Muslim organizations and mosques (Islamlandkarte, n.d.). Its introduction was framed as furthering “transparency” and “security,” thus framing Muslims as a security threat (Langer, 2021). The map’s publication was met with heavy criticism from Muslim civil society and from the researchers engaged in its creation, with the University of Vienna even opting to remove its logo from its website (*Weiter scharfe Kritik*, 2021). A primary criticism centered around the map stigmatizing Muslims in Austria by not distinguishing between Muslim civil society associations, mosques, and organizations with Islamist tendencies (Rauscher, 2021). Additionally, the map was criticized for the risk it posed to Muslim civil society figures, as their private addresses were often identical to the addresses of their respective associations. The addresses’ publication made Muslim civil society particularly vulnerable to right-wing violence. Only a few days after the map was published *warning signs* appeared in front of several mosques in Vienna. The signs read: “Caution! Political Islam in your vicinity” and featured a sketch of a stern-looking, black-bearded man, as well as a reference to the *Islam Map* (Puschautz & Ichner, 2021). While the genderedness of this anti-Muslim political measure is not as readily apparent as it is in the *burqa ban*-example, it is certainly present. It is no coincidence that the ministry behind the *Islam map*’s publication is simultaneously responsible for *Integration* and *Women*. The creation of this distinct ministry is embedded in the convergence of anti-Muslim and women’s rights discourses, continuously highlighted throughout this thesis.

Example three, is the *Documentation Center Political Islam*, a state-funded center monitoring Muslims in Austria, which was introduced in 2020 by the new coalition between the *People’s Party ÖVP* and the *Green Party*.⁹ Later the same year, in November 2020, and based on the Documentation Center’s reports, Austrian special police forces raided the homes of Muslim civil society leaders, anti-racist activists, and academics, including the family home of the editor of the annual Islamophobia Reports, Farid Hafez. Nine months later, the Higher Court of Graz ruled that the raid was illegal (Thalhammer, 2022). The raid, titled *Operation Luxor*,

⁹ While the *Green Party* initially only agreed to a center documenting different forms of extremism (which would for example have included far-right extremism), the *People’s Party* dominated the coalition negotiations and eventually got to realize its desired *Documentation Center Political Islam* (*Grüner Unmut*, 2020).

took place one week after—but unrelated—to an Islamist terrorist attack killing four people in Vienna. Subsequent investigations revealed that in prioritizing the raid against Muslim civil society actors, the responsible government agencies had postponed a threat assessment interview with the soon to be assassin, who had a criminal record and was known to the agencies. The threat assessment interview would have originally taken place *before* the terrorist attack but was postponed to a date after the attack. This decision was made to free up resources to execute *Operation Luxor*, the raid against Muslim civil society (Marchart, 2022). Since *Operation Luxor*, at the very latest, Muslim anti-racist and feminist activists are acutely aware of the dangers they face by being politically active in Austria. Even I was politically attacked in 2021/22, after I had taken part in an art festival by Muslim feminist activists, that drew public attention to *Operation Luxor*. ÖVP General Secretary at the time, Laura Sachslehner, responded to the exhibition by accusing the involved artists, including me, of “political Islam” (Rampetzreiter, 2022). This incident and its implications for my research will be further discussed in chapter IV where I reflect on my positionality.

Since I conducted my research from 2019 to 2021, I refrain from going into greater detail about similar political measures introduced since then. The aforementioned examples provide insight into an extremely hostile political landscape, in which Muslim civil society engagement is restricted and criminalized. Moreover, as highlighted especially through the *burqa ban*-example, many of these hostile political actions are justified with feminist rhetoric. Without claiming to be exhaustive, these are the political circumstances in which I contextualize my research on feminist alliances.

Before discussing my theoretical approach in chapter III, the following section is dedicated to discussing the *genderedness* of anti-Muslim racism more thoroughly, thus providing insight into the historical continuities present in the present convergence of anti-Muslim racism and feminism.

Colonial Feminisms and Gendered Islamophobia: A Brief History and Present

Islamophobia is highly gendered. In contemporary Islamophobic narratives Muslims are portrayed as particularly patriarchal, which is how they come to supposedly endanger “Western liberal values” such as women’s and gay rights (Horsti, 2017, p. 1443). The following section examines the genderedness of anti-Muslim narratives as well as the construction of

Muslim women within them. Deconstructing the essentialized *Muslim woman* and contextualizing this trope in genealogies of colonial feminisms is crucial to this research project, because it deepens our understanding of the tensions the Frauen*Volksbegehren navigated while building strategic alliances with other feminists, particularly Muslim feminists.

In Islamophobic discourses, Muslims are constructed as the *Other*, that is, as the opposite of the *Western world*. During this continuous process of othering, the *Other* and the *Self* are ascribed opposing characteristics. Based on Eurocentric, unilinear progress thinking, Muslims are located as spatially and temporally separate from an idealized Western world (Samman, 2012). From this perspective, which is rooted in ongoing colonial power relations, differences between societies are interpreted as an expression of their differing levels of development (Boatcă, 2016; Samman, 2012, p. 110). In these othering discourses Muslims are portrayed as backward and intolerant. In contrast, the West is constructed as rational, liberal, and secular; characteristics, which—according to these narratives—Muslims are fundamentally incompatible with (Uitermark et al., 2013, p. 235). This nationalization of liberal values is often summarized under the keywords *liberal nationalism* or *culturalization of politics* (Horsti, 2017, p. 1443; Bangstad, 2015, p. 54). Scholar Mahmudul Hasan uses the term *Gendered Islamophobia* to carve out the homogenous negative portrayal of Muslim women (Hasan, 2012, p. 58). Anti-Muslim discourses portray Muslim women as "veiled, shackled, and secluded," as well as subjected to the violence of Muslim men (Hasan, 2012, p. 58). Hasan contextualizes these narratives within a long history of colonial feminisms. Throughout history, colonial feminisms have justified hegemonic power relations and Western interventions in colonized regions by accusing non-Western men of oppressing non-Western women. This phenomenon has been famously addressed by scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her quote: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). The supposed oppression of *brown women* has been a justification for political intervention and power grabs numerous times throughout history (Hasan, 2012, p. 58). This means that the marginalization and stigmatization of racialized women has functioned as an essential tool for maintaining global hegemonic power structures.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod illustrates these connections through the example of the U.S. War on Terror after 9/11. By subjecting media discourses after the terrorist attack to a critical analysis, she shows that warlike interventions in Afghanistan were rhetorically justified in the

U.S. primarily by the supposed need to save oppressed Afghan Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). Instead of seeking socio-political or economic explanations for terror and war and questioning the historical role of the U.S. in creating the conditions for these political struggles, Western media primarily contextualized the political situation with culturalist explanations. According to Abu-Lughod, Islamic head coverings such as the hijab or burqa have taken on a crucial symbolic significance in these essentializing discourses. Abu-Lughod shows that veiling in Afghanistan has a long history and cultural significance that goes far beyond the influence of the Taliban. She emphasizes that veiling has different meanings depending on the temporal and spatial contexts within which it is practiced (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 785). In 2017, fifteen years after anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod emphasized the contextual significance of hijab and burqa, scholars Elisa Banfi and Vista Eskandari publish an article discussing gendered Islamophobia and the Islamophobic construction of the headscarf in Switzerland (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017). From a postcolonial perspective, the authors analyze the example of burqa and minaret bans to examine the institutionalization of Islamophobia in Switzerland. They note that within the last decades, many Western European nations (including Austria) considered or introduced dress regulations for Muslim women (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 57). Without any consideration of the historical and cultural context that Abu-Lughod emphasizes, Muslim veiling has become the ultimate and unequivocal symbol of female oppression in Islam (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 57). The authors outline that this construction of Muslim women as the *Other* vis-à-vis *Western* and *white* women is closely related to Orientalist imaginaries of nineteenth century Europe. In these imaginaries Orientalized women were portrayed either as secluded victims or as over-sexualized slaves in harems (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786). In their study, Eskandari and Banfi describe the burqa as an essentializing symbol which is attributed to Muslim women by non-Muslims. As a result, Orientalized women are perceived as secluded and hidden away behind their headscarves. Further, they are accused of belonging to an inferior group of people whose religious traditions the *Orient* must finally overcome if it ever wants to reach the same developmental level as the *West* (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 65). In her 1998 book *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* cultural and social scientist Meyda Yeğenoğlu encapsulates colonial-feminist discourses by describing that, there is a “metonymic association” between woman and tradition, which explains the “continual obsession and the fundamental weight given to women’s unveiling as the privileged sign of progress.” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998/2009, p. 99) From this colonial-feminist

perspective, “the veil is taken as the sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire tradition of Islam and Oriental cultures and by extension it is used as a proof of oppression of women in these societies.” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998/2009, p. 99) In their analysis on Islamophobic policies in Switzerland, Eskandari and Banfi argue that these exact narratives fundamentally question the national belonging of Muslim women. In liberal national discourses Western nations are imagined as standing for gender equality. Therefore, Muslims but particularly Muslim *women*, whose bodies are perceived as expressions of Islam’s oppression of women, are fundamentally denied national belonging (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 65). Public debates, akin to those in Switzerland, also occurred in Austria during the introduction of the *burqa ban*¹⁰ in 2017 (Österreich, 2023b). A controversial debate revolved around the option of restricting these clothing regulations solely to Swiss citizens and residents, rather than applying them to all individuals on Swiss territory—which would include tourists. While the Austrian ban targets everyone on Austrian ground, the Swiss law specifically targets Swiss women. Eskandari and Banfi thus conclude that being Muslim, which in a Western European context means being the *Other*, is understood as incompatible with a Western national identity (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 60). Not Muslim women in general, but *Muslim Swiss women* in particular are thus constructed as the national threat. The authors conclude that through the discursive symbol of the burqa Muslim women are dehumanized in two ways: First, because of their belonging to a supposedly *uncivilized* group, and second, because of their supposed *inability to emancipate* themselves unless forced to do so by Western actors (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 66). Anti-Muslim dress regulations thus offer Muslim women a perfidious chance to achieve national belonging only by *admitting their own inferiority* and *letting Western politicians and laws save them*: “They can ‘whiten’ themselves only by recognizing the savagery of their group of origin. (...) In fact, Muslim women can become part of the ‘Swiss race’ only by accepting their inferiority.” (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 66).

In recent years, scholars have drawn attention to the fact that these gendered anti-Muslim narratives are not exclusive to the far right. Anti-Muslim narratives portray Muslim women as oppressed victims, thereby addressing key feminist issues. Consequently, anti-Muslim racist narratives are present in current women's and gay rights discourses. With her widely

¹⁰ While the law was officially titled Anti-Face-Covering-Law, it was publicly referred to and justified as a *burqa ban* (*Was Sie über das „Burka-Verbot“ wissen sollten*, 2017).

acclaimed 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* philosopher Jasbir Puar coined the term *homonationalism* to describe the emergence of a “national homonormativity” in the context of the U.S. war on terror (Puar, 2007, p. 2), thus refuting the notion “that the nation is heteronormative and that the queer is inherently an outlaw to the nation-state” (Puar, 2013, p. 336). Fundamentally, *homonationalism* refers to and criticizes the processes through which neoliberal power structures are lining up with gay and lesbian rights rhetoric in order to justify anti-Muslim and anti-immigration stances. *Homonationalist* discourses paint Western societies and nation-states as egalitarian and Muslim migrants as a backwards threat bringing sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia to the liberal Western nation-state. Puar defines *homonationalism* as “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states” (Puar, 2013, p. 337).

In 2017, building on *homonationalism*, sociologist Sara R. Farris introduces the term *femonationalism*. Short for “feminist and femocratic nationalism,” *femonationalism* describes both, “the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam (...) campaigns” as well as “the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality.” (Farris, 2017, p. 4) While Puar’s *homonationalism* sheds light on how nationalism has shifted in term of its invocation of gay and lesbian rights, Farris’ *femonationalism* uncovers how European nationalist parties have increasingly been invoking gender equality within a racist rhetoric (Farris, 2017, p. 1). Simultaneously, *femonationalism* describes the formation of a new alliance between right-wing actors, who are now joined by neoliberals, as well as certain feminists and women’s equality agencies who now jointly “invoke women’s rights to stigmatize Muslim men in order to advance their own political objectives.” (Farris, 2017, p. 3) The main objective of Farris’ book thus is to demonstrate that the racist invocation of gender equality discourses “reinforces the material chain of production and social reproduction.”¹¹ (Farris, 2017, p. 13)

¹¹ Farris’ main argument is that there is a political-economic agenda informing this Islamophobic invocation of women’s rights (Farris, 2017, p 13). According to Farris, stigmatizing (Muslim) migrant women as oppressed by their communities and then urging them to emancipate themselves by becoming part of “neoliberal workfare devices” serves the purpose of upholding the socially reproductive sphere (Farris, 2017, p. 15). Through her analysis of neoliberal workfare initiatives in several Western European countries, Farris found that civic integration programs for non-Western migrant women have systematically been directed toward precarious and feminized job types, like housekeeping, cleaning, or caregiving (Farris, 2017, p. 15). Farris’ *femonationalism* thus also describes the contradiction present “when feminists and femocrats urge emancipation for Muslim and non-western migrant women while channeling them toward the very sphere (domestic, low-paying, and

For the scope and interest of my thesis, what is crucial about Farris's work is not her economic argument, but her observation that there is an alliance of right-wing actors, certain femocrats, and feminists who hold similar and sometimes even identical anti-Muslim positions, thus portraying patriarchy and sexism "as the almost exclusive domains of the Muslim Other." (Farris, 2017, p. 2) A potent example of this phenomenon from the Austrian context is ÖVP-politician Susanne Raab, who is the current Minister for Integration (since 2020) and Minister for Women, Family and Youth (since 2021). Susanne Raab frequently invokes women's rights discourses and anti-Muslim tropes in the same breath. Many examples could be outlined here, but to provide just one, in September 2021, Raab announced that she was committed to "consequently fighting patriarchal structures"—not without immediately specifying, however, that she sees these patriarchal structures present within migrant communities (*Integrationsministerin Raab*, 2021). According to Raab, "equal rights and equality for women and girls are hard-won goods in Austria. We must not back down a millimeter here." (*Integrationsministerin Raab*, 2021) Raab's framing "of not backing down" implies that the goal of gender equality has been reached in Austria, and that it is new residents from the Global South who are pushing Austria back into a dark long-overcome past.

To summarize, this section briefly outlined the history of colonial feminisms and gendered Islamophobia. This section thus contextualized contemporary gendered anti-Muslim discourses in colonial continuities. The chapter thus shed light on the feminist discourses in which the alliance-building processes of the Frauen*Volksbegehren took place.

This leads to the question: How is a big feminist movement like the Frauen*Volksbegehren navigating this political context of anti-Muslim racism increasingly voiced "in the name of women's rights" (Farris, 2017)? How does it shape the Frauen*Volksbegehren's strategic alliance building processes? As will be argued in the analysis chapters of this thesis, chapters V and VI, strategic processes of racialization played a key role here. By presenting my findings, I will argue that in the dynamic of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's alliance building processes with other feminist actors, Muslim identities were racialized and enacted strategically. Before I introduce my findings, the following two chapters are dedicated to introducing my theoretical approach and providing context as to why I chose to work with theories conceptualizing racism

precarious jobs) from which the feminist movement had historically tried to liberate women." (Farris, 2017, p. 15)

as *processes of racialization* (chapter III) and introducing my methods and reflecting on my positionality (chapter IV).

CHAPTER III

Theoretical Approaches: Is Islamophobia Racism?

As established in the last pages, in Austria and other Western European nations, public discourses are strongly characterized by rejection and resentment against Islam and Muslims (e.g., Bangstad, 2015; Eskandari & Banfi, 2017; Horsti, 2017). Anti-Muslim narratives and stereotypes homogenize and essentialize Muslims, who are in fact a highly heterogeneous group. Because of their diversity, the discrimination they face cannot be attributed to a singular category such as race, nationality, ethnicity, or skin color (Cheng, 2015, p. 563). This poses analytical challenges for the study of anti-Muslim discrimination. In recent years different terms and concepts have thus been applied to the study of anti-Muslim sentiments; including but not limited to *Islamophobia*, *Muslimophobia* (Cheng, 2015), *cultural racism* (Meer & Modood, 2012), or *neo-racism* (Bangstad, 2015). A particularly contentious debate revolves around the question whether Islamophobia qualifies as racism at all. Some scholars, among them ethnologist Susanne Schröter, oppose religious affiliation to *race* by claiming that *confession*—unlike *race*—is a free choice. Schröter, who is founder and director of the Frankfurt Research Center for Global Islam, therefore argues that Islamophobia cannot be considered racism (e.g., Schröter, 2019). However, other scholars, such as the racism researcher Jennifer E. Cheng, point out that one can neither choose to be born into a Muslim family nor to grow up in a society in which one's phenotypical characteristics are seen as Muslim characteristics (Cheng, 2015, p. 563). Further, the idea that being Muslim was a choice and that experiencing Islamophobia should thus not be considered racism, implies that it is Muslims who have power and agency over the discrimination they are facing, rather than the perpetrators who inflict it. Cheng makes the point that being forced to change one's own cultural or religious expression or to be expected to recognize it as *backwards* in order to *not* be exposed to racist discrimination already describes a highly discriminatory situation (Cheng, 2015, p. 569). Above all, Cheng argues that the claim that Muslims could escape discrimination (by changing their religious affiliation) while people who were *really* affected by racism could never escape discrimination, fails to recognize the complex connections between essentialist

and racist attributions, religious identity, and power dynamics that are at work when Muslims are discriminated against (Cheng, 2015, p. 564).

Based on her research Cheng proposes an analytical distinction between *Islamophobia* and *Muslimophobia*. Although both phenomena often go hand in hand, through her study on anti-Muslim political rhetoric in Switzerland, Cheng found that it is often not Islam and the global Islamic faith community, that are framed as the problem, but instead specifically Muslims in Europe or Switzerland who are perceived as a threat to the prevailing societal order (Cheng, 2015 p. 582), or as Hafez highlights, as a security threat to the respective nation state (Hafez, 2017, p. 402). This means that political measures such as minaret-bans or dressing regulations banning certain veiling practices are not the result of theological conflicts. Rather, they are expressions of social problems in a secular system. Cheng therefore introduces *Muslimophobia*, arguing that it is the more appropriate term to describe and analyze the stereotypes and discrimination against Western European Muslims (Cheng, 2015, p. 565). Cheng further emphasizes that it is impossible to be racist towards a religion as such and argues accordingly that the term *Muslimophobia* is more appropriate to accurately capture the pejorative discourses in which lifestyles and behaviors, which differ from those of the dominant society, are essentialized, naturalized, and racialized (Cheng, 2015, p. 567). Cheng concludes that *Muslimophobic* rhetoric in public discourse does not necessarily have to be accompanied by negative statements about Islam, that is *Islamophobia*. Yet, *Islamophobia*, is always accompanied by a racist devaluation of Muslims, that is *Muslimophobia*.

Unlike Cheng, scholars Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood exclusively work with the term *Islamophobia*, arguing however, that it is racism. According to the authors, “what is critical to the racialisation [*sic*] of a group is not the invocation of a biology,” although this was the case in 19th and 20th century Europe (Meer & Modood, 2012, p.39). Instead, crucial to racialization is the invocation of “a radical ‘otherness’ and the perception and treatment of individuals in terms of physical appearance and descent.” (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 39) The implication here is that racial differences are not static. Rather, it is argued that religious minorities in Europe “can undergo *processes of racialization* [emphasis added], where the ‘otherness’ or ‘groupness’ that is appealed to is connected to a cultural and racial otherness, which relates to European peoples’ historical and contemporary perceptions of those people that they perceive to be non-European.” (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 39) Biological racism claims physical

differences between groups of people as a basis for exclusion. In contrast, *cultural racism*, according to Meer and Modood, adds another layer of discourse evoking *cultural* differences from a supposed “‘civilised’ [sic] norm” in order to marginalize, vilify, or force into assimilation the same people that are also targeted by biological racism (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 39).

This phenomenon, described by Meer and Modood as *cultural racism*, is captured by anthropologist Sindre Bangstad with the term *neo-racism* (Bangstad, 2015). In his 2015 historical discourse analysis aptly titled *The Racism that Dares not Speak its Name*, Bangstad examines the meaning of racism in Norwegian public discourse from the late 1980s to 2014. His analysis shows that, in contrast to traditional racism, *neo-racism*, which is primarily directed against Muslims and Islam, largely operates without a biological concept of race. Bangstad argues that many Norwegian right-wing populists and intellectuals have strategically adopted a “narrow biologicistic definition of racism.” This enables them to define Muslims as *culturally* or *ethnically inferior* without being accused of—biological—racism (Bangstad, 2015, p. 51). Right-wing populists thus strategically rely on the abovementioned claim that *because Islam is a religion not a race* Muslims could not be victims of racism, at least not due to their Muslimness. Like Meer and Modood, Bangstad also counters this claim by highlighting that it falsely “pre-supposes that ‘race’ is ontologically ‘real’ rather than a mere artefact of socially constructed imaginaries” (Bangstad, 2015, p. 53). In accordance with Cheng (Cheng, 2015, p. 567), Bangstad argues that not every expression of Islamophobia qualifies as racist. Nevertheless, his analysis shows that Islamophobic rhetoric in Norwegian public discourse *is* indeed often racist (Bangstad, 2015, p. 53). What makes certain expressions of Islamophobia racist, according to Bangstad, is the “hierarchical inferiorization of Muslims by means of the overdetermination of the signifier ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ and the essentialization of their inter-linkages.” (Bangstad, 2015, p. 62)

In summary, this section introduced different terms and concepts with which anthropologists and other social scientists are approaching the study of contemporary anti-Muslim sentiments in Western Europe. Most authors introduced in this section argue that many contemporary expressions of Islamophobia in Western Europe are best understood as racism. There are several reasons I agree with this assessment. First, the introduced analyses show that, akin to traditional racist narratives, anti-Muslim narratives essentialize and pejoratively homogenize a diverse group of people. Further, while biologicistic racism approaches difference through a

deterministic naturalism, anti-Muslim narratives too often naturalize difference. As Meer and Modood put it, “a non-religious Muslim might still be targeted as a cultural Muslim or Muslim by community, which means Muslim by background, which means birth and ancestry.” (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 40) This shows that culturalism, “where it is associated with distinct communities,” cannot neatly be distinguished from other expressions of racism (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 40). Bayraklı and Hafez point out that Islamophobia has been defined in a variety of ways, depending on the theoretical approaches of the researchers in question, spanning from racism studies to prejudice studies, or post- and decolonial perspectives. Although their research spans these theoretical approaches, they too work with a definition of Islamophobia which conceptualizes it as anti-Muslim racism (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2020, p. 8). In agreement with the authors who theorize Islamophobia as racism as well as taking into consideration Cheng’s proposal to distinguish between anti-*Islamic* sentiments and anti-*Muslim* sentiments, I choose to work with the term *anti-Muslim racism* in my analysis. In doing so, I contextualize my research in studies on racialization and racism. The term anti-Muslim racism draws attention to the fact that anti-Muslim discrimination also affects racialized people who do not identify as Muslims in a religious or confessional sense. This makes the term particularly useful for the analysis of *processes* and *practices of racialization*, and thus for this research project.

In addition, by using the term anti-Muslim racism, I locate myself in my Austrian research context, where activists and intellectuals in the field favor the term anti-Muslim racism (*antimuslimischer Rassismus*) over *Islamophobia* for several reasons, including strategic ones. First, Austrian anti-discrimination-law currently only covers *either* religion-based discrimination *or* discrimination based on ethnicity. Thus, anti-racist activists are fighting for a legal recognition of *anti-Muslim racism* as such. Second, in a societal context where there is more social consensus that racism is bad than there is that Islamophobia is bad, the term anti-Muslim racism aims at calling out and stigmatizing anti-Muslim discrimination by addressing it as racism.

The preceding section established that many contemporary expressions of Islamophobia are best understood as racism. The following section discusses recent developments in racism studies, as well as ontological challenges and approaches to analytically grasping anti-Muslim racism.

Theoretical Lens: From Race to Racialization

In recent years studies on racism have increasingly focused their analyses on *processes of racialization*. This shift is embedded in an ontological and epistemological turn across many disciplines, which a growing number of scholars engage in. The analytical focus is thereby shifting from the study of fixed subjects or objects and the question of how they relate to each other within a given context, to the study of how actors co-constitute each other continuously (Giraud, 2019, p. 5). This ontological shift is based on the understanding that—as cultural theorist Eva Haifa Giraud puts it—*some things are just impossible to disentangle* (Giraud, 2019, p. 1). It has thus become common to argue that humans are not best understood as autonomous beings who stand and act in opposition to the essentialized natural world. Instead, the human is increasingly understood as “realized by and through its relations with other entities” (Giraud, 2019, p. 1). Translated into a research practice, this means that the research focus shifts; away from a supposedly graspable *subject* with somewhat clear boundaries which interacts with its surrounding context, to the *relations* between a multitude of actors who constantly *co-constitute* each other, or as Giraud puts it, who are “impossible to disentangle.” (Giraud, 2019, p. 1) Accordingly, philosopher Jasbir Puar describes an *affective turn* in more recent scholarship. In her groundbreaking book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) Puar reflects on the limits of intersectional approaches for the study of social hierarchies. She writes:

No matter how intersectional our models of subjectivity, no matter how attuned to locational politics of space, place, and scale, these formulations (...) may still limit us if they presume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation (Puar 2007, p. 206).

Deploying the Deleuzian notion of *assemblage*, Puar formulates a theoretical approach that centers *affect* rather than *subjecthood* (Puar 2007, p. 206). Scholars Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela describe that while intersectionality employs the subject as the primary frame of analysis and is concerned with the multiplicity of subject identity, Puar’s assemblage is characterized by openness to the indeterminate and unknown (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2016, p. 26). In opposition to the fixity of identities and categories of the intersectionality approach, assemblage is interested in “the messiness and contingency of forces of practices.” (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2016, p. 27) The authors summarize, that “instead of analyzing

difference in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion or even the category 'human,' the focus is on temporality, corporeality, and affect." (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2016, p. 27) Thus, instead of assuming a fixity of identity categories and asking how these recognized identity categories operate in different contexts, assemblage focuses on the *processes* and *practices* creating hierarchies and inequalities. Although approaches which emphasize relationality and processuality have evolved in different disciplinary contexts and shall not be homogenized, Giraud still highlights that there are strong tendencies which are shared by these approaches (Giraud, 2019, p. 6).

Embedded in this broader epistemological and ontological shift, race is less and less approached as a stable entity to be analyzed. Accordingly, anthropologist Amade M'charek argues that "race is not a singular object 'out there' in nature." Instead, it is a "relational entity enacted 'in here.'" (M'charek, 2013, p. 421). M'charek argues that race does not materialize "in the body, but rather in relations established between a variety of entities, including bodies." (M'charek, 2013, p. 434) *Processes of racialization* are thus increasingly becoming the focus of research, as the aim is to analyze and describe how "signifiers such as language, religion, clothing, etc. *acquire* [emphasis added] racial meanings" in relation to and in intra-action with phenotypic characteristics and other surrounding actors (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 648). This ontological and epistemological shift is particularly relevant to the study of Muslims as a racialized group, which is aptly illustrated in an article by scholars Saher Selod and David G. Embrick (2013). In their article *Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship* the authors argue in favor of using *racialization* as a theoretical tool for the study of Muslims, as it provides a particularly useful analytical language to discuss the Muslim American experience or *Othered* Muslim experience as a *racial* experience (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 644). The analytical language provided by racialization theories, according to Selod and Embrick, allows researchers to explain how groups of people can "acquire racial meaning" once they migrate to the United States, or—let me add—Europe (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 645). Further, theoretical approaches centering racialization allow the analysis of how economic, political, and other social contextual shifts can contribute to racial meanings *changing over time* (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 645).

Racialization as a theoretical approach has been criticized for becoming too broad and potentially including differences, which are "not inherently racial," such as language, religion,

or class positionality (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 647). Selod and Embrick counter this criticism, by arguing that it aligns with “biological definitions of race,” thus ignoring the complexity and nuances of race and processes of racialization (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 648). According to the authors, one of the core strengths of racialization theorists is their ability to bridge the gap between scholarship on race and scholarship on immigration:

Because race is a fluid concept and not static, it is imperative to understand that racism does not only inflict one group but also uniquely impacts racial and ethnic groups. Those who employ racialization are able to provide a space where race theory can move beyond a Black/White paradigm in order to discuss new racial meanings and new racisms experienced in new political, cultural, and economic contexts. (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 648)

Incontestably, “a Muslim identity contributes to the exclusion from whiteness” (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 649), both in the U.S. and in Western Europe. Nonetheless, locating the Muslim experience within existing racial paradigms has been difficult. As several scholars have pointed out, Muslims are a heterogeneous group, economically, ethnically, and in terms of racial identity categories like Black and *white* also “racially” (Cheng, 2015, p. 563; Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 649). In this context, Selod and Embrick highlight the potency of racialization theories for the study of Muslim’s racial positionalities in Western contexts: “Rather than abandon efforts to situate the Muslim experiences within a racial framework,” they argue that race scholars should apply new paradigms which reflect more accurately the fluidity of race and racism (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 649).

How do these approaches translate into my research project? Processes of racialization and Muslim identities are at the center of my analysis. Based on the literature introduced above, Muslim identities are not monoliths set in stone; rather they are situational and relational, and they form based on equally fluid sets of differences, which are constantly renegotiated and enacted in relational practices (M’charek, 2013; Selod & Embrick, 2013). With the term *identity* I refer to both, the social positionality as well as the personal identification. Both are situational, contextual, and relational, as is their relation to each other. Anthropologist M’charek describes that “differences are not given ,entities’ out there (...) rather,” she argues, “they are effects that come about in relational practices.” (M’charek, 2010, p. 309). Building

on this approach, my research examines *practices of racialization* in the dynamic of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's strategic alliance building with other feminist actors.

The next chapter (IV) is dedicated to discussing my methods and positionality. Following that, in chapters V and VI I will finally present my research findings. It will be argued that in the dynamic of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's strategic alliance building processes Muslim identities were racialized and differences were enacted strategically. This strategic enactment justified both at different times: the strategic *inclusion* as well as the strategic *exclusion* of Muslim feminists from the Frauen*Volksbegehren. This thesis thus describes how Muslim identities were "enacted" (M'charek, 2010, p. 313) and how certain characteristics "acquire[d] racial meaning" (Selod & Embrick, 2013, p. 649) in the dynamic of the strategic alliance building processes of the Frauen*Volksbegehren with other feminist actors.

CHAPTER IV

Methodological Approaches

Within anthropology classical fieldwork and participant observation are often framed as the most distinguishing strengths of the discipline. Anthropologist Laura Nader argues, however, that using participant observation should *not* be a must when doing anthropological research; especially when it comes to research topics such as bureaucracy and policy. Nader argues that if anthropologists are researching institutions affecting many people's lives "in a complex way" they should take a "methodologically eclectic approach" (Nader, 1972, pp. 307–308). I thus approached this research project with different methods: I analyzed policy documents, conducted semi-structural interviews with key actors, investigated the Frauen*Volksbegehren's online self-presentation, attended events by and with my informants, and had many informal conversations with informants. Only a portion of the data I gathered during my research will be presented in the analysis chapter of this thesis. As part of my research process, I conducted a thorough examination of the petition's list of political claims, assessed its online presence on social media, read and analyzed numerous public interviews given by the petition's activists, read papers authored by them, as well as the official transcript of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's hearing in parliament. Although some of these data are not immediately pertinent to answering my research question, they have significantly enriched my understanding of the research field. As a result, they still form a

crucial cornerstone of my analysis. In what follows, I am going to detail the research methods chosen.

Critical Policy Analysis

I started my research by studying the Frauen*Volksbegehren's list of claims, selectively analyzing the initiative's online presentation (its website, Facebook and Instagram page) and some of its early press releases. This enriched my understanding of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's preferred self-images and deepened my understanding of how the initiative has been positioning itself in public discourse. These analyses helped me discover "trends and what is thought of as problematic by the actors" (Nader, 1972, p. 308). Anthropologists have shown that, policy is never ideologically and politically neutral, instead, it is a cultural phenomenon which needs to be analyzed and theorized accordingly (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 6). According to Wedel et al. anthropological approaches to policy aim at "de-masking the framing of public policy questions" thus uncovering "the constellations of actors, activities, influences that shape policy decisions, their implementation, and their results." (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 30) While analyzing, I looked for recurring keywords and questioned their connotations and meanings in the political context in which the Frauen*Volksbegehren operates and positions itself in. In doing so I not only focused on issues that were being discussed directly (for example, veiling), but also questioned which issues were not mentioned at all (for example the precarious working conditions that many women of color and migrant women face). Shore and Wright urge anthropologists who study policy to ask, "How are normative claims used to present a particular way of defining a problem and its solutions, as if these were the only ones possible, while enforcing closure or silence on other ways of thinking or talking?" (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 3) Similarly, feminist policy researchers have demonstrated that biases are often reproduced within supposedly neutral policy texts: By not explicitly addressing existing inequalities, these inequalities are not specifically accounted for and thus often reproduced (McPhail, 2003, p. 42; Paterson & Scala, 2015). As part of my research process, I thus critically analyzed the Frauen*Volksbegehren's nine claims (each of which has three to five sub-claims) by asking questions with which I aimed at uncovering normative assumptions implicitly shaping the policy text. These questions¹² served as

¹² Questions that guided my analysis are: Which kinds of actors does the petition's list of policy claims implicitly address and imagine? Who is not being addressed and why? Is multiple/intersectional discrimination addressed

analytical tools shedding light on normative assumptions about society, gender relations, and gender-based discrimination which were implied by the claims. Additionally, they helped me understand who the Frauen*Volksbegehren included and who it excluded in their assumptions and frames. My conclusions drawn from this policy analysis strongly informed my interviews, in which I confronted the activists with gaps, contradictions, and normative assumptions I had identified.

Interviews with Frauen*Volksbegehren Activists

After my initial policy analyses, I conducted six recorded interviews, all of which were close to two hours long. Four interviews were with activists from the Frauen*Volksbegehren, two with key Muslim feminist activists. The Frauen*Volksbegehren-interviews are comprised of interviews with two spokespeople, one of which had been casted for the role of the spokeswoman because of what was described as her “migration foreground” (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020). The third interview was with one of the initiators, who was also the project coordinator and unofficial spokeswoman. I also interviewed a legal expert, who was part of the content-related drafting of the claims. Worried that her workplace might react negatively to her feminist activism, she was the only one who asked to remain anonymous in this thesis. All of my other informants who agreed to recorded interviews, gave me written permission to use their full names. I still decided to anonymize their names in this thesis, in part because some of them have moved on to entirely different professions and projects since the time of our interviews.

My interviews were semi-structured, which means that I had prepared an interview guideline in advance, but departed from it, whenever I wanted to gain deeper insight into a specific topic that was raised by my informants. The questions I asked the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s activists can be clustered in three categories. The first cluster deals with their understanding of and their relation to the Frauen*Volksbegehren: when and why they joined, the political context at the time, and how they think about the petition’s impact. This set of questions helped me gain a general understanding of how the involved actors understand their feminist activism and how they position themselves in the feminist activist landscape. In the second

and if so—how? Which ideas of a good society are implicated in the petition’s claims? What political measures does the petition propose for society to move towards this ideal? Which relation between cause (the political measure the petition proposes) and effect (social change) is implicitly assumed by the claims?

phase of the interview, I confronted my interview partners with contradictions I had identified either during our interview or prior. In the third phase, I let the conversation evolve into a dialogue, by sharing my thoughts and considerations about their arguments with them and opening my interpretation up for debate. This enticed my interview partners to interrogate their own memories from the specific angles I was interested in for my research project.

There are several reasons why I chose these interview techniques. First, I had to find a way to methodically address not only what was *there* in the relationship between these actors, but also what was potentially *lacking*: lacking cooperation, lacking representation, a lack of press releases regarding anti-Muslim racism, and so forth. Methodically this poses a challenge, which I tackled with the interview techniques described above. To gain understanding as to what was most important to my informants, I first asked open questions. To motivate them to discuss and reflect on the abovementioned *lacks*, I then invited them to reflect on contradictions I had identified. Apart from the methodic benefits of this approach, there is also an ethical one: It made my research transparent and gave my feminist informants an opportunity to raise concerns about my interpretations.

Interviews with Muslim Feminist Activists

I conducted recorded interviews with two Muslim feminist activists. My first interview partner is D., who is one of the founders of the *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism* (Dokustelle Islamfeindlichkeit & antimuslimischer Rassismus). Since 2014 this NGO has been documenting cases of anti-Muslim racism in Austria and publishing an annual anti-Muslim racism report. Further, the organization offers workshops and counselling for people who are affected by anti-Muslim discrimination and is networking with similar organization on a national and EU-level. My second interview partner is N., who has been a public figure in the Austrian medial and political discourse for over twenty years.¹³ In 1999 she co-founded the *Initiative Muslimischer ÖsterreicherInnen* (Initiative Muslim Austrians). This NGO has been working on facilitating Muslim citizens' social participation through media work, as well as through organizing and participating in countless events. Together with a second woman, N. later became one of the two first women in the Superior Council (*Oberster Rat*) of the *Islamic*

¹³ Due to the Covid-19 social distancing measures my interview with N. had to be conducted via videocall. Despite some technical difficulties in the beginning, I did not get the impression that our conversation was negatively affected, as N. is an experienced interviewee.

Faith Community in Austria. At the time of our interview (March 2020), she is no longer part of the Superior Council, but still carries responsibilities in the Faith Community as the head of the education authority. As of the time of our interview she is still an active member of the Initiative Muslim Austrians and chairwoman of the *Forum Muslimische Frauen Österreich* (Forum Muslim Women Austria), which was founded in 2005.

The interviews with the two Muslim feminist activists were structured similarly to my interviews with the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists. In the first section I asked open questions about how and why my interview partners had chosen to become politically active. I also asked whether they had been in other (feminist) organizations prior and why they saw a need to create their own initiatives and activist spaces. This helped me understand how they perceive the dynamic of failed close alliances and exclusion mechanisms, which are deterring them from actively participating in other feminist organizations.

Most likely due to the hostile political context Muslim feminists find themselves in, I had difficulty finding Muslim feminist activists who agreed to recorded interviews. Yet, during my research, I attended several Muslim feminist activists' events, and had many informal conversations. Further, as will be discussed in the next section, I have since the beginning of my research built close relationships with several Muslim feminist activists and become involved in projects and struggles. The next section is thus dedicated to reflecting my role and social positionality.

Social Positionality: Being a Fellow Activist

I have not entered my research field as a blank sheet to my informants but was instead received as a fellow activist who is invested in intersectional feminist and anti-racist issues. Since 2019 I have been using memes¹⁴ as a tool for political commentary, criticizing Austrian interior politics from an intersectional feminist, anti-authoritarian, and anti-racist perspective (for more information see Neghabat, 2021). Most of my informants knew my political memes. Given that my interview partners were activists who were generally interested in connecting with other politically active people, I believe that this generally worked to my advantage.

¹⁴ Memes are (satirical) images that circulate on social media. During my research phase many Austrian activists, among them most of the activists I interviewed for this thesis, knew, and followed my Instagram meme page (@ibiza_austrian_memes), which used to have about 25.000 followers (as of end of June 2020).

In 2020 when I first approached my informants, I was not affiliated with any organization and not yet part of formal or informal feminist networks. However, since then, I have built close relationships with several Muslim feminist activists and have come to be actively involved in some of their projects, initiatives, as well as political struggles. My involvement in struggles has perhaps reached its peak in 2021, when the ÖVP general secretary at the time accused me, together with several Muslim feminist activists, of *political Islam*.

In November 2021 I was part of a then newly founded art festival which included artworks from Muslims and non-religious people who experience anti-Muslim racism.¹⁵ A selection of my political memes was displayed as part of the exhibition. The festival intentionally took place around the one-year anniversary of *Operation Luxor* (November 2020), with some of the artworks explicitly dealing with and criticizing the raid.¹⁶ A few weeks after the festival two ÖVP local councilors, one of them also ÖVP general secretary at the time, submitted a written inquiry to the local council (which had funded the festival) in which they made serious accusations against the festival and against us participating artists (Stadt Wien, 2022). Their inquiry accuses¹⁷ us of having a close relationship to “political Islam,” of “adapting narratives of political Islam,” and of “left-wing extremist propensity to violence” (Stadt Wien, 2022). As Asma Aiad, Marina Gržinić, and I thoroughly discuss in a recent paper, the arguments these accusations are built on, are highly problematic and can only be explained as politically motivated (Aiad et al., 2024). In response to these serious and unfounded accusations curator

¹⁵ The art festival was titled Muslim*Contemporary and was curated by conceptual artist Asma Aiad. I was approached by the curator a few months prior, marking the first time I was invited by a Muslim feminist activist to join one of their projects.

¹⁶ *Operation Luxor* was a large-scale police operation during which Austrian special police forces raided over sixty Muslim households, some of which were the homes of Muslim civil society leaders, anti-racist activists, and academics, including the home of political scientist and Islamophobia expert Farid Hafez. The Higher Court of Graz later ruled that the raid was illegal (Thalhammer, 2022).

¹⁷ In their inquiry the ÖVP politicians argued that by claiming that anti-Muslim racism exists, us involved artists were already adapting a “narrative of political Islam.” (Stadt Wien, 2022) Based on an equally questionable conclusion, the ÖVP inquiry further accuses the two politicians Mireille Ngosso (SPÖ) and Faika El-Nagashi (Green Party) of “left-wing extremist propensity to violence” (Stadt Wien, 2022). In a photo taken at the exhibition, depicting the team and supporters of the anti-racist *Black Voices* petition, both politicians are looking at the camera while raising their fist—a well-known Black power symbol, symbolizing the anti-racist struggles for the rights and equal treatment of Black people. The ÖVP inquiry, however, argues that: “According to a report by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on left-wing extremist symbolism, the clenched fist stands for ‘readiness to fight and use violence’” (Rampetzreiter, 2022).

Asma Aiad, local councilor Mireille Ngosso (SPÖ), and I formulated an open letter,¹⁸ in which we addressed, analyzed, and deconstructed the accusations (Aiad et al., 2022).

This event is highlighted to illustrate two important points: First, while I initially approached my informants as a stranger, I have since then become involved in Muslim feminist activists' political struggles. Although I could only conduct two recorded interviews with Muslim feminist activists, I had numerous informal conversations. Further I gained insight into both the networks and some of the struggles through my own involvement in them. Second, the anecdote illustrates how in Austria the sheer fact that Muslims and people who are perceived as Muslims network and organize is considered suspicious by politicians, who will proceed to criticize or even criminalize these networks. This explains the hesitancy of many of my Muslim feminist informants to agree to recorded interviews. It is also why strong alliances are of great importance for Muslim feminist activists.

Social Positionality: Being Iranian

Since this research project deals with racialization, it is important to note that my social position regarding *race* and anti-Muslim racism is ambiguous. As a light-skin half-Iranian woman who was raised in Austria, I do encounter instances of racism and racialization on a regular basis, but I also get to navigate many environments and situations as *white*. As will be thoroughly argued in the empirical chapter, *race* is not a static property we possess, rather it is a “relational entity enacted” in practices of racialization (M'charek, 2013, p. 421). Further, being Iranian often entails having an ambiguous position in leftist and *white* feminist spaces. Many people in the Iranian diaspora—especially those who have access to higher education—are atheist and some of them are opposed to Islam (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). This can be traced back to the fact that the Iranian diaspora in Western countries currently largely consists of people who left due to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that resulted in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Anthropologist Shahram Khosravi has argued for a Swedish context, that there thus is a widespread belief that Iranians are secular, leading to them often being seen by the dominant society as “good migrants” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). From my experience, people in leftist spaces in Austria are often aware of this political context, and thus often sympathize strongly

¹⁸ At the time of its initial publication the letter was already signed by over sixty well-established artists and academics, including for instance the Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Johann F. Hartle. The letter received considerable media attention, with the media coverage in our favor (Rampetzreiter, 2022).

with Iranians, especially with Iranian women in the diaspora. As I will show when I present my findings, there is a risk of tokenization that comes with this sympathy, where Iranians who do not identify as Muslims or who even hold Islamophobic standpoints are often included on panels or in projects as the “good migrant” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75), or—as I will argue when I present my findings—even as the *good Muslim*. For now, the crucial point is: During my research, my Iranian identity meant I got to enact both at different times, a certain Muslim-ness and a certain non-Muslim-ness.

CHAPTER V

Introduction

The following two chapters are dedicated to presenting my findings and argument. In doing so I will contrast two events, in which—I will argue—Muslim identities were strategically enacted in the dynamic of the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s alliance building processes with other feminist actors. Case one, presented in chapter V, describes how the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s initial team strategically enacted Muslim identities justifying the *exclusion* of Muslim feminist activists. Case two, presented in chapter VI, shows how the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s team enacted an activist’s Muslim identity to justify *including* her in the core team. I will argue that these enactments of differences were strategic insofar, as they allowed the Frauen*Volksbegehren to form crucial alliances with anti-Muslim feminist actors while maintaining an image of *diversity*, allowing them to also build strategic alliances with anti-racist feminist actors.

In describing both cases I will trace how Muslim identities were enacted and racialized strategically in the dynamic of the alliances between the Frauen*Volksbegehren, Muslim feminist activists, and other feminist actors.

Case I: Strategically Enacting Muslim Identities Justifying Exclusion

As established earlier, the success of a petition is measured by the number of its supporters. To gain support from as many Austrian citizens as possible, the Frauen*Volksbegehren strategically built alliances with well-established women’s rights organizations, feminist groups, and related NGOs and collectives throughout the country. During my interviews, my

Frauen*Volksbegehren interview partners proudly highlighted how this strategic alliance building is what made their petition a collective, bottom-up movement.

One strategy to involve other activist groups in the Frauen*Volksbegehren's decision-making processes was the bottom-up development of the policy claims which would eventually become the petition's text. To gather other activists' input, the Frauen*Volksbegehren drafted a short questionnaire which consisted of several open questions, asking which issues the recipients wished to see represented in the petition's text. In April 2017 (at an early stage of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's formation) this questionnaire was sent to almost 140 initiatives across Austria. The work of the organizations that were contacted spans many fields and addresses a variety of political struggles. Among the recipients were feminist magazines, festivals, and artists, feminist bookstores, and research groups, but also advice and therapy centers for women, girls, and queer people, as well as organizations supporting sex workers, and even subgroups of political parties, namely the women's groups of the Austrian Social Democratic and Green party. Although the Frauen*Volksbegehren reached out to many different organizations and individuals throughout Austria Muslim feminist activists and their respective organizations were not among those contacted and were thus excluded from this early decision-making process.

During one of our conversations, Frauen*Volksbegehren activists S. confirms that Muslim feminist activists were not forgotten but excluded on purpose. S. is one of the petition's initiators, project leader and chairwoman of the association (*Verein*) Frauen*Volksbegehren. She has also acted as spokeswoman and has been an important face of the petition since its initiation. According to S., the questionnaire was deliberately not sent to Muslim feminist activists, because the early Frauen*Volksbegehren team had decided to exclude *all religious organizations* during the initial alliance-building phases. This decision, according to S., was based on the team's shared assumption that *religious* actors were going to oppose core feminist claims.¹⁹ Based on this assumption, alliance-building with *religious actors* was postponed until after the petition had decided which political issues it was going to address. The Frauen*Volksbegehren's alliance-building process thus mobilized a binary between allegedly religious and allegedly non-religious organizations.

¹⁹ An example that was given was improving access to abortions; an issue that the Catholic Women's Movement traditionally has a rejecting position towards (see for example Katholische Frauenbewegung Österreichs, 2021).

This justificatory narrative about why Muslim feminist activists were excluded is based on two interconnected claims. The first claim is that Muslim feminist activists were excluded just like *all other religious organizations*. The second, more implicit claim is that Muslim feminist activists' organizations *are* "religious organizations." Here, a connection is made between the Muslim identity of Muslim activists and the alleged religiosity of their organizations.

At closer examination, neither the first nor the second justificatory claim hold true: While politically outspoken Muslim organizations such as the *Islamic Faith Community* or the *Muslim Youth Austria* (MJÖ)²⁰ were excluded (allegedly because they are religious organizations), the same treatment was not extended to non-Muslim religious organizations. For instance, the Catholic Women's Movement (*Katholische Frauenbewegung*), an explicitly religious organization which is incorporated into the Catholic Church, *did*, in fact, receive the Frauen*Volksbegehren's questionnaire. On the other hand, organizations led by Muslim feminist activists which are not explicitly religious were excluded. An example would be the anti-racist *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism*, an organization not concerned with religion, but with racism and discrimination. The NGO's work actively acknowledges that many non-religious racialized people are affected by anti-Muslim racism, and it includes Muslims and non-Muslims in its organizational structure. This leads to the question: How do Muslim feminists' organizations become marked as *religious*?

Differences and similarities are fluid, situational, and relational. Race, according to anthropologist Amade M'charek, "is not a singular object 'out there' in nature, but a relational entity enacted 'in here.'" (M'charek, 2013, p. 421). Similarly, one of the leading questions, with which feminist researcher Linda Martín Alcoff "seeks to uncover some of the mechanisms by which [social identities] are identified, enacted, and reproduced," is: "how are racial and gendered identities operating here, now?" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 9). Following both researchers' cues, this leads me to ask: How are Muslim identities *enacted* in the justificatory narratives

²⁰ The *Muslim Youth Austria* is the youth organization of the *Islamic Faith Community* in Austria. It was founded in 1996, has approximately 30.000 members across Austria, and is supported by the Federal Ministry for Women, Family, Youth and Integration (*Muslimische Jugend*, 2016; *Muslimische Jugend Österreich*, n.d.). The organization offers workshops, youth camps, and get-togethers, but also reacts to political events through press releases and press conferences. Each year the organization's events are embedded in a larger project, for example *Muslims Against Antisemitism* (Europäisches Parlament, 2019), or the feminist project *empowHER* in 2020 (*Muslimische Jugend Österreich*, 2020).

about their exclusion? And how are Muslim identities *operating* in the narratives surrounding said exclusion?

In S.'s narrative, which tells the story of why Muslim feminists were excluded, certain differences are enacted while others are ignored. The Muslim identities of Muslim feminist activists are enacted solely as *religious* or *confessional* difference. This enactment of difference is extended to their NGOs, which are then no longer approached as feminist and anti-racist documentation and counselling centers, or as NGOs holding expertise on the intersection of anti-Muslim racism and sexism, but instead solely as "religious organizations."

The exclusion of organizations which were founded or are led by Muslim women who veil—religious *and* non-religious organizations alike²¹—is justified by the Frauen*Volksbegehren through its enactment of Muslim feminists as *religious actors*. This means that in justifying Muslim feminists' exclusion from the Frauen*Volksbegehren's early alliance-building and decision-making processes, their Muslim identities were enacted as religious or confessional identities.

Ultimately, while the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists had purposefully included a diverse spectrum of feminist actors in their early decision-making processes through the abovementioned questionnaire, they waited for several months until they finally also met with Muslim feminist activists. The Frauen*Volksbegehren activists met Muslim feminist activists long after the evaluation of the questionnaires, after having clustered the input, and selected a set of claims through a complex process involving many meetings and many different actors. They met Muslim feminists at a point where they had almost fully finished phrasing the claims which were to become the petition's final text. This get-together in which the Frauen*Volksbegehren finally sat across Muslim feminist activists to ask for their input, was not even initiated *by* the Frauen*Volksbegehren. Instead, the meeting was organized by former federal minister for women and civil service (2008-2016), Gabriele Heinisch-Hosek.²² As a supporter of the Frauen*Volksbegehren with good connections with several Muslim

²¹ Examples would be the abovementioned *Muslim Youth Austria*, the *Forum Muslim Women Austria*, or the *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism*.

²² Between December 2008 and May 2016 Gabriele Heinisch-Hosek was federal minister for women and civil service (SPÖ). She was and is a public supporter of the Frauen*Volksbegehren but was never team member.

feminist activists, she finally involved the latter by inviting them and the Frauen*Volksbegehren to her parliament office for a roundtable discussion.

Thinking back on this first encounter with the Frauen*Volksbegehren, almost²³ all the Muslim feminists I spoke with underlined their disappointment about how late they had been approached, and about thus having been excluded from crucial decision-making phases. D., for instance, says:

The Frauen*Volksbegehren is completely made by *white* women and then they meet [us] *once* to exchange ideas. Then you think to yourself: Why wasn't I included in the whole process? (...) Just the other day, a woman who is very active among [Muslim] feminists said that she felt that [the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists] were very *reserved*. And I think that's a pretty good word for it. (D., recorded interview, March 13, 2020)

How do we make sense of this reservation? I opened this chapter claiming that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's exclusion of Muslim feminist activists served a strategic purpose for the petition. The following section is devoted to discussing this claim.

Western Feminist Reservations against Muslim Feminist Activists

The context in which the exclusion of Muslim feminist activists from a feminist petition serves a strategic purpose is one of stark anti-Muslim sentiments among many Austrian feminists. My interviews show that Muslim feminist activists in Austria often experience skepticism, exclusion, and disdain from other feminists.

D., who is one of my Muslim feminist informants, can recall numerous negative experiences she and her peers have had with majority *white* leftist and feminist organizations over the years. D. is one of the founding members and at the time of our interview also board member of the *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism*. The NGO documents cases of anti-Muslim racism and offers counselling to people who are affected.²⁴

²³ The only exception was N. who states that she also wished she had been approached earlier, during more profound decision-making processes, but who is still giving the Frauen*Volksbegehren the benefit of the doubt: She does not think Muslim feminist activists were excluded on purpose and that in big projects one can easily forget to include certain people (N., recorded interview, March 30, 2020).

²⁴ In addition to voluntary engagement, the activities of the documentation center in the year 2022 were facilitated by funding received from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection, as well as funding from the European Networks Against Racism (ENAR), and donations.

D.'s sociopolitical involvement began in her teens when she initiated and participated in projects on interreligious and intercultural discourse. In her twenties, due to personal experiences and the increase of anti-Muslim racism in public discourse, she became increasingly aware of structural racism and more interested in societal power relations. When D. could not find an organization specifically addressing the struggles she experienced, she co-founded the abovementioned *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism* in 2014. Her aim was to build a documentation center that would specifically address anti-Muslim racism and an organization that would empower specifically Muslim women. According to D., one of the organization's biggest strengths lies in it being led by women who belong to communities affected by anti-Muslim racism. When D. founded the organization, she wanted to create a space in which racialized Muslim women could talk about their experiences safely, without language barriers, without having to fear not being understood, and without facing racist discrimination by counselors.

During our interview D. describes that, since she founded the organization, it has frequently been met with hesitation or exclusion from majority *white* feminist organizations. These experiences range from unanswered e-mails, to not being included in lists of Viennese anti-racist NGOs, to not being allowed to use facilities for workshops and events. A drastic incident took place in 2017 at the Vienna Women's March. After Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016, Women's Marches were organized across the globe. In Vienna, my informant N.—who, as already briefly mentioned, is a very important feminist actor in the Muslim faith community and in the Viennese feminist landscape in general—was asked to give a speech at the Vienna Women's March. In our interview, D. describes how she and other Muslim women joined the March particularly looking forward to N.'s speech. Once they arrived, they were, however, gravely disappointed to find out that N.'s speech had been cancelled, and even more disappointed once they learned why: shortly before the event started, N. had been uninvited (D., recorded interview, March 13, 2020). While some of the *white* feminists who organized the march had invited her, other organizers were not willing to share a stage with a Muslim hijab-wearing woman. Their rejection was so strong that they decided to spontaneously uninvite N.. The incident triggered a major controversy in the Viennese feminist landscape and had significant consequences, such as a public panel discussion in which *white* feminists were challenged by Muslim feminists to face feminists of color in a discussion about whether their feminism was or *could even be* anti-racist. Even

though the Vienna Women's March took place three years prior to my interviews, several of my informants brought the incident up during our conversations, underscoring the gravity of the event. Although Muslim feminist activists in Austria do have *white* allies, the examples above illustrate the extent to which Muslim feminists are facing suspicion, hesitation, and outright exclusion when trying to build alliances with *white* feminists in Austria.

The Frauen*Volksbegehren justified its exclusion of Muslim feminist activists by claiming to generally be skeptical of religious feminists. However, ultimately, the Frauen*Volksbegehren team *did* include the Catholic Women's Movement *despite* its negative assumptions about religious actors. Based on this observation, it must be argued that the rejection of Muslim feminists in particular can only partly be attributed to skepticism against religious feminists in general.

According to anthropologist Laurel Zwissler feminists' rejection of religion can be dated back to second wave feminism (1960s and 1970s) when "leftist activists began to move away from Christianity and embrace Marxist understandings of religion as an oppressive tool of the bourgeoisie" (Zwissler, 2012, p. 357). Zwissler outlines that "following popular trajectories of secular humanism, many activists saw religion as colluding with other institutions – government, family, media – to maintain social hierarchy and the subjugation of women." (Zwissler, 2012, p. 357) Since then, Zwissler argues, there has been a continuation of a division between feminists who embrace spirituality as crucial to their feminism, and feminists who reject religion as inherently anti-feminist. According to Zwissler, "many of the current debates among progressive activists about the legitimacy of religion in political work stem from this split." (Zwissler, 2012, p. 357) While Zwissler's analysis provides an explanation as to why the Frauen*Volksbegehren decided to exclude *all religious organizations*, it does not offer an explanation as to why the Frauen*Volksbegehren *included* the Catholic Women's Movement, a religious organization, while simultaneously excluding Muslim feminist activists' secular NGOs.

Muslim feminist activist D. attributes the rejection she and her peers experience not only to anti-religious attitudes but specifically to Eurocentric narratives about the interconnectedness of secularism and modernity. She argues:

[They think:] the more modern you are, the more developed you are, and the less you are going to have to do with religion. Reintroducing religion to these [contexts] is seen

by many in this scene as a step backwards, even though this is not the case. (D., recorded interview, March 13, 2020)

As has been famously argued by postcolonial scholar Edward Said, the *Orient* discursively acts as a distorting mirror for the West (Said, 1978). In her quote above, D. addresses such *othering* narratives. As outlined earlier, the rejection my Muslim informants are facing from many *white* feminists is based on prejudices embedded in long genealogies of racism, colonialism, and Orientalism. In her 1984 text *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes second wave feminists' approach to Islam from a postcolonial perspective.²⁵ By using the term "western feminism" she uncovers second wave western feminists' assumption of "'the west' (...) as the primary referent in theory and praxis." (Mohanty, 1988, p. 63) Through her analysis Mohanty dissects colonial narratives, in which religion is diametrically opposed to modernity, while modernity is seen as the reason why *we* (i.e., Western societies) gradually evolve(d) toward more gender equality over time. Through this Eurocentric lens Muslims are seen "as temporally and spatially distant" (Samman, 2012, p. 108) from the Modern World and thus as fundamentally "indigestible to the modernist project" (Samman, 2012, p. 117). It thus must be argued that in a Western discursive the context, the anti-religious attitude of certain leftists and feminists (as described by Zwissler, 2012) is intertwined with colonial-racist narratives about the cultural *Other*.

Accordingly, in the case of the Frauen*Volksbegehren, general anti-religious attitudes are also expressed differently than the anti-Muslim attitudes. The Frauen*Volksbegehren activists' general anti-religious stance is reflected in their decision to exclude *all religious organizations* during early decision-making processes; a decision, based on the assumption that religious actors were always going to reject core progressive claims. Ultimately, however, the Frauen*Volksbegehren team *did* include the Catholic Women's Movement *despite* these negative assumptions about religious actors. At the same time, Muslim feminist activists remained *excluded*—even those who are active in non-religious, anti-racist NGOs (e.g., *Documentation Center Islamophobia & anti-Muslim racism*). In this example Muslims face particular skepticism, which I argue is due to the colonial-racist continuities outlined above.

²⁵ The version of Mohanty's text "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," I am citing was published in 1988, however, the text was first published in 1984.

Muslim Feminists as Dangerous Victims

In addition, my findings indicate that Muslim feminist activists not only experience particular rejection but are further met with intense suspicion by other feminists.

As established earlier, Islamophobic and Orientalist narratives paint Muslim men as aggressive and dangerous, while Muslim women are constructed as the counterpart: passive and victimized. While this description of anti-Muslim stereotypes is certainly accurate, my findings suggest that the prejudices *white* feminists hold against Muslim feminists are more complex and contradictory. Anthropologist Horsti has argued Muslims are “not only seen as a threat from the outside but increasingly as a threat originating from within Western societies, as ‘non-integrated Others’ and ‘homegrown’ terrorists.” (Horsti, 2017, p. 1443). This is echoed by my informant N. who describes feeling as though other feminists often perceive her as someone, who secretly holds fundamentalist views. Thinking back to the Vienna Women’s March incident, N. notes that facing hostility and suspicion to the point of being uninvited did not feel unfamiliar (N., recorded interview, March 30, 2020). N. proceeds to describe feeling as though, no matter how progressive she is in the “Muslim scene,” and no matter how many boundaries she keeps pushing with her progressive politics, other feminists will still often end up thinking, “she is Muslim, she veils, the veil is a symbol of oppression (...) yes, that’s this fundamentalist woman in disguise [*die verkappte Fundi-Frau*], whom we are definitely not going to invite to our progressive protest.” (C. A. N., recorded interview, March 30, 2020).

The label “fundamentalist woman in disguise” implies two threatening characteristics. First, it describes someone who is holding fundamentalist views and agendas. Second, it implies a masquerade and distraction. When N. says she feels stigmatized as the *fundamentalist in disguise*, she describes feeling labeled as a woman who *abuses feminism to hide her supposed true agenda* of spreading fundamentalist and extreme religious and/or political views. Evidently, the label “fundamentalist woman in disguise” does not describe a passive, and shy victim in need of liberation. Instead, it describes an active, and dangerous perpetrator who needs to be watched closely and, if necessary, stopped.

N. directly relates being perceived as a dangerous imposter to negative interpretations of her hijab: “[they think] she is Muslim, she veils, the veil is a symbol of oppression” (C. A. N., recorded interview, March 30, 2020). She believes that her veiling *while* being an outspoken feminist (instead of a shy victim) is what leads other feminists to think of her as hiding a

dangerous religious and political agenda behind her feminist activism. This interpretation is supported by feminist scholar Meyda Yeğenoğlu's 1998 book *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Yeğenoğlu argues that in colonial narratives and for the colonial gaze the veil represents "the Orient's/woman's mask; (...) an exterior surface which is assumed to conceal the site of inferiority," or in other words "the true self of the Islamic culture, (...) its quintessential and unchanging essence." (Yeğenoğlu, 1998/2009, p. 101). In 2017, almost twenty years after Yeğenoğlu first published her book, scholars Vista Eskandari and Elisa Banfi identify the same essential tropes about Muslim women in their study on burqa bans in Switzerland. They write, "Oriental women, secluded behind their veils, are essentialised [*sic*], and the grim picture of the orient is assumed to be inscribed onto them." (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017, p. 58) I argue that it is no surprise then, that outspoken, feminist women, who choose to veil are met with fear and disdain—not only is their veil itself already perceived to be threatening the West; by *choosing* to veil they are also threatening the prevalent narrative that the veil must stand synonymous with backwardness, oppression, and victimhood.

I therefore argue that feminists who shun Muslim feminist activists do not do so because they perceive them as *passive* and *helpless*. Rather, my research suggests Muslim feminist activists are met with rejection and suspicion by anti-Muslim feminists who perceive them as *active* and *dangerous*. It is therefore to be expected that the anti-religious attitudes, which are culminating in skepticism and exclusion, affect Muslim feminist activists who veil particularly harshly. Western feminism according to scholar Mahmudul Hasan is characterized by its "obsession with the Muslim women's plight" with the aim of asserting "supposed moral ascendancy of the West (...) to create an artificial urgency to save brown women from brown men" (Hasan, 2012, p. 59). Accordingly, we shall not be surprised that anti-Muslim feminists feel threatened by Muslim women who are refusing to be saved.

This section illustrated that Muslim feminist activists in Austria regularly experience exclusions and hostility from *white* feminists. It further shed light on the stereotypes behind these exclusions, which are both ever-changing, yet embedded in continuous histories of colonialism and racism. I have further identified and discussed two common stereotypes with which Muslim feminist activists are regularly confronted. First, I described anti-religious attitudes among many Western feminists and showed that in the case of the

Frauen*Volksbegehren, Muslim feminist activists were affected by these anti-religious attitudes particularly harshly due to colonial-racist continuities and narratives. Second, I showed that Muslim feminists who veil are faced with particular resentment and argued that this is due to them being perceived by anti-Muslim feminists as dangerous and active rather than shy and passive.

As will be shown in the following section, the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists were acutely aware of the prevalence of anti-Muslim attitudes among their potential feminist alliance partners. Based on this observation, it will be argued that *excluding* Muslim feminist activists thus served a strategic purpose in the Frauen*Volksbegehren's alliance building processes with other feminists.

The Frauen*Volksbegehren faces Feminist Hostility towards Muslim Women

The Frauen*Volksbegehren team barely included Muslim women in its project. Yet, one of the very few times a Muslim woman with a hijab was visible in the Frauen*Volksbegehren's campaign, the activists immediately faced backlash. For its campaign, the Frauen*Volksbegehren designed ten different flyers: one side introduces one of the petition's claims, the other side pictures a different group of people. One of the flyers pictures a group of four young people, among them a young Muslim woman who is wearing a hijab.²⁶ When the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists distributed these flyers throughout Austria, they were immediately met with criticism from feminist alliance partners. While some directly expressed anti-Muslim attitudes, by feedbacking that they personally did not want a woman with a hijab giving face to the petition, others argued that while they did not personally mind, the flyer was going to negatively impact the number of supporters. This anecdote gives us a glimpse into the difficulties the Frauen*Volksbegehren would have faced, had it included Muslim feminist activists—especially ones who veil—in their team, or more visibly in their campaign.

In reaction to this hostility against Muslim women, the Frauen*Volksbegehren chose an evasive approach, which is reflected, for example, in its public stance on the politically charged issue of the hijab. At the time of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's campaign the issue of the hijab

²⁶ I asked several of my Muslim feminist informants whether they knew the Muslim woman depicted on the flyer. None of them did. During an informal conversation, Frauen*Volksbegehren activist S. told me that her team initially asked a fellow Frauen*Volksbegehren activist's teen student to pose for the picture. Although the young woman ultimately backed out, and I was not able to identify the woman who is depicted on the flyer, the anecdote shows that Muslim feminist activists were not even contacted or involved for the photo.

was yet again heavily exploited by populist politicians.²⁷ This discursive context pressured the petition to also publicly take a stance. Eventually, the Frauen*Volksbegehren's team agreed on the position "We are against all clothing regulations." Frauen*Volksbegehren initiator S. describes this position as, "the perfect feminist wording," because, as she puts it, "it says very clearly, that we are neither in favor of women being forced to take off their veil, nor in favor of women being forced to put on a veil. We condemn both equally." (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020) From the Frauen*Volksbegehren's perspective this wording can indeed be considered "perfect" as it has been serving a strategic purpose for the petition: The position "against all clothing regulations" does not challenge any of the popular public positions towards the heated question of the hijab. People who believe the hijab universally is a symbol of oppression, which could never been worn out of true free choice, will readily agree that no one should be objected to clothing regulations. Others, who think that the hijab is rarely if ever an issue of force or persuasion, whose focus is on Western states mistreating Muslim women by forcing their clothing regulations onto them, will also readily agree to "against all clothing regulations." And even those who fall somewhere between these two positions, who believe some women may choose it, while others may be forced to wear it, can agree. The "perfect feminist wording" in question thus achieves a strategic purpose, as it enables strategic alliances with different actors who have drastically different positions in this polarized context of anti-Muslim racism. What the "perfect feminist wording" does however not achieve, is addressing the prevalent anti-Muslim racism and the ways in which Muslim women are essentialized and exploited by populist politicians who are building election campaigns on anti-Muslim resentment and racism. In a context of severe anti-Muslim racism, the "perfect feminist wording" and position may not burn bridges to Muslim feminist activists, however, it does not speak out in solidarity either.

Case I: Conclusion

In summary, this chapter showed that the Frauen*Volksbegehren was forced to strategically navigate a context of suspicion and hostility against Muslim feminists, and shed light on how this affected its strategic alliance-building processes. The outlined examples of backlash against Muslim feminists, such as the incident at the Vienna Women's March, or the backlash

²⁷ In January 2017 Sebastian Kurz, at the time minister for Foreign Affairs and Integration (ÖVP), called for the introduction of a veiling ban in public service (*Kurz für Kopftuchverbot*, 2017). In November 2018, the National Council unanimously passed a ban on headscarves in kindergartens (Parlament Österreich, 2018).

to the campaign flyer depicting one Muslim hijab-wearing woman, give us a glimpse of the difficulties the Frauen*Volksbegehren would have faced in alliance-building if it had significantly included Muslim feminist activists in its team or campaign. Muslim feminist activists' exclusion from the Frauen*Volksbegehren thus served a strategic purpose for the petition's goal of building broad alliances.

As demonstrated earlier, the Frauen*Volksbegehren justified Muslim feminist activists' exclusion through enacting their Muslim identities as religious difference. I thus describe this enactment of difference through which the Frauen*Volksbegehren could justify Muslim feminist activist's exclusion as *strategic*—as it enabled the Frauen*Volksbegehren to build strategic alliances with anti-Muslim feminist actors.

CHAPTER VI

Case II: Strategically Enacting Muslim Identities Justifying Inclusion

The following chapter will demonstrate how the Frauen*Volksbegehren, despite its exclusion of Muslim feminist activists, simultaneously maintained an image of racial inclusivity and diversity. In case one, discussed above, the Frauen*Volksbegehren enacted Muslim identities to justify *exclusion* of Muslim feminists and their NGOs. Case two, starting with the next paragraph, tells the story of how the Frauen*Volksbegehren enacted a woman's Muslim identity to justify *including* her in the petition's core team. As I will argue, her inclusion served a strategic purpose for the Frauen*Volksbegehren, as her enactment as "secular" and "non-Muslim" allowed the petition to continue building alliances with anti-Muslim feminists. Simultaneously the included woman's enactment as a "Muslim woman" allowed the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists to perform diversity and inclusivity, ultimately obscuring their exclusion of Muslim feminist activists.

By discussing the Frauen*Volksbegehren's approach to "diversity" and racial inclusivity, the following section first sheds light on why the Frauen*Volksbegehren wished to include a racialized woman in its team.

The Frauen*Volksbegehren's Self-Understanding as Intersectional

Intersectionality is crucial to the Frauen*Volksbegehren's self-understanding. According to my interviews, it acts as an ideal, which the Frauen*Volksbegehren's activists desire their work to

live up to. S., who is one of the initiators and unofficial spokeswoman of the Frauen*Volksbegehren, states that one of the petition's goals was to show that Austria had "finally also arrived at intersectional feminism" (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020). A., whose inclusion into the team as official spokeswoman is analyzed in this chapter, also uses the term intersectionality when describing her understanding of feminist activism, which she says should create spaces in which "diverse [and] intersectional feminism [are] lived realities" (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). Likewise, spokesman P. claims the petition's campaign had an "intersectional approach" (P., recorded interview, January 29, 2020).

These quotes show that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's activists perceive intersectionality as central to their work. But how can we understand *intersectionality* in this context? Which *practices* are the activists referring to when speaking of intersectionality in the context of the Frauen*Volksbegehren? And how do Muslim identities operate in this context?

Intersectionality and the Frauen*Volksbegehren

The term intersectionality emerged between the late 1970s and 1990s in the context of Black feminism in the U.S. (Anthias, 2012, p. 5). In 1989 Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw famously coined the term when she criticized antidiscrimination lawmaking for treating sex and race as mutually exclusive categories of experience—and thus erasing the experiences of women of color, specifically Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw argued that the then common approach of analyzing discrimination along one *single* axis (e.g., the axis of gender *or* class *or* race) erased the experiences of people experiencing marginalization on multiple levels by limiting analysis to "otherwise-privileged members of the group" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). This means that an analysis on sexism, for example, would usually focus on *white* and class-privileged cis²⁸ women, and an analysis on racism on class-privileged cis men. „Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people“, Crenshaw says “they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). What is significant about Crenshaw's analysis of discrimination and marginalization is that it shows how “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.

²⁸ *Cis* is an adjective that is short for *cisgender*, which is a term to describe people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) did not use the term here.

140). She therefore argues that any feminist and antiracist analysis *must* take intersectionality into account to understand the experiences of women of color (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Despite the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists' emphasis on the intersectionality of to their work, the petition's list of claims does not address women of color as a distinct group facing unique challenges.²⁹ Let me exemplify this by discussing one of the petitions claims. The claim is titled *Sharing Power* and targets codetermination of "women*" in political positions of power by calling for 50% quotas for "men*" and "women*."³⁰ One of the sub-claims addresses the policy-making level (such as electoral lists and the representative body); another sub-claim states that half of the positions in political advocacy and interest groups should be held by "women*" as well as half of the positions in the Austrian *Sozialpartnerschaft*,³¹ in committees, advisory councils and similar decision-making positions of power. Lastly, the petition demands effective sanctions in case this 50% quota of "men*" and "women*" is not met (Frauen*Volksbegehren, n.d.-b). We can see that this claim addresses inequalities between "men*" and "women*." Inequalities between different groups of women as well as genderqueer people, however, are not addressed in the petition's claim. This goes against the very point Crenshaw made through deploying an intersectional lens to antidiscrimination law. Crenshaw's core argument is that effective antidiscrimination measures must actively

²⁹ Other intersections like dis/ability, or classism are also not addressed explicitly. Eight out of nine claims address "men*" and "women*" without further specifying differences between different groups of men, women, and genderqueer people. The ninth claim is titled "Providing Protection" (*Schutz gewähren*) and addresses refugees' rights. Among other things, it calls for a legal recognition of gender-specific reasons for flight according to the UN women's rights convention and the Istanbul convention (Frauen*Volksbegehren, n.d.-a). This is the only claim in which a specific group of women is addressed, namely women refugees.

³⁰ By marking gendered words with an asterisk, the petition uses a gender-inclusive notation beyond the gender binary. A common way of gender-sensitive notation in the German language is the so-called *Binnen-I*, which is the capital letter "I" in a gendered, which signifies that the intended meaning of the word is both feminine and masculine (e.g., masculine: *Student*; feminine: *Studentin*; Binnen-I: *StudentIn*). By many feminists this Binnen-I-spelling is rejected for further marginalizing by not including gender-non-binary experiences. Here, the asterisk symbolizes non-binary people. By adding asterisks to gendered words—including the petition's title and even its logo—the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists made a conscious choice to indicate that the petition is thinking and acting beyond binary notions of gender and aiming at realizing gender-equality not only between two binary sexes, but on more fundamental and intersectional level. Yet, the petition's list of claims does not address any struggles that are specific to genderqueer, trans, or intersex people. Although an asterisk is added to the gendered words *men**, *women**, *girls**, and *boys**, binary notions of gender are reproduced, as the petition's text does not address the different political struggles faced by cis women versus intersex and/or trans people.

³¹ According to a definition by economist Julia Puaschunder "the Austrian model of *Sozialpartnerschaft* (social partnership) describes the institutionalized relationship between the government, political parties and certain interest groups in the field of labor, social, and economic policy." (Puaschunder, 2017, pp. 22–23) According to sociologists Franz Astleithner and Jörg Flecker "social partnership as a whole rests on the principle of including business and labour in governmental decision-making (...). The consensus that can be reached in this way is supposed to guide policy implementation." (Astleithner & Flecker, 2017, p. 173)

acknowledge the fact that women of color do not only experience racism and sexism, but also distinct forms of discrimination based on being both at the same time, women and racialized. Through this *intersectional* lens, it is to be expected that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's proposed policy changes only addressing "women*" will primarily favor *white*, class-privileged, cis women, as they do not explicitly address discrimination faced by people who embody the intersection of several marginalized identities. This means that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's claims are not proposing "intersectional" policy changes according to Crenshaw's definition. This leads to the question: Which practices *are* the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists referring to when describing their political work as intersectional?

Intersectionality, Diversity, or Visual Representation

During my interviews, I confront Frauen*Volksbegehren activists with the discrepancy between their self-understanding and self-representation as an intersectional initiative and their lack of consideration of intersectional discrimination in their political claims. In doing so, I bring up the abovementioned claim *Sharing Power*, which is visualized on the Frauen*Volksbegehren's website and flyers with a photograph of a businesswoman in a wheelchair. I first ask spokesman P. whether he thinks that this claim, which calls for a fifty percent quota for women in leadership positions, would equally empower women with visible disabilities to move into leadership positions more easily. Without hesitation, P. affirms my question: "Yes, simply because women with disabilities are women too and would thus be affected by a women's quota." (P., recorded interview, January 29, 2020). In case of doubt, he elaborates, the category *woman* was going to weigh more heavily than the category *disabled*.

I pose the same question to initiator S., asking how she comes to describe the petition as intersectional although the petition's claims do not explicitly address intersectional forms of discrimination. In response, S. agrees with me that the political *claims* do not really address intersectional forms of discrimination, highlighting, however, that the petition's *campaign* does. She highlights the political power of the campaign, arguing that it must be understood as its *own activist tool*—a tool perhaps even more potent than the petition's list of policy claims. Retrospectively, after none of the proposed policy changes have been implemented, S. argues that the Frauen*Volksbegehren team never had high hopes that the government would adopt the petition's proposed policy changes. Therefore, she argues, the main goal of

the Frauen*Volksbegehren was changing political discourse by bringing feminist issues to the forefront of public debate. S. argues, that the photos used in the campaign, which are depicting society's "diversity" (Black women, one woman with hijab, one visibly disabled woman, trans women), were a core activist tool in achieving this discursive intervention. S. thus frames the petition's campaign as a tool with which the petition was working on public awareness for intersectional forms of discrimination.³² During our conversations I would often find my Frauen*Volksbegehren interview partners using the terms diversity and intersectionality interchangeably. I acknowledge that there are many contexts in which they are uttered in the same breath, not only by my Frauen*Volksbegehren informants. Nonetheless, I question S.'s claim that a "diverse" campaign alone would lead to public acknowledgement of intersectional forms of discrimination, let alone the social and material effects of such a campaign beyond visual representation.

Intersectionality can refer to the Black feminists' work which coined the term, it can refer to a framework for analysis, but it is also often a call for precise political action. Postcolonial feminists Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro Varela describe intersectionality as a "theoretical alternative" to second-wave feminists' "assumption that *all* women were equally victimized by a global patriarchy" (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2016, p. 14). When Kimberlé Crenshaw defines embracing intersectionality as *not* centering "white female experiences in the conceptualization of gender discrimination," her definition puts emphasis on how intersectionality as a theoretical alternative *should be translated* into antidiscrimination lawmaking (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 144). This shows, that when translated into a concrete political or activist practice, intersectionality is often (a) a call for active consideration and analysis of how multiple discrimination creates distinct forms of oppression, as well as (b) a call to tackle these distinct forms of oppression with precise measures. As I have shown, the Frauen*Volksbegehren did not practice intersectionality according to these definitions. Nevertheless, the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists chose certain actions to live up to their ideal of being an intersectional movement. To highlight the differences between the definitions provided above and the Frauen*Volksbegehren's practices, I will discuss said actions using the term diversity (instead of intersectionality).

³² In Austria, a *Volksbegehren's* text must propose precise policy changes or new laws. S. also argues that this narrow framework does not lend itself to addressing the complexities of intersectional discrimination.

Diversity, as practiced by the Frauen*Volksbegehren in how it designed its campaign, focuses on reflecting society's heterogeneity on different levels within organizational structures. Of course, diversity, here, does not refer to just any difference, like hair color or height. Instead, diversity refers to differences which within unequal societal power structures constitute idealized and often marginalized identity categories (e.g., Black, *white*, Muslim, woman, disabled, gay, etc.). Diversity as practiced by the Frauen*Volksbegehren comes to mean including people as representatives for these different idealized identity categories. In the context of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's campaign including *diverse people* mainly meant making them visible through depicting them in campaign images. Unlike in intersectionality approaches that take intersectionality seriously as an analytical framework, the goal in the petition's diversity-approach seems to be realized when *diverse people* are made visible, not when structural discrimination is identified or tackled. Consequently, I question the claim made by Frauen*Volksbegehren activist S. that mere visibility in the petition's campaign was eventually going to lead to political measures improving the circumstances of the groups represented in the campaign. If the systemic struggles and political claims of the marginalized groups represented are not communicated through said campaign, I believe it is doubtful that their mere visibility will raise awareness about their structural marginalization.³³ There is more to be said about the relation between visibility and impactful representation, however, the scope of this thesis prevents me from going into these questions more deeply.

For this research project, the crucial point is that making people who represent different idealized identity categories visible was central the petition's activists' understanding of how to practice *intersectionality*, meaning that the Frauen*Volksbegehren was invested in visibly showcasing *diversity*. In short, the Frauen*Volksbegehren activists justify the (alleged) intersectionality of their petition through the visual inclusion of people who stand for different idealized identity categories in roles visible to the public. The Frauen*Volksbegehren's campaign therefore showcased a *diverse* cast of people: young and old, men and women, queer, disabled, trans and intersex, as well as people of color. Further, the team decided to strategically fill one of three spokespeople positions with a non-*white* Muslim-ish woman. The

³³ It shall be noted here that in some cases the campaign images did address the political struggles of the group represented in the image. An example would be a flyer posted online (the post has since been deleted) depicting an intersex activist along with a text saying that "a lot still needs to be done in Austria" for intersex people to be able to simply exist as they are (posted on the Frauen*Volksbegehren's Facebook page June 18, 2018; information retrieved from a screenshot taken January 13, 2020). However, intersex struggles and intersex organizations' calls for political action are not included in the petition's list of claims.

process of her inclusion and the implications for my research question about the strategic enactment of Muslim identities will be discussed in the following sections.

Including a Spokeswoman with *Migrationsvordergrund*

During one of our informal conversations, S. explains that the initial Frauen*Volksbegehren activists quickly agreed, that “nowadays,” for an *intersectional* initiative like theirs, it would be totally unacceptable to only have *white* team members. Therefore, to meet their ideal of representing an “intersectional” initiative, the initial team members decided to increase their *diversity* by filling one of the three spokesperson positions with a woman of color, or—how S. phrases it—a person with *Migrationsvordergrund*, literally “migration foreground” (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020). “We were not a diverse group,” S. states during our interview, “So, what did we do to increase diversity? We casted spokespeople, I mean casted... we deliberately approached [certain people, which] is how we got A. (...) to join us.” (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020). The spokeswoman in question, A., later learned that the team initially considered giving her spokeswoman position to a Muslim woman. She elaborates during our interview:

They knew that they absolutely needed a woman with a migrant background, or whatever, a non-*white* background. And I also think for quite a while there was the intention to have someone... I mean someone who decidedly self-identifies as Muslim. (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020)

Yet, as described thoroughly in chapter V, the Frauen*Volksbegehren did not contact Muslim feminist activists, and even deliberately excluded them in early alliance-building processes. This exclusionary practice however did not contradict an explicit “casting” of a spokesperson that would allow the team to produce an image of “intersectionality.” This means that, instead of approaching and involving Muslim feminist activists, the petition’s team ultimately decided to give the spokeswoman role to A.. A., who was born in Iran to Iranian parents and grew up in Austria, brought professional expertise on labor market issues to the Frauen*Volksbegehren, but had never engaged in feminist activism before her involvement in the petition. Prior to her joining the Frauen*Volksbegehren, A. already briefly knew some of the women who later initiated the petition, as she too was a member of the *Sorority* women’s career network through which the founders met (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020).

Having said this, A. only knew the founding members by sight, meaning that there were no pre-existing close connections that led to her being invited to join the team. Although her expertise in socioeconomic and labor market issues was appreciated by the Frauen*Volksbegehren, according to my interviews she was *not* approached for this expertise either. Instead, A. was specifically invited to join the Frauen*Volksbegehren for the role of spokeswoman with *Migrationsvordergrund*, as initiator S. aptly put it (S., recorded interview, February 3, 2020).

Unlike *Migrationshintergrund* (literally migration background), the term *Migrationsvordergrund* is not commonly used. S. uses the neologism to describe the kind of woman she and her team were looking to include in order to visibly increase the team's *diversity*. While the common term *migration background* addresses a person's "background," as in their own or their family's (more recent) history of (usually transnational) migration, *Migrationsvordergrund* literally addresses the foreground, what stands out to the observer, a visible or prominent characteristic. This explicit mention of the migration *foreground* already emphasizes the importance displayed by the Frauen*Volksbegehren for *diversity* to be visually recognizable and identifiable for the public audience in a highly immediate way. This of course relies on and plays into pre-existing images of who the *Other* is in relation to the *white* (Christian) *Austrian*. The German dictionary *Duden* defines *Vordergrund* [foreground] as „the front area, or immediately visible area (of a room, picture, etc.)” (Duden, n.d.). In English, foreground can also be used as a verb, *to foreground*, which means “to give particular importance to something” (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.). So, what are the characteristics in the *foreground* that *migration foreground* is referring to?

In *Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment* (1999) feminist philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff examines race as an analytical category and embodied ontology. She argues that although race is not *natural*, it is certainly *real* in the sense that it is “internal to certain schemas of social ontology that are themselves dependent on social practice.” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 15). Alcoff argues that although *rac*es are determined based on perceptual difference, this perception is always embedded in contextual knowledge (Alcoff, 1999, p. 18). This means that recognizing *certain* differences between bodies (and not others) is “the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight.” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 16). According to Alcoff, the context in which this perceptual practice was established, is one

of “European anxiety about the suddenly increased size and diversity of their world” through colonialism (Alcoff, 1999, p. 15). This diversity was then both “known and neutralized through the formulation of an ordering system,” namely race and racial difference as an ordering system of that which is visible and therefore classifiable (Alcoff, 1999, p. 15). This ordering system served a function as the ideological basis for the exploitation and subordination of the colonized parts of the world, and the people, animals, and plants living in these regions (Lugones, 2010). Since *Migrationsvordergrund* centers what is visible or prominent, I interpret it as a term addressing such racialized and *perceptual* difference.

According to Alcoff, there is on the one hand, a “contemporary skepticism toward race,” and a biological consensus that has generally been reached acknowledging that race is a myth; on the other hand, she highlights, that race or racialized identities “have as much political, sociological, and economic salience as they ever had.” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 16) In this context Alcoff identifies three basic positions towards race. Although her text was published in 1999, these three positions are still prominent today. The first, *contextualism*, is a position toward race, where race is understood as “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice.” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17). The benefits of this position, according to Alcoff, are that it allows us to address historical changes in meanings of racial categories, it offers better explanations for varieties of racial beliefs across different contexts, and thus acknowledges the uncertainty and fluidity of racial identities and boundaries. Secondly, Alcoff identifies *essentialism*: Here, race is always the most important and stable element of identity (Alcoff, 1999, pp. 16–17). This position, according to Alcoff, fails to capture the fluidity of racial meanings. The third position is *nominalism*: It claims that race is not real, and that it is therefore harmful to use the term (Alcoff, 1999, p. 16). Alcoff criticizes this approach for failing to capture the multiple meanings of race that are not biologicistic and for falsely assuming that simply not using racial concepts could end structural racism (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17). Although racism is of course very prominent in Austria, ‘race’ (German: *Rasse*) is not. Anthropologist Andre Gingrich highlights the disparity between the persistent usage of the term *race* in English and the situation in German-speaking European countries, stating that “non-academic and political references to any such notion of *Rasse* among humans became completely discredited and absolutely unacceptable very soon after 1945, as part of the efforts to leave Nazism behind.” (Gingrich, 2004, p. 158) This is still the case today and goes so far that German-speaking activists and academics whose work is

concerned with racism use the English word *race* rather than the German word *Rasse*. Gingrich underlines this point when he writes, that “it is important to understand that today any positive public usage of the word *Rasse* in relation to humans in German attracts the justified suspicion that the speaker is openly racist.” (Gingrich, 2004, p. 158) Thus, to use Alcoff’s vocabulary, the most dominant position toward race in Austria is *nominalism*, the position claiming that race is not real, and should therefore not be addressed (Alcoff, 1999, p. 16). This approach towards race prevents open discussion about experiences and practices of racialization.

This inability to directly address racialization in the German language is the context in which I understand *Migrationsvordergrund* as a term awkwardly and indirectly addressing racialization and race. At the same time, this term, which centers the *foreground*, makes tangible what the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s intention to “increase diversity” essentially is about: having someone who looks the part—the part in this case being “Muslim / migrant / woman of color”, different terms that within the Austrian context of anti-Muslim racism are often conflated or used interchangeably.

As established above, realizing visible *diversity*, is how the Frauen*Volksbegehren defined successfully practicing *intersectionality*. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who researches how whiteness and racism operate in institutionalized settings, problematizes this notion of *diversity*. According to her, diversity in practice often solely “becomes about changing images of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations [*sic*].” (Ahmed, 2018, p. 334). Here, Ahmed argues that when organizations decide to *increase diversity*, they often direct their actions at changing their *visual* self-representation, instead of their power structures: “In practice, changing the image of the organisation as ‘white’ as well as ‘male dominated’ means that women of colour within organisations have to be pictured more.” (Ahmed, 2018, p. 334). Regarding the Frauen*Volksbegehren team this observation certainly rings true. While the spokeswoman position is clearly a powerful one, Ahmed’s critique of how diversity is often practiced within organizations draws our attention to the fact that spokeswoman is also the most *visible* position. Ahmed points out that this “work of repicturing an organization [*sic*]” falls unevenly on those who are perceived as *diverse* (Ahmed, 2018, p. 334). “The further away you are from the norm the more you have to appear” in the organization’s pictures, flyers, its websites, or in its campaigns (Ahmed, 2018, p. 334, emphasis

in original). A.'s inclusion therefore is the Frauen*Volksbegehren actively *becoming diverse*, according to contemporary perceptions and images of what diversity is supposed to look like. To include A. in the most visible position of spokeswoman is most notably a strategic move to *appear* more diverse to potential alliance partners and the public.

During our interview A. states that she has always been interested in politics and had been working in jobs related to party politics in the last few years (but without membership to any political party). Nevertheless, prior to her involvement in the petition she had never worked on explicitly feminist or anti-racist issues (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). This signifies that although the initial Frauen*Volksbegehren team was looking to include a spokeswoman of color, meaning someone who experiences racism, expertise in advocating for anti-racist issues was not a prerequisite. In addition, although they originally wanted to include a Muslim woman as spokeswoman, they actively excluded Muslim feminist activists from their petition. This means, that when the Frauen*Volksbegehren team looked for a Muslim-ish woman with *Migrationsvordergrund* to include, instead of inviting Muslim feminist activists, they invited A.. Why her? What do the narratives surrounding her inclusion tell us about the ways in which the Frauen*Volksbegehren strategically navigated and enacted Muslim identities in its alliance building processes?

Enacting the Spokeswoman's Muslim Identity

While the chapter before told the story of how the Frauen*Volksbegehren enacted Muslim identities to justify *exclusion*, this chapter tells the story of how the Frauen*Volksbegehren enacted A.'s Muslimness in the process of justifying her *inclusion* in the petition's core team. Differences and similarities are never given. Instead, as anthropologist M'charek argues, they are "enacted in moments of tensions" (M'charek, 2010, p. 313). Accordingly, social identities are not set in stone. M'charek argues that racial identities are about "the kind of links that are made (...) and how this helps to enact [someone] as [one of 'us']," or I would like to add, as *Muslim*, as *Oriental*, as *Other* (M'charek, 2010, p. 310). The question with which feminist researcher Alcoff approaches the fluidity of identities in her research is, "how are racial and gendered identities operating here, now?" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 9)

Applying these vocabularies and theoretical tools leads me to ask, how is A.'s gendered and racial identity operating here—in the context of her involvement in the

Frauen*Volksbegehren? How is A.'s gendered and racial identity operating now—in the narratives that are evoked when she and her team members reflect on her entry into the petition's team?

Let us examine these questions by taking a closer look at the A.'s own narrative of how and why she was included in the team. During our interview, while reflecting on her entry into the Frauen*Volksbegehren, A. states:

[The petition] was always intended to be intersectional, this was never challenged. So, [the initial team] knew that they absolutely needed a woman with a migrant background, or whatever, a non-*white* background. And I also think for quite a while there was the intention to have someone... I mean someone who decidedly self-identifies as Muslim. Because I see myself... I mean I am completely areligious; you see, I mean, yes, I was born in Iran, but I would not be the representative of let's say a Muslima. (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020)

This quote has several layers. First, A. explains that the Frauen*Volksbegehren considered giving her role to a Muslim woman and clarifies that this has *not* happened through her inclusion. The very next moment A. relativizes her non-Muslimness by almost admittingly stating, "I mean, yes, I was born in Iran." (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). To explain to me the ambivalence and fluidity of her Muslim identity, A. contrasts her irreligiosity with her birthplace. By doing so, she indicates having experienced her identity being enacted as Muslim, irrespective of her religious confession or faith, but based on other characteristics, including—but certainly not limited to³⁴—the fact that she was born in Iran. On the one hand, we can observe A. grasping for words when trying to describe her social positionality and Muslim identity. We can observe the same with S., who creates the neologism *Migrationsvordergrund* to make graspable the social positionality of the kind of person the Frauen*Volksbegehren was looking to include. One could argue that this awkward use of language results from A. and S. lacking a more precise or *right* vocabulary to describe what they are referring to more accurately. However, this would imply that there *was* a static positionality and identity to be described and grasped with the *right words*. Instead, I argue

³⁴ Of course, this enactment of A. as Muslim based on her birthplace being Iran builds on existing stereotypes and images of what Muslims in Austria look like. It is for example not to be expected that a Black woman, whose birthplace is Iran, would experience racialization in the same ways A. is.

that the awkward use of language sheds light on how A.'s racialized Muslim identity is intrinsically fluid. When describing her social positionality, by contrasting her birthplace to her irreligiosity, A. communicates that in a certain way, in certain interactions, and certain contexts she *is* Muslim—while also always *not* being Muslim. The quote above shows, that despite not being Muslim on a religious or confessional level (which her team members knew when they invited her to become spokeswoman), A. navigates being enacted as Muslim in certain interactions and contexts, therefore *being* Muslim, when these contexts interlace with her name, her place of birth, or her physical appearance and body, as the term *Migrationsvordergrund* implies. Therefore, her racial identity is not only contextual and situational but also intrinsically relational.

There is yet another layer to her quote: “Yes, I was born in Iran, but I would not be the representative of, let’s say, a Muslima,” she says, indicating that despite having been included to visually represent a Muslim-ish woman, she does not feel like she is adequately representing Muslim women in Austria. In the second part of this quote, A. indicates that in the context of and in interaction with Muslim feminist activists, she is *not* Muslim. In the first part of her quote, where she acknowledges that she was given the role of a Muslim spokeswoman and admittingly states that she was born in Iran, indicates, however, that she is aware that her identity was enacted as Muslim when she became spokeswoman of the petition. Thus, in the context of the Frauen*volksbegehren, A. became racialized as Muslim; here, she *is* Muslim—or at least Muslim-enough—to bring the desired diversity to the Frauen*Volksbegehren’s team. Her racialization and the enactment of her Muslim identity justified her inclusion in the petition. In the context of the Frauen*volksbegehren, the enactment of A.’s identity as Muslim certainly does not derive from her confession. I thus argue that being Muslim, in this case, is a racialized identity.

Enacting Muslim Identities: On Iranian Identities and “Liberal Muslims”

In the attempt to grasp the nuances of her (non-)Muslimness, A. contrasts her irreligiosity to her Iranian identity. But how exactly does A.’s *Iranian* identity operate in her enactment as Muslim?

According to my interviews, the Frauen*volksbegehren considered giving the spokeswoman role to a Muslim woman.³⁵ Knowing this, I approached S., asking why she and her team still chose to exclude Muslim feminist activists. In response, S. claimed that years ago, when she did not live in Austria, she had worked with Muslim women more closely and had found it difficult to include them in feminist projects, because, according to S., they tended to have conflicting views on feminist issues. While elaborating, S. referred to one group as “liberal Muslim women” (*liberale Musliminnen*). Intrigued, I asked her to specify how she would identify and define a “liberal Muslim woman.” To my surprise, S. named an Austrian local politician who I would have never thought of as “Muslim.” The woman in question—who I am going to call F.—was born and raised in Iran. From the time she migrated to Vienna more than a decade ago until recently, she was politically active in the Green Party. To my knowledge, she has never publicly claimed to be religious. However, she is a vocal critic of “Islam” who publicly opposes the term *Islamophobia*. She claims that *Islamophobia* does not exist and that using the term would prevent leftists from criticizing Islamism and “Islam as an ideology” (Reinfeldt, 2016). Surely, if a *white* person uttered such statements, they would not be labelled a “liberal Muslim.” So, how and why exactly does F. become a “liberal Muslim woman” in S.’s eyes? Inquiring how F.’s Iranian identity operates in this, sheds light on how A.’s Iranian identity operates in her enactment as Muslim.

In his study on the Iranian diaspora in Sweden, anthropologist Shahram Khosravi found that there is a prevalent “image of Iranians as ‘good migrants’” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). He attributes this image to the widespread belief that Iranians are “secular” and proceeds to describe that there indeed is “not only a strong secularism but also a widespread Islamophobia among Iranians” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). The claim of Islamophobia among Iranians is not a facile homogenization of the Iranian diaspora; instead, it acknowledges and addresses that many Iranians left Iran to flee the Islamic Republic and that this context shapes attitudes

³⁵ I can only speculate as to why the Frauen*Volksbegehren did not decide to increase its *diversity* by including a disabled, a Black, or a trans woman as spokeswoman. It is not unlikely, however, that the desire to include a Muslim(ish) woman as spokeswoman can be traced back to the intensity of the interconnections between women’s rights and anti-Muslim discourses in Austria.

towards religion and Islam.³⁶ Yet, some scholars, among them Reza Gholami, have offered a more complex analysis of Iranians' attitudes towards Islam, moving beyond what he calls "an exhausted religious-secular paradigm." (Gholami, 2016, p. 29) In his thorough ethnography on secularism and identity in the Iranian diaspora Gholami introduces the term *non-Islamiosity* to grasp the self-identification and practices of Iranians in the diaspora, arguing that non-Islamiosity "identifies Islam as standing in the way of freedom," and thus is "a particular negative sentiment towards Islam and Allah (not religion and God)" (Gholami, 2016, p. 55). Although Gholami introduces non-Islamiosity, instead of attesting the Iranian diaspora a "widespread Islamophobia," his analysis does not negate Khosravi's argument that Iranians are often perceived as "secular" (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). Building on this argument and the example above I argue that Iranians, due to being perceived as "secular," are not only seen as *good migrants*, but often also as *good Muslims*. In the example of my conversation with S., to be a "liberal Muslim woman" does not mean being Muslim and liberal, or a Muslim feminist activist. Instead, to be a "liberal Muslim" is to be someone who actively speaks out against "Islam," who does not publicly present herself as religious—while simultaneously being non-white. Evidently, "liberal Muslim" is not a confessional category; it is a racialized ascription. Since, just like F., A. is a non-religious Iranian too, I argue that the spokeswoman-role intended for a Muslim woman was not given to her *despite* her *not being Muslim*, but through the enactment of her racialized *Muslim identity*. Muslim, here, is not a descriptor that points to a person's religious confession, belief, or practice; rather it is a racial category and a racialized identity.

In this section, I showed that in the context of A.'s inclusion into the Frauen*Volksbegehren, her Iranian identity operates as an ambivalent and relational racialized identity. In the process of her inclusion, her differences (*Iranian, Muslim*) were enacted, which is how her team members justified her strategic inclusion.

Her inclusion was strategic insofar, as the initial team included her for the purpose of visibly increasing *diversity*. However, there is yet another strategic function A.'s inclusion served for

³⁶ According to the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies of the San Francisco State University "the largest mass migration took place in the first decade after the 1979 revolution (...). The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in combination with the start of the Iran-Iraq War (1981–1988) caused tremendous uncertainty and economic instability and it is estimated that more than 3 million Iranians left to seek refuge and stability in countries in the West." Further, "the majority of those who initially left Iran were often upper and middle class," although in more recent years Iranians have also migrated to the West for economic mobility and education (Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies, n.d.).

the Frauen*Volksbegehren. The following section sheds light on how A.'s relational, situational, and ambivalent Muslim identity for the Frauen*Volksbegehren allowed for alliance-building processes with feminist actors who hold anti-Muslim sentiments.

How to be a “Good Fit”

When I asked my informants from the initial Frauen*Volksbegehren team how and why they had chosen to include A. as spokeswoman, I was told repeatedly that she had simply been a "very good fit" for the role and the teaA. also assumes that she was invited by the other team members mainly because she was perceived as someone who would be “a good fit” (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). What does it mean to “be a good fit”?

In questioning this notion of the “good fit,” I found that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's inclusion of A. and the enactment of her differences served strategic purposes for the petition. Specifically, I argue that the mobilization and racialization of her differences enabled the Frauen*Volksbegehren to position itself strategically within the Austrian context of rampant anti-Muslim racism, in a way that would further enable the petition's broad alliance-building processes.

On the one hand, the examples provided in the section above show, that A.'s Iranian identity was enacted as a Muslim identity during her inclusion. On the other hand, as I will show in the following section, her Iranian identity also means that she is perceived and can be enacted as *not (too) Muslim*, as *secular*, as *non-threatening* to an anti-Muslim audience or as Khosravi (2018) might put it, as a “good” Muslim. In this next section I will thus argue that in the Austrian context of intense anti-Muslim racism, what made A. the “perfect fit” was that her visible presence increased Frauen*Volksbegehren's *diversity* while not risking alliances with and support from people who are holding anti-Muslim sentiments.

On Being an Areligious Muslim

The foremost goal of a petition is to collect as many signatures as possible, requiring the Frauen*Volksbegehren to build strategic alliances with a broad range of feminist and/or women's organizations which were already well-established at the time of the Frauen*Volksbegehren's initiation. From the Catholic Women's Movement, over counselling centers for women affected by violence, and feminist magazines, to women's organizations

affiliated with labor unions—the Frauen*Volksbegehren reached out to a broad spectrum of women’s rights and feminist initiatives. Obviously, the socio-political stances of these different external actors varied, as did their understandings of pressing issues and feminism in general. According to my informants some of these external actors also held resentment against Muslims and Muslim feminists. This shall not surprise us, given the prevalence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in Austria; as established earlier, it has been well documented how these racist narratives have also become integral to women’s rights discourses (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 2002; Farris, 2017).

During our interview, A. recalls a particular encounter, which occurred during a series of meetings that were part of alliance-building activities with other feminist actors. For one of these meetings, several members of the Frauen*Volksbegehren team, including A., met with a powerful player in the Austrian feminist landscape. The activist in question, who I will be referring to as Huber, overlooks an array of institutions offering support to women in danger, which is why the Frauen*Volksbegehren was particularly eager to form a strategic alliance with her. During our interview, A. recalls that at one point during their meeting Huber started to rant about migrants and Muslims, uttering statements which A., thinking back on them during our interview, identifies as explicitly racist. A. describes that in her rant Huber blamed the violence her clients were experiencing on the supposedly archaic, Muslim culture of the women’s partners, husbands, and families. While recalling this instance, A. remembers a feeling of helplessness. She describes having felt torn about how she should be reacting in the moment. On the one hand, A. feared that confronting Huber would escalate the situation, threatening the alliance. A. says that, on the other hand, she believes such racist comments should “actually not be left unchallenged” (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). Eventually, A. remained silent, as did her Frauen*Volksbegehren colleagues.

During our interview, A. is both recalling and simultaneously interpreting the situation and her role within it. While doing so, she refers to herself as “a woman who is herself very secular and of course not too much into religions in general” (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). She proceeds to argue that these characteristics were the reason that, despite not agreeing with the racist generalizations Huber made, she could to a certain extent still *sympathize* with the underlying issues that were addressed and understand how Huber, whose clients (due to socio-economic disadvantages) are mostly migrants, came to her—racist—conclusions (A.,

recorded interview, March 5, 2020). What is crucial here is not *that* A. sympathizes with this racist reasoning articulated by Huber (a reasoning that is also in line with dominant anti-Muslim discourse in Austria) but *why* she does it: Tracing her ability to sympathize back to her self-understanding as “a woman who is herself very secular and of course not too much into religions in general,” A. argues that *these* are the reason why, despite finding Huber’s statements racist, she could still “also totally understand” Huber (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020).

For her 2017 book titled *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* scholar Neda Maghbouleh interviewed over eighty second-generation Iranian Americans about their experiences in everyday racialized sites, like their schools, home lives, summer camps, and the like. Maghbouleh’s comprehensive study concludes that “Iranian American racial identities are anything but stable across these spheres.” (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 9). Her research on processes of racialization is of course embedded in a US context, in which bureaucratic documents require residents to racially self-identify by ticking an ethno-racial box —the box for Iranians being *white/Caucasian*. It is also a context in which the words *race* and *white* are part of everyday language. Translating Maghbouleh’s findings into my Austrian research context must therefore be done with caution. Yet, although Maghbouleh’s research is embedded in a US-American legal, economic, and discursive context, there are still aspects of her study which transcend this local US context; for example the persisting myth that Persian Iranians belong to an *Aryan race*, described by scholar Reza Zia-Ebrahimi as “one of the founding pillars of ideological Iranian nationalism” (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p. 466), diasporic media circulating globally (Gholami, 2016, pp. 87–89), or what scholar Reza Gholami calls a “diasporic consciousness” (Gholami, 2016, p. 29), as well as the fact that many Iranians who left after and due to the 1979 revolution and settled down in Western countries do not identify as Muslims and/or have a negative attitude towards Islam.³⁷ It is therefore not surprising that anthropologist Khosravi identifies similarities between Maghbouleh’s findings and his own study on the Iranian diaspora in Sweden. Based on both, he summarizes, “Iranians

³⁷ See for example Khayambashi (2019), who argues that her Muslim Iranian-Canadian informants experience Islamophobia “from within the Iranian-Canadian community.” (Khayambashi, 2019, p. 181). Or anthropologist Sadjed’s work (2016), where she argues that “a very strong rejection of Islam” is common among the Iranian diaspora in Germany, and that this is connected to the “current negative perception of Islam in Europe” (Sadjed, 2016, p. 55). Or Gholami’s ethnography, where he introduces the term *non-Islamiosity* to grasp the self-identification of Iranians while moving “beyond an exhausted religious-secular paradigm.” (Gholami, 2016, p. 29) Gholami’s *non-Islamiosity* “identifies Islam as standing in the way of freedom” (Gholami, 2016, p. 55).

live a racial paradox at the limits of whiteness. Believing in their own whiteness, successfully responding to the demands of the host society and taking on the role of ‘model minority,’ Iranians find themselves still treated as non-white” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). Scholar of Urban Studies Cameron McAuliffe, who conducted research on the Iranian diaspora in London, Vancouver, and Sydney, found that Iranians who had already grown up in the diaspora, despite stating that they have *witnessed* an increase in anti-Muslim racist attitudes, did *not* perceive themselves as subject to this rising racism (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 45). McAuliffe writes that:

Despite possibly being mistaken by the press and by ‘white’ community members as a ‘Muslim’ because of their Iranian background, the reality of the second generation’s self-awareness seems to have allowed many to see the rise in racist attitudes as something that does not, and should not, happen to them. (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 46)

McAuliffe’s analysis lacks complexity in terms of the vocabulary he uses to describe how racialized identities operate. Claiming that Iranians might be “mistaken” for Muslims, assumes static, authentic racial identities, which simplifies the complex ways in which differences “are not given, but enacted in moments of tensions” (M’charek, 2010, p. 313). As I have argued earlier, Iranian-ness can be enacted as Muslimness in relational practices. However, although I think McAuliffe’s analysis lacks complexity, he still makes a point that corresponds to my own experience growing up as part of the Iranian diaspora, to Maghbouleh’s study, as well as to Khosravi’s study, namely that many³⁸ “Iranians live a racial paradox at the limits of whiteness.” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75)

To some extent McAuliffe’s findings contradict Maghbouleh’s. While in McAuliffe’s study it is the *second* generation of Iranian migrants understanding themselves as white and racism “as something that does not, and should not, happen to them” (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 46), in Maghbouleh’s study this applies to the *first* generation of Iranian Americans. Still, what Maghbouleh and McAuliffe both identify (although in different generations) is that “[a] feeling of disengagement arose in discussions about racism that (...) indicated a degree of agency

³⁸ In the context of these studies *Iranian* does not refer to nationality, as ethnic and racialized minorities like Afro-Iranians, or Iranian Hazara, are not implied by these studies. Surely, Afro-Iranians living in the diaspora would not be situated at a “racial paradox at the limits of whiteness” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 75). Without the addition of this footnote, the quotes above would thus uncritically reproduce a link between Iranian nationality and Persian ethnicity.

over their interstitial position in identity relations.” (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 46) Mc Auliffe elaborates:

When faced with racism, ‘non-Muslims’ of Iranian background (...) feel at least some agency over how they respond to racist acts. Their agency is manifested by their actively interrupting the preferred meaning of racist acts and reconfiguring the meaning through their reading. (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 47)

How A. experienced her role and identity during incident discussed above can be interpreted in terms of such a disengagement. The whole instance of her disengaging reaction is crucial, as it shows us that although A. was specifically casted to fill the role of a migrant and *Muslim* spokeswoman, and although her Muslim identity is enacted in the narratives surrounding her inclusion, her self-perception and identity as a “secular” Iranian migrant, who is therefore *not* Muslim, enables her to rationalize and emotionally distance herself from the anti-Muslim racist comments. By being a *Muslim(-ish) woman* A. thus brought *diversity* to the Frauen*Volksbegehren. Simultaneously, her presence as a *non-Muslim woman* ensured that the Frauen*Volksbegehren could smoothly continue building strategic alliances with anti-Muslim feminist actors, without having to expect major obstacles or conflict. A. was never “mistaken” as a Muslim, as McAuliffe would perhaps put it (McAuliffe, 2016, p. 46). Instead, A.’s differences, her social positionality lends itself to being enacted as both Muslim and non-Muslim.

I would like to emphasize, that this enactment of difference is *not* an asymmetric process, in which something is *done to* A.’s identity by her team members. Instead, my findings shed light the *intrinsic relationality* of her identity within a complex context, in which socio-material differences become legible on individual bodies through modes of racialization, and in which forms of (visually) mobilizing these differences become increasingly important for the strategic navigation of intense anti-Muslim racism in Austria. A crucial component of the processes in which her differences are enacted is A.’s fluid, situational, and relational *self-identification*.

“[Differences and similarities] are not given, but enacted in moments of tensions.” (M’charek, 2010, p. 313). By now this quote should be familiar to the reader. Considering the example of A.’s encounter with Huber, we can see differences being enacted in a concrete situation. In the example provided, A. finds herself in a moment of great tension: between the important

yet racist potential alliance partner Huber, her own experiences of being racialized, her belief that one should speak up against racism, and her team; between her ambivalent and situational Muslim-ness, her Iranian identity, and her self-understanding as “secular”—more could be added to this list. In this moment of tension, A., who was included in the Frauen*Volksbegehren as a Muslim(-ish) woman, becomes non-Muslim; she becomes a “secular woman” who can thus muster understanding for racist statements, who remains silent, and who thereby enables alliance-building with a feminist who holds anti-Muslim sentiments.

Good Fit—Bad Fit?

Beyond how A. did (not) react to the racist statements, I further want to draw attention to her takeaway from this incident. Thinking back on the situation, A. positively remembers that when Huber began uttering the anti-Muslim racist statements, her Frauen*Volksbegehren team members immediately made eye contact with her (A.). This eye contact is significant as it once again emphasizes A.'s racialized and Muslim-ish identity. I interpret, them quickly making eye contact with her when encountering instances of anti-Muslim racism, as an acknowledgement of how she could be implied and hurt by such remarks. During our interview, A. interprets this eye contact as them signaling to her that, firstly, they were also noticing the racism of these statements, and, secondly, that they also found it problematic. A. positively highlights that *within the team* “racism was never an issue” (A., recorded interview, March 5, 2020). Yet, the example above shows that not facing racism from your own team members is not the same as being part of a team explicitly committed to anti-racism.

Let us engage in the following thought experiment and ask how this situation would have unfolded if anti-racist activist D., founder of the *Documentation Center Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism*, had been present in A.'s place during the incident described above. Based on the consequences D. has been drawing from the experiences she keeps making with anti-Muslim racism, it is doubtful that she would have been satisfied with this outcome and able or *willing* to distance herself from the anti-Muslim racist remarks the way A. did. During our interview, D. negatively describes the Frauen*Volksbegehren as centering “*white* women’s needs” and criticizes it for not directly addressing anti-Muslim racism (D., recorded interview, March 13, 2020). While A.’s social position and self-identification as a secular yet Muslim(-ish) woman enables her to affectively distance herself from anti-Muslim racist remarks, a person

who is committed to fighting anti-Muslim racism who has expertise in countering anti-Muslim narratives would most likely have (re-)acted differently. A.'s ability to distance herself emotionally and affectively from the anti-Muslim racist remarks thus allowed the Frauen*Volksbegehren to build strategic alliances even with feminists like Huber, who holds anti-Muslim racist viewpoints. I therefore argue that what made A. a "good fit" was the fact that her differences could be enacted as both: in one instance, she became the *Muslim spokeswoman* who brought *diversity* to the team, while in another instance she became the *secular non-Muslim woman*, who allowed or enabled alliances with anti-Muslim feminist actors.

Earlier, I described that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's understanding of how to practice *intersectionality* is based on the idea that *intersectional institutions* should reflect the diversity of society. Anthropologist M'charek argues that "this politics of representation generally requires the 'Other' to come in one version." (M'charek, 2010, p. 311) This is confirmed by A.'s reaction to the anti-Muslim alliance partner Huber: Although the Frauen*Volksbegehren wanted to include a *Muslim woman*, the example shows, that the *diversity* the petition could allow without risking broad alliances was actually very limited. A. indeed was the "perfect fit" for the petition, however, there clearly are not many ways of being "the right fit."

Case II: Conclusion

The first part of my analysis, chapter V, discussed how the Frauen*Volksbegehren's team enacted Muslim identities justifying the *exclusion* of Muslim feminist activists. I showed that the Muslim identities of Muslim feminist activists were enacted solely as religious difference, and that their exclusion from early alliance-building processes was justified through this enactment.

In contrast, this chapter (chapter VI) discussed a case in which Muslimness operates as grounds for *inclusion*. In questioning what made spokeswoman A. "a good fit" in the eyes of the petition's team, I argued that her differences and social positionality lend itself to strategically being enacted as Muslim and as non-Muslim in different situations and contexts, which helped facilitate strategic alliance-building processes with anti-Muslim feminists while maintaining an image of racial inclusivity and diversity, which was important for alliances with anti-racist feminists.

Finally, I argued that these enactments of differences served strategic purposes in both cases: *Excluding* Muslim feminist activists was helpful for the Frauen*Volksbegehren in building alliances with anti-Muslim feminists. *Including* A. while enacting her identity as Muslim allowed the Frauen*Volksbegehren to present itself as committed to *intersectionality* while remaining able to build strategic alliances with anti-Muslim feminist actors.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

In conclusion, the political context the Frauen*Volksbegehren has been navigating is one of pronounced anti-Muslim racism which is strongly interwoven with feminist and women's rights discourses. In this context it is likely, that the Frauen*Volksbegehren's strategies of selective exclusion and inclusion of Muslim(ish) feminists, were helpful in garnering widespread support and achieving formal success. Critical theorist Giraud argues that exclusions within activist movements are not always negative but can also have a "productive role" (Giraud, 2019, p. 11). However, to avoid simply reinscribing already existing social inequalities, it is crucial that decisions to exclude within activist movements remain "temporary, contingent, and open to contestation" (Giraud, 2019, p. 12). Accordingly, as a feminist anthropologist, I think it is crucial to uncover, question, and problematize the strategic inclusions and exclusions of Muslim feminist activists by the Frauen*Volksbegehren. From a feminist standpoint—a standpoint from which I do not just aim at describing social realities but also hope to change them—the question arises whether the exclusion of Muslim feminist activists was more productive or destructive to the overall feminist goals of fighting patriarchy, sexism, and racism in Austria. Given the intensity of anti-Muslim sentiments in Austria and their intimate connection to women's rights discourses, it is likely that the petition's strategic exclusions and inclusions were important in mobilizing support. In Giraud's words, from the Frauen*Volksbegehren's perspective, these strategic exclusions can thus be described as "productive" (Giraud, 2019, p. 11). Neither the Frauen*Volksbegehren nor Muslim feminist activists are to blame for the political context they find themselves in. Yet, a critical question remains open: To what extent is the formal success of the Frauen*Volksbegehren going to empower, support, or benefit Muslim feminists in their political struggles in Austria if it at least partially relied on their exclusion? The scope of this

research project does not allow me to provide an answer to this question. What this thesis does achieve, is to highlight and contextualize the strategic exclusions and inclusions of Muslim feminists by the Frauen*Volksbegehren. In doing so, it traces the racialization of differences and the enactment of these differences as Muslim identity markers, thus enriching our understanding of how racialized differences operate within the Austrian context of anti-Muslim racism “in the name of women’s rights” (Farris, 2017).

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Abstract

In recent years, anthropological scholars have documented a convergence of anti-Muslim and women's rights discourses in Western Europe (e.g., Farris, 2017). Anti-Muslim racism is pervasive, it is highly gendered, and increasingly voiced "in the name of women's rights" (Farris, 2017). This thesis examines how the Frauen*Volksbegehren, a major feminist petition in Austria (initiated in 2017), strategically navigated this context in building alliances with other, politically diverse feminist actors in Austria. Based on the research findings, it is argued that racialization played a crucial role in these alliance building processes. By closely examining said processes of racialization, this thesis traces how Muslim identities and racialized differences were strategically "enacted in moments of tensions" (M'charek, 2010, p. 313). Consequently, it is argued that in the dynamic of strategic alliance building processes between the Frauen*Volksbegehren and other feminists, Muslim identities did not operate as static entities. Instead, racialized difference and Muslim identities were selectively and strategically "enacted in moments of tensions" (M'charek, 2010, p. 313).

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren verzeichnen anthropologische Wissenschaftler*innen eine Konvergenz von antimuslimischen und frauenfeindlichen Diskursen in Westeuropa (z.B. Farris, 2017). Antimuslimischer Rassismus ist allgegenwärtig, er ist stark *gendered* und wird zunehmend „im Namen von Frauenrechten“ geäußert (Farris, 2017). Diese Arbeit untersucht, wie das Frauen*Volksbegehren, eine große feministische Petition in Österreich (initiiert im Jahr 2017), diesen Kontext in seiner Allianzenbildung mit anderen, politisch vielfältigen feministischen Akteur:innen in Österreich, strategisch navigierte. Basierend auf den Forschungsergebnissen wird argumentiert, dass Rassifizierung eine entscheidende Rolle in diesen Prozessen spielte. Durch die genaue Untersuchung dieser Rassifizierungsprozesse zeichnet diese Arbeit nach, wie muslimische Identitäten und rassifizierte Differenzen in „moments of tensions“ strategisch „enacted“ wurden (M'charek, 2010, S. 313). Folglich argumentiert diese Arbeit, dass in der Dynamik der strategischen Allianzbildungsprozesse zwischen dem Frauen*Volksbegehren und anderen Feminist*innen, muslimische Identitäten nicht als statische Entitäten wirkten. Stattdessen wurden rassifizierte Differenzen und muslimische Identitäten selektiv und strategisch in „moments of tensions [...] enacted“ (M'charek, 2010, p. 313).