



Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

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Enemies Within

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Mother: the Beginning

I scan the walls with my eyes, white, or maybe gray. My gaze pauses for a few seconds on the clock. Tick. Tock. Slow. Heavy. Our eyes meet. Behind her metallic desk, she is looking at me. Why is she looking at me? The civil servant repeats herself, articulating slowly each letter. I think she is waiting for an answer. I nod timidly. Small, my legs dandling, too short to touch the floor. She keeps talking. Keeps staring. There is something off, or is it only in my head? She speaks to me again. Why is she speaking to me?

I'm only eight.
It's an administrative appointment.
My mother is with me.

She is sitting beside me. Calm, dressed with care, her organised folder resting on her lap.

So why is she talking to me? Why won't she look at my mom? Why is she repeating herself, gesturing? Why does she pretend to not understand? Why is she correcting every word? *Why is she humiliating her?*

"Speaking means existing absolutely for the other," Fanon once said. My mother speaks French. She understands French. She earned her Master's degree here, in France.

But my mother has an accent. And my mother is Arab. And my mother is an immigrant. And my mother wears a headscarf.

Tick.Tock. Each second in that office landed like a slap. Sitting there on a chair too big for me. And in that small-cowardly nod — without realizing it — I became complicit. Complicit in a silent theft of dignity. Complicit in systemic humiliation. Complicit in the quiet violence aimed at my mother.

Later, I'd be the one targeted too. Karma?

Activism, for me and many of us, stems from this.

From bureaucratic humiliation.

From media hatred.

From unjust treatment.

From police violence.

From this repeated mantra: *You do not belong. Your existence does not matter.*

Fear. Anger. Sadness. Exhaustion... Hope?

Bell Hook wrote "Being oppressed means the absence of choices." Our activism is not a choice. It is an imperative. It's raw. It's primal. It's animal. A reflex. A need to protect. A constant state of alert. A high sensitivity. A precocious lucidity. The crushing weight of having to prove your humanity over and over.

At the beginning, it was my mother who took me to my first protest.

Building of the Enemy: History repeats itself

"But what a patch of mud on your name — I was going to say on your reign — that this abominable Dreyfus affair! A council of war has just, by order, dared to acquit an Esterhazy, the supreme bellows of all truth, of all justice. And it's over. France has this stain on its cheek. History will write that it was under your presidency that such a social crime could have been committed." — Emile Zola, *J'accuse*, 1898

Stretched out on a bench under the blazing Marseille sun, we lazed in silence, eyes lost in the vast, calming blue of the sea. Between bites of slush that numbed our brains, our conversation drifted, inevitably, back to “EMF”.

Not long ago, a report was deliberately leaked by the Ministry of the Interior. It warned of "entryism", the Muslim Brotherhood, and an alleged underground plan by Muslims to infiltrate the Republic. Etudiants Musulmans de France (EMF) was named. An association that supports students. That distributes food parcels across campuses. That organizes social and cultural events to fight isolation. That advocates for students' rights.

That was our association. Our work. Our faces. And overnight, our commitment became suspicious. Food drives? Proselytism. Public speeches? Manipulation. And our faith? A testimony against us.

“This is like the Dreyfus affair”, Kayode starts. He is wearing his signature glasses: the exact same pair as my sister’s. He literally bought the same, a woman’s frame, because they gave the “diva” look. That’s Kayode: flashy, hilarious, unbothered, yet very modest and polite. "It's the same story... And by God's grace, it'll have the same ending." he continues.

I am not sure if it is the scene or my reflex of always downplaying, second-guessing our pain, convincing myself *it's not that serious* that made me think that he was being dramatic. But once back home, I decided to open my laptop and to read about it again. It's a required part of French school syllabus: In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French military, was arrested, tried, and convicted of treason. No solid evidence. Publicly shamed. Deported. Why? Because he was Jewish. That was enough. The military knew he was innocent. Still, they chose to protect the real traitor rather than clear a Jewish man's name. In 1898, Emile Zola published his famous open letter "J'accuse...", denouncing state antisemitism, judicial manipulation, and the silent complicity of the press.

Today – and for some years now – there's a new name whispered with suspicion. Not Dreyfus. "Muslim."

Our visibility became a threat. Like Dreyfus, we aren't condemned for what we did, but for who we are.

The language has changed, but the machinery is the same: the creation of an internal enemy.

Back on that bench, I asked Kayode, who is EMF's current president, what he felt the day the report dropped.

"I think it was a Wednesday" he said "Ines* was the one who sent it to me. It hadn't even been officially published yet, it was leaked through a government site. But honestly, the signs were there before. On Sunday or Monday, right-wing media had already dropped their 'exclusive' previews. We got an email from *Le Point* Monday morning with a series of questions. Supposedly for an article about EMF, but it was clearly about the report. So we knew we were being named. We could feel it."

"It was stressful, waiting for the hit, but also realising it had already landed."

"When the report dropped" he continued "my first instinct was CTRL+F — EMF, étudiants. Given the media frenzy, I was bracing for the worst! But weirdly... I felt some relief. Out of 70 pages, we were mentioned only three times. Two of those were factually wrong. It was sloppy work. Then my second reflex? I searched for our names. Just to make sure we weren't directly targeted. That we were, at least, still somewhat protected."

Neither of us was named, but one of our friends, a former president of EMF, was. Others we knew were there too.

* different names were used

And then came the work. Immediate, urgent.
Writing a response.
Publishing a statement.
Questioning our lawyer.
Reassuring members.
Making sure we were the ones speaking, not just being spoken about.

"But we wanted to go beyond that," Kayode told me. "We wanted to inspire. To show the image of a strong young Muslim, representing an association, speaking clearly and confidently. No fear. Beyond refuting the claims, it was about visibility and hope. Letting others know: *you're not alone*. That seeing someone take action can help others get through their own frustration and despair. Making them also want to engage. For us, mental health matters, and that's part of it too."

And it worked. A few days after appearing on television, Kayode received a message on LinkedIn: Thank you. Just two words, but they meant everything.

Blessed is the one at the service of others

"Slowly! Slowly!"

On the first floor, Zayn* and I were gripping the back legs of the table, carefully inching it toward the open window. Down below, Ayman* stood with arms outstretched, ready to receive it, directing us like an air traffic controller guiding a landing. It wasn't very high up, a floor, maybe two, but the doorway was too narrow, and this was the only way.

I know this might look like a heist. I swear it is not. In less than an hour, just a few steps away in the open courtyard of this university campus, we'd be hosting a free food distribution for students. And for that, we needed tables. So we improvised. Borrowed a handful from the quiet study hall. Just for two, maybe three hours. No one would miss them.

* different names were used

After a few careful back-and-forths and some tense balancing, the big truck finally pulled in. The back doors creaked open, and out came our cargo: bags of pasta, rice, oil, sugar, flour, canned goods, milk, cereals, hygiene products, even a few crates of fruit. We sorted everything, category by category, lining the tables one after the other. Students were already starting to arrive, shopping bags in hand. They began to queue. The line grew fast, so much that at the end, some could not get anything...

So many young people live in precarity in France. In 2024, over a third of them reported skipping meals regularly or from time to time due to lack of money. To respond to the crisis, we organise regular free food distributions across 25 university campuses in France. During Ramadan, our distributions – food packs and hot dinners – become daily.

Janaya Future Khan, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter Canada said once in *Time* "Activism is about being alive: about fighting for life. Activism is being for someone else who you needed most in your most vulnerable moment. There's something inherently spiritual and supernatural about what happens when we tie our fate to another person: we discover who we are in service to others."

I could not agree more...

"Obviously I lost my chance to get a job in the public sector," Kayode tells me, with a faint, bitter smile. He had always wanted to be a school teacher. To work with children. To pass something on. He had the patience. That natural warmth. The humour. But after the report, he knows. "With EMF on my record, it's over. I'm blacklisted."

"Welcome to the club, I was blacklisted the day I decided to wear my headscarf" I responded trying to make things lighter.

The slush probably froze our brains...

“If I have kids one day, I hope they’ll join EMF” I look at him surprised. “Because even with all the internal challenges, the external pressure, the sleepless nights, the police summons, the ignored partnership requests, the frozen bank accounts... EMF is still beautiful. You know what I love the most about EMF, beyond what we do? It's what we become together. It's the friendships. The people who meet here, work side by side, fall in love, get married. Some have kids now. Can you believe it? EMF builds families. It's precious. It's the most beautiful thing.”

I cringed, the slush definitely froze his. We laughed.

Because yes — there are numbers, distributions, reports, events, motions, conferences... But more than that, there is this. This thread. This invisible string that holds us together, even when everything else falls apart.

In our faith, we say: Whoever gives for God (their time, their energy, their wealth) will surely be rewarded. Maybe not with what they hoped for, but with what they needed. Maybe our activism won't change the world tomorrow, but this commitment? It already frees something in us.

It restores dignity. Together.

In that office, on that stiff chair, my mother's hand held mine.

Belonging

We are second, third, even fourth generation. We don't have an accent and we know the codes. We study. We vote. We contribute. We engage and serve our society to make it better. Yet somehow, for some, we are still too much. Too visible. Too organised. The dangerous other.

On July 7th, 2025, Emmanuel Macron announced new legal measures targeting the so-called “entryism”: a law is expected by the end of the summer. It includes freezing the assets of organisations – modeled after anti-terror legislation – expanding power to dissolve associations without trial, and financially punishing those who refuse to sign the Republican Commitment Contract (ECR), a pledge critics say is being used to police belief and right to dissent.

This is not new.

This is not a rupture.

It is a continuation.

After her visit to France in 2018, The United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms warned “the conflation of Islam with terrorism in government policy and in the implementation of administrative measures unduly singles out this community, alienates the community from the State, and creates a form of political and social disenfranchisement that is inconsistent with the State’s obligations under international human rights law”.^[1]

In 2021, they said we kept to ourselves. They called it “separatism”. So they wrote a law that shut down our institutions, raided our mosques, interrogated our children in school. All in the name of breaking the “separatists”. At the time, Amnesty International warned the bill risked reinforcing negative stereotypes and would “seriously attack rights and freedoms”, disproportionately targeting Muslims.^[2]

^[1] [Preliminary findings of the visit: UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism concludes visit to France | OHCHR](#)

^[2] [France: Amnesty International’s concerns regarding the bill “to strengthen respect for the principles of the Republic”](#)

Now in 2025, the narrative evolves. Now, we're too integrated. Too engaged. Too confident. So it's suspicious. Because when Muslims succeed — visibly, confidently, collectively — it disturbs the narrative. So they invented a new word: "entryism."

A seventy-page report full of errors, approximations and fantasies. No proof. But there was never a need for it. It was enough to name. To shame. To blacklist. Enough to turn our mere presence into a threat and start the witch hunt.

This is not just a national debate. It is a deliberate attack of equality and human rights.

So what happens when a state demands loyalty while denying belonging?

Again... This is not new. This is not a rupture. It is a continuation. From that day in the office, and even before...

We don't sit silently on that chair.

We refuse erasure.

We speak up.

We organise.

We build.

Collectively.

This Capstone Project has been realised as part of a twinning scheme, between the author and Right Livelihood Laureate Sheila Watt-Cloutier, supported through a scholarship offered in collaboration with Right Livelihood.

From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.

The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

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