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From Erasure to Emergence: African-American Muslim Women and the Changing Face of the American Mosque

Freeha Riaz

A Thesis in the Field of Middle Eastern Studies

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

This thesis aims to consider one aspect of religiosity of African-American Muslim women—who now constitute the majority of the converts of the fastest growing religion of America—and the praxis of their faith vis-à-vis their engagement within the mosque and its affiliated communites. The primary intent of this ethnography is to understand the "essence" or conscious effort from the perspective of African-American Muslim women of *their* experiences of engaging within the mosque and its affiliated communities. Secondarily, this study attempts to tease out how and why the mosque, instead of another locus, become an important performative space for African-American women.

The distillation of the narratives of my informants, reveals to me, that Islam for the women is a liberatory "worldview" within which they find agency. Stepping into the new worldview of Islam compels them to negotiate an identity that validates their gender in the context of their religious framework. These permutations range from issues of gender segregation, to *hijab*, to polygyny—all gendered issues that must be negotiated by the indigenous Muslimas.

As I have found, for the women, their approach to *thei*r Islam and its praxis finds its genesis in notions of equity. Furthermore, the praxis of their faith seeks to validate the women with an identity that is "authentically" Islamic and American. This in turn affords the women agency to read their Islam in the manner they deemed most fit—an endeavor which they continuously strive to perfect. The mosque for the women serves as a conduit through which the women

not only empower themselves, via mastering their faith, but also forge bonds within the sisterhood of the *ummah*—a community of believers.

As the women tell me, the mosque and those who practice the faith play a profound role in facilitating their transformation. The mosque is not merely a venue for the praxis of their individualized Islam—rather it is a living model which contributes immensely to their Islamic worldview. The mosque serves as a point of convergence where a Muslima can convene a framework which merges her newfound *deen* and its actuation into a permutation that has a profound effect on how she encounters the worldview of Islam.

Dedication

To my father, Riaz-*ul-Haq*

Whom I only knew for four years of my life,

but who instilled within me the value of education.

This is for you!

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and THANK Sister "Joyce," who was the first African-American Muslima with whom I discussed this project. In May of 2015, Sister Joyce agreed to meet with a stranger who called her to solicit some advice and help. As a result of this meeting, I was invigorated and reassured that this perhaps was *doable* and most importantly—needed to be done. Sister Joyce passed away a few weeks before the completion of this thesis—I want to thank her from the bottom of my heart for being such an ardent supporter from day one. In our last email exchange, she wrote to me about this endeavor: "as old African-American grandmas used to say: '*hope you on!*'" With this in mind, Sister Joyce, *I hope you on to the beloved!* It is my hope to not only do justice to her story but that of all the Muslimas who chose to share their spiritual journeys with me. I have spent countless nights lying awake, contemplating each and every one of you and your words. You have all lived in my head. I have dreamt of you, I have attempted to stand in your shoes—and some of you have even become my friends. For all this, I thank you! I hope the precious stories with which you have entrusted me shine through the academic jargon. If I have made any errors in the interpretation of your words, I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me. I have tried my best to do justice to your words and stories. I humbly thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

After the women, I would like to thank Jihad Turk, whose Arabic class at UCLA made me fall in love with the study of our rich Islamic heritage, nearly eight years ago. Jihad has always been the most open minded imam I have ever known, so much so, that I

do not even think of him as an imam—he is my friend and I thank you Jihad for your friendship. I would like to thank Gail Kennard for being a vital resource and sounding board for this project. I would also like to thank Professors Joe and Doug Bond. Joe, you are sorely missed and I hope my thesis makes you proud up in heaven. Doug, thank you for always believing in me and giving me great opportunities to work with you—it is always a pleasure. I would also like to thank Dr. Jocelyn Cesari, whose classes have been the most brilliant and engaging at Harvard. Last but certainly not the least, on the academic side, I want to thank Dr. Marla Frederick, who has been the most patient thesis director. Thank you for your willingness to join me on this journey and for offering brilliant guidance and assistance. I am forever grateful. It has been an honor and a pleasure to work with you.

Next I want to thank the other imam in my life, Imam Timothy Patrick McCarthy. Thank you Tim for being a wonderful friend and most importantly, being such a wonderful teacher who teaches. Harvard is very lucky to have you! I want to thank Miss Melinda Mohamed for always being a great research assistant along with being an excellent babysitter. On that note, I want to thank my eighteen-month-old son, Cyrus, who has been deprived of a mother for the last few months. I hope you read this thesis one day and then you will surely understand the importance of this work. I want to thank all of my family and friends for being so supportive and understanding.

Again, I want to thank all of the women, the mosques and the affiliated communities who welcomed me into their spiritual hearts. I have learned so much from you.

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Chapter I

Prelude

On a balmy Saturday night in November, a tall, green-lit minaret in the middle of an expansive traffic jam helps center me on the occasion. Stuck at the intersection of Malcolm X Boulevard and Massachusetts Ave, I cannot help but notice the juxtaposition of this soaring Islamic symbol, which can be seen from at least a mile away, with the shivering cheerleaders who pile out of a minivan ahead of me. I can see that the young ladies have chosen to suffer through the slight chill rather than to wait for the light to turn green. Leaving the driver to the mercy of traffic gods, the teen girls run across the street for what I assume is a Saturday night football game at the high school set across from the very large mosque—the Islamic Center of Boston.

As I walk into the Boston Islamic Center (through the co-ed entrance) I am tugging my head scarf into the appropriate position and quickly scanning the women around me for hints about whether I am appropriately covered or not. I feel the usual fidgety nervousness that I feel *every* time I enter a mosque. Tonight, especially, I cannot help but wonder how I ended up at a mosque for a Sisters' knitting class on a Saturday night—as I do not know how to knit and I am not what one would call a "practicing Muslim." I am, however, a researcher, who happens to be Pakistani and Muslim by birth, and can certainly "pass" while attempting to edify herself on the nuances of indigenous Islam as it pertains to African-American Muslim women and their uniquely nuanced relationship with the mosque.

The level of activity in the large, brightly lit entrance hall astonishes me as I realize that perhaps the source of the traffic jam and lack of parking was not solely the football game. Rather, it may have been the crowd of several hundred or so men, women and children among which I find myself. Yet again, I contrast the football game being played across the street with the activities in the mosque. Unbeknownst to each other, one part of American society is partaking in the "typical" Saturday night football game while a different part of Americana is celebrating, socializing and praying—right across the street from each other. Thus, the juxtaposition emphasizes the multiplicity of America, which is replicated within the grand hallway of this very *masjid*.

I am looking for a friendly face, wondering who exactly passed on my email address to Anita, an African-American sister within the community who seems to be the host of tonight's Sisters' gathering. A large table of food is set up for some kind of a celebration. Upon further inspection, I realize it is a *hakika*, a baby shower, for a little girl born to one of the congregants. The proud parents are seated next to a table with flowers, gifts and a sign with the baby's name. Behind them is the expansive prayer area which is mostly empty—although I do notice a couple changing a baby's diaper on the floor as well as few men praying beyond them.

I begin to wonder if it is some kind of a Muslim holiday or one of those special-holy nights which can often attract Muslims to the mosque at nightfall. However, not all of the fury in and around the mosque is religious in nature. I quickly surmise that these people are here to hang out and mingle with their brethren Muslims; it just so happens that the mosque serves as the locus. I start a conversation with a South-Asian-looking woman who also seems lost in the sizable mosque and she informs me that besides the

hakika, she is also here for the Sisters' knitting class. We congratulate the new mother and make our way to the corner corridor, beyond the café where I spot an African-American sister who along with others is setting up some yarn and knitting needles. I assume this is one of the women who invited me and I introduce myself. Anita is indeed the sister who sent me an email inquiring about my research study and followed up with an invitation to the Sisters' knitting group that she had just started. Tonight is their first meeting.

An hour later, nearly twenty women are cozily placed in a quiet corner of the mosque and enjoying a game of "name round-robin." This, along with other icebreakers, makes way for us (or at least me) to feel more at ease and helps *me* feel more confident about coming to the mosque on Saturday night. Why not? Why can't I come to the mosque on a Saturday night instead of staying at home and hosting the usual dinner party with my cousin and his wife or friends who seem to be on the complete opposite spectrum of these women? At that moment I realize that *this* is what I have chosen to do and this is where my passion lies. I am here because I want to learn more about these sisters among whom I sit. I want to absorb their words and actions. Despite having spent the last year priming for this research and reading "everything" on the topic, I feel that it is within these women and their narratives that the true authority lies. All of the academic theories and jargon have not equipped me to explicate *their* experiences. If other Muslim women throughout the world choose to pray at home, then why do women in America, particularly African-American women, choose to enter the mosque? My goal is to listen, observe and distill from their very own expressions the reason they are here and choose to participate in the mosque.

As part of our introduction, each woman is supposed to share something interesting or unique about herself. I choose to share the fact that "in the last nine months I have attended more mosques, between the Northeast and Southern California, then ever before in my life and for once my mother would be proud!" This lets out a great roll of laughter from the women as winks, nods and high-fives are shared in appreciation as they too recognize the complicated relationship one can have with one's *iman*,[1] thus in turn the mosque—and definitely with one's mother.

I had spent the previous nine months "mosque hopping" all throughout Southern California and New England. I attended *jummahs*,[2] *walimas*,[3] lectures, and *halakas*[4] at predominantly African-American mosques along with some immigrant mosques, such as the one I find myself at this evening. All of the mosques that I visited were unique in their own ways. Some were new and some were old. Some had partitions to segregate the sexes and some were open. Some had imams and some did not. Some seemed progressive and some stuck in a time capsule. Some were warm and friendly while some seemed intimidating. Some mosques even seemed feminine while some seemed very masculine. Nonetheless, amongst all these varying shades of characteristics, they revealed to me a very intimate and nuanced portrait of indigenous Islam.

Another icebreaker game reveals that at *least* ten to fifteen nationalities are represented in the group of twenty or so women. These sisters come from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eretria, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Pakistan,

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[1] A believers "faith."

[2] Friday prayer.

[3] Wedding reception.

[4] Islamic recitation and discussions.

and Chechnya along with the indigenous Muslim women who are represented by a Native American sister and numerous African-American women. One of the women I recognized from the *halaal* market close to my house, whom I always presumed to be of Arab decent, shared that she was in fact Puerto-Rican—and was fluent in *Urdu*. All this added to the texture and contours of my experience within the mosque at the Sisters' knitting group.

Above and beyond their ethnicities, there lies a great mixture in their capabilities, professions and aspirations. They are homemakers, teachers, psychotherapists, students, social workers, body healers, doctors, and lawyers as well as mothers. Again, I cannot help but surmise that the American *ummah* conjoins all to create a very diverse community that not only draws from the whole globe but is the model of American multiplicity.

Toward the end of the evening, one of my previously interviewed informants, Rashida, appears with her daughter. Hesitant to seem too friendly, I nod and smile. She approaches me and gives me a big hug and introduces me to her daughter. I quickly realize that this social butterfly of the mosque is the one who connected me to Anita and this is surely part of the vetting process to which I have grown accustomed: the sisters wanted us to cross paths in a more social setting before committing to sit down with me for a one-on-one recorded interview. As the evening winds down, I find myself answering questions and describing my research to Anita along with five other African-American sisters who give the impression that they are titillated, suspicious but mostly importantly refreshed by my efforts. A Moroccan sister shyly steps forward and volunteers to be interviewed, as she does not know that I am seeking out African-

American informants only. I kindly explain that her experiences as a North African woman in America are very different from those of the "indigenous Muslims," and that I myself as an "immigrant Muslim" would not qualify for the study either. She seems a bit perplexed and saddened to be left out but continues her attempts to help me. She informs me that she knows the "African-American brother who is the security guard at the front entrance and could petition him on my behalf." I jokingly blurt out, "I don't care about the men, I am here for the women!" Again, I clarify to my North African Muslim sister that my project focuses solely on African-American Muslim women and their very distinctive relationship with the mosque. This makes the African-American sisters giggle, an endorsement of sorts of my research as they are the nucleus of study. Thus, two and half interviews are secured after I have spent nearly 45 minutes discussing my thesis project.

Over my failed attempts at knitting, I am also asked what prompted me to study this particular topic, a question I have grown accustomed to answering. My response: as a Pakistani-American, I never really knew or observed women to participate or engage within the mosque—neither in Southern California, where I grew up, nor in Pakistan where I was born and often visited. Neither my mother, her sisters nor my grandmother really attended the mosque. In fact, one of the only memories I had of being at the mosque was for my grandmother's funeral. With the exception of a newer trend of *Eid* celebrations, women and families did not attend regular *jummah* prayers or partake in any mosque activities.

Besides Pakistan, I have also noticed during my many trips to various Muslim countries that women do not seem to be part of the makeup of the mosques.[5] I distinctly remember being in *Dhab*, Egypt during *Eid Ul-Fitr* of 2007, when the hotel staff invited my brother, Adeel, to join them for the prayers the next morning. They wanted to show my younger brother, an American-born Pakistani, how the Egyptians did *Eid*. I inquired whether the women also prayed and the men informed me something to the effect of "not in public." With the exception of one mosque in Damascus, all the other major mosques I visited from Istanbul to Fez and various other major cities revealed to me that women were not significant participants in the mosque.

My childhood experiences and observations often come as a surprise if not as a shock to the African-American sisters. Most often, the women, after being surprised to hear of my upbringing, go on to speculate that it is probably because the women of Pakistan and other Islamic societies are "oppressed." Tonight another sister, adorned in a black burka with silver embroidery, explains that in her opinion it is due to the lack of hunger for the *deen*—and that living in an Islamic society makes one "burned out" on Islam and in turn not as appreciative as those who choose to convert. From her perspective, the women who choose to embrace Islam and surrender to Allah do so "freely"—as was the case for her and most indigenous Muslimas—and thus find themselves attempting to quench the thirst for Islamic knowledge.

Atish, from Indonesia, a doctoral student in engineering at MIT, interjects that in her homeland there are great cultural variances in the praxis of Islam from island to island. Atish informs us that one of the major islands sees women attending and

[5] With the exception of the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque in Damascus, which I visited in December 2010.

participating in the mosque on a regular basis. To her great dismay, upon arrival in the capital, Jakarta, on the island of Java, she was literally prevented from even entering a mosque. She relays a story of her attempts to attend *jummah* prayers in a large mosque in the capital city. As she approached the mosque, several men glared at her to dissuade her from entering. She was met by an elderly gentleman at the gates who again discouraged her from entering the mosque altogether. Upon her insistence that she wanted to partake in the *jummah* services, a young boy was recruited to walk her through the back of the mosque to deliver her to a small room that smelled bad and was simultaneously used as a storage room. Atish left without making her *jummah* prayers.

Atish's story and my upbringing remind us that the praxis of the Islam is not monolithic across the globe, as well as having great cultural diversity even within the largest Muslim nation in the world: Indonesia. All religions are saturated with culture, and as Clifford Geertz states, "the meaning of any theology in terms of an individual's orthodoxy and orthopraxy varies."[6] This is also the case for Islam in America.

After dropping Rashida and her daughter off, I drive home satisfied, but more importantly reinvigorated and recharged. I am still thinking, though, of the disturbing phone conversation I had earlier in the same day. A woman whom I had never met had emailed me to inquire further about my research project and wanted to talk on the phone. With nothing to hide, I called the woman and began to answer her inquiries. She informed me that she was not interested in participating in my study but rather had "concerns" about my research as she had received several phone calls from throughout Southern California from women complaining and worried about what I was doing. The woman on the other side of the country berated me for having the gall to come in and try

[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 90.

to study African-American Muslim women whilst not being either. I cannot help but compare this particular phone conversation with the interactions of the evening or with a dozen other calls I have had throughout the last six months. Not a single one of those calls questioned my intentions, though a very inquisitive sister Diya from Los Angeles did ask, "We are all looking forward to meeting you and having you visit our mosque, however, some sisters are wondering if you are Black and Muslim?" I answered the question honestly and it did not result in a single cancelation. To my surprise I had a 100% fulfillment rate for interviews.

The culmination of that day's events led me into deep introspection. A few days of consultation with respected colleagues at my university, my advisor, and a wise sage made me believe more than ever before that this story needed to be told. Some of the best-respected scholars of African-American Islam, or what I will refer to as "indigenous Islam," include ethnographers who are insiders (such as Jamillah Karim, Aminah Beverly McCloud, and Debra Majeed) and outsiders (such as Carolyn Rouse and Robert Dannin) who are non-Muslim and white. I find that I am somewhere in between, an outsider who can get in. With this research, my aim is to inaugurate a deeper or more nuanced understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Along with embedding myself in their Islam, their mosques, and their activities, I hope to ascertain their narratives.

At hand is a qualitative study that aims to answer a very basic question: Why do African-American Muslim women participate or engage themselves within the mosque? What are the impetuses that beckon them to attend *jummah* prayers in higher numbers than immigrant Muslim women and why do two-thirds of Black mosques have women on

the board of directors? This is not a comparative study; rather it is a phenomenological study[7] which aims to present the "essence" or conscious effort from the perspective of African-American Muslim women of *their* experiences of engaging within the mosque. Secondarily, this study attempts to tease out how and why the mosque, instead of another locus, become an important performative space for African-American women.

What I share is what I have found to be the case in two different regions of this country. These results are based on my observations of, conversations with and reflection on my pool of informants. I am optimistic that they will add to the small but fast-developing canon of literature on the topic and on the overarching issues faced by African-American Muslim women. *Here lie the answers from the experts on their very own lives.*

[7] Phenomenological inquiry, as described by John W. Creswell, *Research and Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications: 2003), 15. "Research in which the researcher identifies the 'essence' of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the 'lived experiences' marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationship of meaning."

Chapter II

Background

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." Today, the weekly praxis of *jummah* houses African-American, Anglo and Latino-American Muslim converts alongside immigrant Arab, South Asian, African and European Muslims—conjoining all to produce the very diverse and distinctive American *ummah*.

Islam is one of the fastest growing segments of the American religious landscape, the American Muslim population having doubled in size in just the last decade. The combination of geopolitics and changes in immigration laws instated in the 1960s and 1970s has resulted in the migration of Muslims from all over the world. Domestically, the second half of the twentieth century has witnessed an ascension of Islam in the American religious mosaic, compelling converts from all walks of American life to embrace Islam as an underpinning of their identity. Experts on Islam in America, such as Yvonne Haddad, Aminah McCloud, and Sherman Jackson, posit that this burgeoning cohort predominantly attracts African Americans, who easily make up 30% to 40% of the of all the Muslims in America.[8] Haddad goes on to reveal that what is most astonishing *and* perhaps antithetical to prevailing Western notions on Islam is that female converts

[8] Aminah B. McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 2. Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerian: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

outnumber men on a scale of four to one—with a majority of converts identifying as African American.[9]

According to the Mosque Study of 2011, sponsored by a coalition of organizations,[10] the highest average of female attendees at *jummah* occurs in African-American mosques,[11] where 23% of attendees are women. This number is considerably higher when compared against predominantly immigrant mosques, where the female attendance rate for *jummah* is only 16%. This survey also identified African-American mosques as being more likely to have women serve on their mosque boards, at a rate of 75%, implying that African-American mosques have a higher female engagement rate than their immigrant counterparts.[12] This thesis aims to analyze the religiosity of African-American Muslim women—who now constitute the majority of the converts of the fastest growing religion of America—and the praxis of their faith vis-à-vis their engagement within the mosque. The primary intent of this qualitative study is to understand the "essence" of the perspective of African-American Muslim women on their experiences when engaging within the mosque. In other words, how and why did the mosque, instead of another locus, become an important performative space for African-American women?

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[9] Yvonne Y. Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (Oxford: Oxford Universtiy Press, 2006), 41-42.

[10] Hartfor Institute for Religion (Hartford Seminary), Association of Statisticians of Amerian Relgious Bodies (ASARB), Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the International Institute of Islam Thought (IIIT).

[11] The definition of mosque for the purpose of this study is as per listed by the American Mosque Study.

[12] Aisha Al-Adawiya, Ihsan Bagby, and Sarah Sayeed, *US Mosque Study 2011: Women and the American Mosque,* Report Number 3 (March 2013): 4-16.

"Research has shown that religion and spirituality are particularly salient among African-American women and are sources of strength, identity, and empowerment."[13] In Islam, as explicated by McCloud, no persons embody God's Divine authority; each individual is expected to become knowledgeable and responsible for his/her actions to God. Islam does not have ordained clergy or a centralized church.[14] In regards to the praxis of *jummah*, John L. Esposito explains, attending *jummah* or the mosque is not compulsory for women as it is for men; however, studies have shown a higher level of engagement by African-American women than their immigrant counterparts.[15] It is possible that African-American Muslim women choose to make Islam a salient aspect of their overall identity as they feel "divorced" from mainstream American society. Research has shown that the praxis related to religion and spirituality is central to African-American women's ability to cope with adversities of their lives, and the mosque provides these women with a venue for this praxis.[16]

Rubina Ramji states, "How Muslims understand themselves to be American has become of central concern since the tragic events of 9/11, given the rising level of anti-Islamic sentiment in North America and in other parts of the Western World."[17] Despite

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[13] Joretha Bourjolly and Roberta Sands, "African American Women's Experiences around Conversion to Islam," *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 32, no.1 (2013): 16-17.

[14] Aminah McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America Set.* ed. Rosemary S. Keller and Rosemary R. Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 610.

[15] John L. Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239.

[16] Bourjolly and Sands, "African American Women's Experiences," 17.

[17] Rubina Ramji, "Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today," Review of *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, ed.

scholarly attention to this concern, there is still a gap in knowledge on the topic of African-American Muslim women. In the post-9/11 context there has been much consideration placed on Islam and Muslims in America, with a focus on immigrant Muslims and their "encounter" with religio-political issues. However, African-American Muslims and, in particular, Black women are missing from these conversations. Considering that African-American women make up at least 50% of the fastest growing religious cohort within America, research on this population is essential. The aim of this thesis is to shed light on African-American Muslim women's religiosity and how it is formed, informed, and influenced through the mosque.

Since the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent war(s) on terror, the image of the American Muslim has become conflated with that of nefarious foreign elements. Under the guise of national security and world peace, discourse on Islamic praxis has been hijacked. Islamophobic rhetoric has dominated the American public, further fueling misconceptions about Islam in America.[18] A general sense of fear or, at best, suspicion has fallen upon the entire American *ummah*, as Jamillah Karim observes: "all American Muslims—black, white and immigrant—face the common struggle to project Muslims as a positive force in America."[19]

Yvonne Y. Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 4 (2011): 844.

[18] See such surveys such as, "American Public Opinion about Islam and Muslims" by Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2006 and 2004. <https://www.cair.com/images/pdf/american_public_ opinion_on_muslims_islam_2006.pdf>.

[19] Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the Ummah* (New York: New York University Press 2009), 126.

There is no unanimity on how to describe or estimate the total number of Muslims in America, as specific figures are wide-ranging.[20] Since, the U.S. Census is prohibited by law from asking questions about religious belief and affiliation and Muslim Americans comprise such a small percentage of the American population, the general population surveys are not sufficient to permit meaningful analysis.[21] According to a 2010 Pew survey, of the total 1.6 billion Muslims globally, less than 1% live in America, a number that has doubled since the attacks of 9/11, making Islam the fastest growing religion of the past decade. According to some projections, this growth rate will continue on its current trajectory and even increase. By 2030, Muslims will account for 1.7% of the American population, nearly double the current population.[22] Other estimates by Muslim advocacy groups such as the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) challenge the aforementioned reports and postulate that there are somewhere between 6 to 7 million Muslims living in the United States.[23] While the exact number of American Muslims remains unclear, McCloud points out, "the only numbers that researchers agree on are that close to half of all Muslims are African-American and half of them women. Using the prevailing figures, it is estimated that there are approximately 4 to 5 million

[20] For varying estimates and explanation see: Euro-Islam.info, US Country Profile < http://www.euro-islam.info/country-profiles/united-states/> or Pew Research Center 2007 report "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Chapter 1.

[21] Pew Research Center. 2007. "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream" Washington DC: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

[22] Pew Research Center. 2012. "The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010." Washington DC: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>.

[23] CAIR, "What about the American Muslim community?" March 19, 2015, <http://www.cair.com/american-muslims/about-islam.html>.

African-American Muslims today, and since there are slightly more males than females, a little less than 2.5 million are women all of these numbers are growing."[24]

Existing research also points to African Americans and, Black women in particular, as being some of the most religious people in the world.[25] A report titled "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans"—by the Pew Research Foundation in 2009—concluded that nationally, "African-American women also stand out for their high level of religious commitment...No group of men or women from any other racial or ethnic background exhibits comparably high levels of religious observance."[26] Interestingly, these high religiosity tendencies seem to translate over to African-American Muslims as well. A 2007 Pew survey, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," revealed that native-born Muslims, especially African-Americans, were more likely to attend mosque weekly than were foreign-born Muslims.[27] In the same survey, when asked "Do you think of yourself first as an American or first as a Muslim?" 58% of African-Americans chose Muslim as their first choice versus 28% who chose American first. Such trends designate African-American Muslims, and Black women in particular, as possessing high levels of religiosity as they choose to make Islam a salient aspect of their identity.

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[24] McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," 608.

[25] Bourjolly and Sands, "African American Women's Experiences," 16.

[26] Neha Sahga, and Greg Smith, "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans," Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2009 <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>.

[27] Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.* Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2007, 24 <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

As Sulayman S. Nayang explains, "American Muslims consist of two branches, the immigrants and the native-born Americans. Within both are subgroups that must be taken into account when talking about Muslims in the U.S."[28] In regards to the "native-born," historian Sylviane A. Diouf posits that "with a documented presence of five hundred years, Islam was, after Catholicism, the second monotheist religion introduced into Columbian America."[29] Her book, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas,* along with other new histories, such as *African Muslims in Antebellum America* by Allan D. Austin, have undeniably established Islam to be as native or intrinsic to the Americas as the African slaves themselves.[30] However, despite encountering such overwhelming evidence, it is still inconceivable for most Americans to readily recognize (or comprehend) that nearly half of all American Muslims may possess intrinsic roots to this country before it was even a country. Aminah McCloud advances the sentiment that even though Islam is "over fourteen centuries old, [...] as an American religion, it is relatively new to the consciousness of U.S. citizens."[31]

Pairing these "native," or what I will be referring to as "indidgenous," African-American Muslims with the recently arrived immigrant branch of Muslims in America, the path of least resistance for American conventions has been rooted in notions of Orientalism—which categorically essentializes and exoticizes *all* Muslims as the "other."

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[28] Sulayman S. Nyang, "Seeking the Religious Roots of Pluralism in the United States of America: An American Muslim Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 3 (Summer, 1997): 416

[29] Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 179.

[30] Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America* (New York: Routledge Press, 1997).

[31] McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," 608.

This "otherness" was only reinforced by the events of September 11, 2001: "September 11th and its aftermath solidified the idea that Islam in American is only the Islam of foreigners…Once I was excluded from being a legitimate spokesperson, I became an observer…" writes Amina Wadud, an African-American Muslim female theologian,[32] professor emerita of Islamic Studies and outspoken activist, of her experiences when discussing the state of Islam in America.[33] Wadud goes on to explain that by rendering all Muslims as "foreign" or "other" the stage was set for a litany of public scrutiny and denigration of the American *ummah.* This *ummah,* despite being multi-faceted, diverse and significantly native, finds itself on the margins of American society.

For the Black Muslims of America, this marginalization or "exoticized othering," compounded with longstanding racial tensions, has culminated in a sort of discontinuation or "divorcing" from their chosen faith. Today, when Americans envisage Islam in America, they fail to acknowledge, or overlook, the presence of Muslims—the Black Muslims of America. For Amina Wadud, just like many other African-Americans, this "divorcing" was at the behest of the American public at large, but was further compounded by the inter-*ummah* politics of race and gender.[34] Aminah McCloud, an expert on African-American Islam and one of the only experts on the lives of African-American Muslim women, explicates this divorcing or "othering":

> The situating of the American empire in an increasingly complex social and political world has caused some extreme reactions in American society. Along with vilification of Islam and Muslims

[32] The only African-American female theologian in the United States.

[33] Amina Wadud, "American by Force, Muslim by Choice," *Political Theology* 12, no. 5 (2011): 701.

[34] See Wadud's discussion on not being recognized as a "legitimate spokesperson" as per her race and her gender. Wadud, "American by Force, Muslim by Choice," 701.

> in a war on terror, there is the effort to rewrite American history…As presidential candidate and ex-Senator Barak Hussein Obama, although not Muslim but possessed of an African Muslim name, was berated in the media for his Muslim ancestry. Most strikingly, presidential candidate Obama's name became a new signifier for some Americans' racial and religious fears, while a beacon of hope for African descended Muslims to receive some positive attention even if peripheral. Yet, issues of [his] identity and authenticity are persistently raised.[35]

In fact, up until the late 20th century, Black Muslims constituted the majority of the Muslims on the continent and the face of Islam in America.[36] Professor Sulayman Nyang, an expert on the topic and co-investigator of the project "Muslims in the American Public Square," an initiative to foster greater understanding of Islam and Muslims in the US, explains in an interview with Allison Keyes of NPR: "Prior to the terror attacks on September 11th, when most Americans thought of Muslims they thought of the honorable Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam."[37] Starting in 1975, thousands of African Americans left the Black Nationalist movement of the Nation of Islam to follow the *Sunni* Reformation of the NOI led by Elijah Muhammad's son, Imam Wallace D. Muhammad.[38] Upon the death of Elijah Muhammad (the leader of the Nation of Islam from 1933 to 1975), Imam Wallace D. Muhammad "inherited the mantle of leadership from his father in 1975 and then led the movement through remarkable transformation toward the universalistic interpretation of

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[35] Aminah McCloud "African American Islam: A Reflection," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 9 (2010): 544.

[36] Such as Elijah Mohammad, Malcolm X, Mohammad Ali and Louise Farrakhan.

[37] "A History of Black Muslim in America," narrated by Allison Keyes. News and Notes. *NPR News.* August 23, 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4811402>.

[38] Edward E. Curtis, *Islam in Black America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 113.

Islam...and aligned NOI with Sunni Islamic teaching and the Arab Islamic world."[39]

However, as Jamillah Karim explains, despite this monumental exodus, the revolutionary stance of the Nation of Islam left a lasting mark on African Americans' perceptions of Islam and remains a symbol of resistance to anti-Black racism.[40] Conversely, as McCloud posits, this image is seared into the psyche of white America, as "Black Islam" has been stereotyped to represent Black Nationalism and Black protest.[41] Today, African-American Muslims find themselves at a crossroads, where they must re-negotiate their binary identity to not only prove their "Americaness," but also authenticate their "Muslimness," all while dealing with persistent racial tensions. The perceived dichotomy engendered by American society as a whole is further compounded from within the *ummah*—where African-American Muslims are finally challenging the traditional immigrant Muslims' hegemonic role as the "true" keepers of Islam in America. Thus, by confronting Islamic thought and sources directly rather than relying on others to interpret them,[42] African-American Muslims have avowed the primal importance of Sunni Islamic traditions and norms.[43]

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[39] Curtis, *Islam in Black America,* 107.

[40] Karim, *American Muslim Women,* American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the *Ummah*.

[41] Aminah B. McCloud, "African-American Muslim Intellectual Thought," *Souls* 9, no. 2 (April-June, 2007): 172.

[42] This is in relation to such movements as NOI, the Ahmiddya's, and Temple Moor Societies as well as the later years of the 20th century and the "Sunni Reformation," where African-American Muslims were not reading the Quran directly. Rather they were relying on the interpretations of the various leaders' interpretations. Toward the latter part to of the 20th century a push was made, with the help of W.D. Muhammad, for Muslims to learn Arabic as well as learn and interpret the Quran for themselves. See Curtis, *Islam in Black America.*

[43] Curtis, *Islam in Black America,* 124-127.

The dichotomy within Black Islam in America has brought to fruition a whole generation of Black Muslims who espouse themselves to follow the path of Sunni Islam. In the post-9/11 context, these second- and third-generation Black Muslims—particularly women—have emerged from the shadows of monumental men such as Malcolm X and Ali, and are steadily gaining control of Islam in America and its narrative.[44] These orthodox Black Sunni Muslims are emancipating their identity and religiosity to no longer be undermined by previous years' affiliations with the politics of the Black Nationalist movements, or conflated with foreign-born terrorists. McCloud describes their Islamic ideology as not the child of Black Nationalism; rather, this ideology is fundamental to the notion that "Muslims [must] strive to discover the Divine Will but no one has the authority to lay an exclusive claim to it."[45]

In *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, Robert Dannin's ethnographic work sheds light on the incentive behind the conversions of African-American men and women. He notes the duality in the struggle for these minorities, as African-American Muslims try to survive in a society where they are a racial and religious minority.[46] Dannin's book surmises that the coalescing of discipline, community, and a sense of "otherness" within American society seems to be the most salient explanation for how and why Islam helps ease the oppression and marginalization of the African-American community as a whole.

The impetus to embrace Islam is more nuanced for African-American women, and has not garnered ample study. Of the limited scholarship that focuses specifically on

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[44] McCloud "African American Islam," 538.

[45] McCloud, "African-American Muslim Intellectual Thought," 177.

[46] Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford Universtiy Press, 2002).

African-American Muslim women and the formation of their religiosity, there is often a common theme of serious "disillusionment with Christianity and even more dismay about life without a religion that honored them as women."[47] Aminah McCloud, an African-American convert herself, was one of the first scholars to examine African-American female converts. She notes that the appeal to Islam has been tremendous for African Americans as they yearned to be acknowledged as fully human in light of the burning of crosses by the Christian Ku Klux Klan.

A more recent work of ethnographic scholarship by Carolyn Moxley Rouse titled *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* and Jamillah Karim's *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the Ummah* both highlight that for most African-American Muslim women, Islam serves to establish clear rights for women, provides respect, and places emphasis on a family structure that is headed by a patriarch. These attributes and rights provided by Islam empower African-American women to combat the social ill of oppression based on gender, class and race: "By reviving a conservative, patriarchal ethos and simultaneously raising the banner of racial opposition, the Muslim movement displays tremendous potential to rally traditionalists alongside discontents."[48] Rouse notes that in converting or "surrendering"[49] to Islam these women are empowered to live new lives that engage their political consciousness but also produce a spiritual and social epiphany.[50]

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[47] McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," 609.

[48] Carolyn Rouse, *Engaged Surrender, African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20.

[49] Islam means surrender or submission to the will of God. See Esposito, *Islam*, 68.

[50] Rouse, *Engaged Surrender, African American Women and Islam,* 20.

The distillation of such ethnographic research points to African-American Muslim women as having a great desire to express their religiosity in a public and outward manner, perhaps in an effort to solidify their Islamic identity via the mosque. By making religion a salient aspect of their overall identity, African-American Muslim women are able to empower themselves. The mosque provides these women a unique refuge where cultural and historical commonalities function to form a distinctive sisterhood and community. This identity formation is in part informed by their engagement in the mosque via *jummah*, which provides a visage that enables the practitioner to solidify his or her Islamic identity and make it public.

One of the first reasons for the higher engagement of African-American women than other Muslim women is pragmatic, as those who convert seek out knowledge about their newfound faith and do so via the mosque and its related networks. Since there is no intermediary between a Muslima and her god, this education must be self-directed. The "American Mosque Study" proposes that, with the rapid increase of Muslims in America, including converts, the American mosque has seen an increased demand for religious education.[51] African-American women's need and desire for religious education matches, if not exceeds, that of their immigrant counterparts. Furthermore, these converts are in need of edification for their children and thus turn to the mosque and its networks as a locus of knowledge that will assist in the search for individual truths. For African-

[51] Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Survey 2011, Activities, Administration, and Vitality of the American Mosque*, Report Number 2 (May 2012): 4-11.

American women, the derivative of this truth comes through a unique lens, intersecting with, and compounded by, racial, class, and gender oppression.[52]

The second reason for engagement in the mosque in the mosque suggests that the mosque solidifies the social identity derived from the commonalities of African-American women's experiences. As McCloud and Karim describe throughout their works, by turning to Islam, African-American women enter into a whole new worldview which forces them to surrender their previous lives. However, at times this "surrender" comes at the price of separating emotionally and spiritually from the non-Muslim families to some extent. To compensate for these lost or loosened bonds, there is a need for close relationships to be formed with others within the *ummah*.[53] The implication of this shift in worldview is that African-American Muslim women seek out kinship within the mosque. By converting to Islam, these women have either left behind, or found themselves distanced from family and friends. By engaging or merging their lives within the mosque, they encounter other women who have recently completed or are in the midst of this same process of conversion or surrender. The mosque creates a space where women create new social networks and families that are better equipped to meet their changing physical and emotional needs.

Lastly, beyond identifying as Muslim in America, African-American women must cope with stereotypes, imposed by American society, which further deepen their bonds with other African-American and Muslim women in general. These bonds are forged and fostered through the mosque. Jamillah Karim's extensive ethnographic study analyzes

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[52] Pamela J. Prickett, "Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque," *Gender and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2015): 51.

[53] McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," 617-618.

the nuanced intra-*ummah* politics of race and religion. In *American Muslim Women,* she analyzes "how religious identity influences race relations and how race affects religious identity. [She asks] what is the meaning of the ummah, or shared religious identity, in a racialized society?"[54] Though there are no clear answers, for African-American Muslim women, participating in and practicing their chosen faith comes at the cost of not only being a minority within their own religion but also participating in a religion whose practice is wrongly steeped in misogyny. Therefore, in the daily performance of their faith, Islam, these women must challenge the legitimacy of American assumptions about race, gender, class, family and community.[55] Compounded by the intra-*ummah* prejudices or segregation, the African-American mosque becomes more important as it provides an escape from these pressures and a place to engage directly with the source of Islam. This engagement liberates these women to fight the patriarchal and racist trends that are frequently at the core of their life experience.

[54] Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the Ummah,* 6.

[55] Rouse, *Engaged Surrender*, 9.

Chapter III

Methodology

For this ethnographic study, I chose New England and Southern California as the two sites for my fieldwork. These geographies were chosen primarily based on demographics and secondarily based on convenience.

Geography

Despite being a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts for the preceding seven years, I chose to include Southern California due to its large concentration of Muslims and specifically African-American Muslims. According to the PEW Religious Landscape Study, California houses the largest number of Muslims in America.[56] As a native of Southern California, I found the added advantage of having greater familiarity with and admittance to many of the Muslim communities with which I came into contact.

In New England the number of Muslims is not large enough to approximate California's high concentration; however, Muslims still account for nearly 1% of the population. Based on preliminary research, the longstanding history of the African-American Muslim communities in Boston, and the fact that Boston boasts the second-largest mosque on the East Coast, this seemed an ideal location. For similar reasons, I initially planned on including Atlanta or Chicago. However, due to time constraints I

[56] PEW Research Center. 2014. "Religious Landscape Study." http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/

was unable to include those cities. Continued research in this area would ideally include the aforementioned locations.

At the local level, the objective or purpose of this research project was not intended to be specific to any particular mosque or institution. Above all, my aim was *not* to exclusively seek out African-American mosques to enlist study participants. Rather I directed my project toward the African-American women with whom I was easily able to connect—which in turn directed me to enter *their* religious landscape. Synergistically, I decided on field visits to mosques and other religious loci, based on where my study participants engaged themselves for their spiritual and/or religious needs.

Logistics

To begin, I met with and consulted several imams and community leaders, both male and female and including African-American Muslim women. Each mosque I encountered had an open-door policy and all were welcome at any time, as this is the general nature of Sunni mosques. Even so, I took extreme caution and did not enter a house of worship without first being invited by a congregant nor did I enter without a discussion with the imam and/or the staff of the mosque. Not one time was I discouraged from entering a mosque, its affiliated spaces, or events. The congregants, staff and the imams always took time to welcome me and offer assistance throughout the process.

During this time, my gender, ethnicity and religious background helped inform me of the multitude of sensitivities of the project at hand. My familiarity with the *topoi* of Islam and its associated customs helped me communicate more smoothly with the imams and the Muslim community. This familiarity and the fact that I am a Pakistani

woman served as sources of comfort to most of those I interviewed and thus helped facilitate the process. Despite the ethnic disparity between myself and the subjects, I felt well positioned to move ahead with the research. Furthermore, I believe my educational background and passion for this project helped convey my desire to approach the topic with the utmost caution and respect.

Concurrently, I obtained ethics training related to human subjects through Harvard's Instructional Review Board (IRB) along with IRB approval, which exempted my study protocol per the regulations found at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). Where appropriate, I provided a copy of these credentials or information regarding IRB review/approval of my study protocol. Lastly, the IRB deemed that my study-protocol could employ an oral consent which would be audio recorded along with the interviews, thus reducing further impediments to study participation.

Sampling

Due to the sensitive and hidden nature of the research topic and population, I chose to utilize snowball sampling for recruitment of participants. A few preliminary informants led to a chain of referrals which at times provided me with multi-generational study participants. Two sets of mother-daughter interviews were conducted along with multiple siblings within families.[57] This provided a deeper and more expansive view of my subjects' religiosity from multiple perspectives, as it pertained to the mosque. Due to the nature of this type of sampling, the progression of chain referrals led me to micro-communities within broader regional communities. Again, this helped provide deeper

[57] Each participant was interviewed separately but administered the same questionnaire.

insights into how and why these micro-communities related to the mosque. Some outlier participants were included in my research, but for the most part the chain of referrals seemed to incorporate cohorts via common places of worship, social settings, and/or job sites.

In addition to the recorded interviews, a few women chose to engage with me without wanting to be recorded. They felt they could better illuminate the topic by providing some background or context to my enquiries. At no point did I ever "cold call" anyone nor approach an unknown participant without an introduction or referral. I primarily encouraged the participants to make first contact with me via email and or phone.

Interviews

Before commencing each face-to-face interview, I strived to make my participants comfortable by engaging in casual conversation and inviting them to first ask questions. This humanistic approach was meant to build rapport and gain credibility. In cases where the interviewees did not have any questions or concerns, I made sure to interact with them and contextualize my research by providing some background information. Quite often, these humanistic approaches roused and incited participants to enquire about my own background, religiosity, choice of protocols and particularly *my* motivations for studying this particular subject. At every point of this research I made great efforts to truthfully answer any and all questions in order to reduce apprehensions.

One of the most common enquiries related to what my "angle" or position was. I conveyed that my research did not employ any explicit theories, which meant that I was

not "boxed" into any pre-conceived notions. Due to the qualitative nature of my study, I intended to let the essence of the participants' experience guide me to the explanation of the central phenomenon. In a simple manner I conveyed that my goal was to understand the truth from what I was exposed to—this seemed to reassure the participants that I had no hidden agenda. Before starting the formal interview, I administered an oral consent via a script provided to me by Harvard IRB that was audio recorded. This consent made clear that participation was voluntary and that the interview could be stopped at any point.

Questionnaires

The interview process incorporated an initial set of qualitative, open-ended questions, which were intended to stimulate conversation regarding each participant's experiences with and relating to the mosque. These questions were tailored to topics and variables that I estimated to be significant. However, as the research progressed, common themes began to emerge and therefore I refined my interview questions with probing questions to elicit responses on the new topics. I used probing questions to steer the conversations toward the women's relationship and praxis of their faith vis-à-vis the mosque while keeping in mind the aim of investigating the *lived experience* of each participant. Thus, I would not label these interviews as strictly structured; rather they are synchronized to each individual's responses and answers.

The abovementioned system helped me formulate and expand my initial questionnaire, which also snowballed with the progression of the study. Interestingly enough, many participants elected to broach topics or revisit questions once the recorder

was turned off. I respected their choices, but noticed some patterns emerge within the study as to which topics were most often evaded while being "on the record." A few participants decided to contact me at a later time to explicate or add to their initial insights. Again, patterns emerged as to which questions and or topics they chose to further expound upon.

During the interviews, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewee's behaviors and took written notes documenting such things as clothing, head covering or lack thereof, demeanor, tone, body language, reactions to particular questions, and reactions to our surroundings. I also noted which answers or topics to follow up on—and why. The locations for our interviews were mostly chosen by the participants and led to me several home visits, offices, coffee shops, libraries and mosques. The commonalities of data helped coalesce multiple emerging themes in the context of grounded theory. Out of respect for my participants' privacy, I have used pseudonyms to refer to all who participated in my research interviews, as well as employing fictitious names for their mosques and affiliated religious communities.

Field Research

My field visits consisted mostly of *jummahs* and other activities related to the mosques. Many of the social events that I attended were made known to me by my informants and or participants. In the case of more intimate gatherings such as *hakikas* (similar to baby showers) or *walimas* (wedding receptions), I only attended in cases where I was directly invited by the congregants. At such functions I did not take notes during the event; rather I chose to participate along with my hosts and document the

occasion at a later time. My aim was to avoid being disruptive or disrespectful with anyone with whom I came into contact. Lastly, I made an effort to visit the surrounding areas of each of the mosques to gain a better understanding of the communities within which each of my interviewees engaged for their spiritual and religious needs.

Limitations

Academically, a great deal of research is being carried out to further understand the "Muslims of America." In particular, such studies have sought to understand how these Muslims' inward-outward-facing worldviews (religiosity) employ, engage, and help relate them to the American *ummah* (intra-religious community) as well as to American society as a whole. Inquiry into and statistics on such broad topics as the increase in Islamophobia, increase in religiosity, identity formation amongst Muslim youth, Quranic exegesis, Muslims in the media, gender issues, terrorism, the landscape of mosques in America, and many more have garnered plenty of attention and debate. On the other hand, these studies have largely neglected African-American Muslims, despite their constituting nearly half of the American *ummah*. What has been most unsatisfactory and will be the focus of this particular study is the near-complete absence of research on issues related to African-American Muslim women and *how* they "do" religion with a particular focus on *why* they engage within the mosque.

Having stated this, the present study may suffer from a number of limitations. First, it suffers from my own bias and subjective analysis. My worldview and outlook on Islam, race, religion, gender issues, and class can greatly influence the interpretation of the data and presentation of the research report. My "immigrant Muslim background"

predisposes me to view Islam in a manner which is heavily saturated with South Asian norms and practices. In this same vein, I would not describe my background as being "Islamic," as neither my immediate nor my distant family were religious or practicing Muslims; rather, I was raised as what I call a "cultural Muslim."[58] Such self-labeling can have many connotations, but my aim is to explicate the fact that unlike indigenous Muslims, immigrant Muslims do not necessarily make a conscious decision to become Muslim. Instead it is something they are born into and is part of their character; whether they choose to make it a salient part of their identity is on a case-by-case basis. Simply put, I am labeled as a Muslim because I was born in Pakistan to a Pakistani family.

I would attribute most of my inquisitiveness and knowledge about Islam to an amalgamation of my academic studies and my "cultural Muslim" upbringing. It was not until I was mature that I truly studied Islam along with the people who practice it. Again, this occurred not in the context of "studying my religion," but rather in the context of academic religious studies for my personal growth and edification. Furthermore, the fact that I grew up from the age of seven in a very diverse Southern California affords me a lens that is embedded in a more culturally universal outlook—both in the matter of race and religion.

The second limitation from which this study may suffer runs along racial differences between the women whom I have chosen to study and me. Jamillah Karim's groundbreaking ethnographic work, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*, brings to light "[e]xisting racial, ethnic, class and gender

[58] For example, our "cultural Islam" included not dating or drinking, but also not wearing a hijab or any head covering outside of religious events and, as Jamillah Karim mentions, separating the genders at parties.

divisions [which] demonstrate that the *ummah* is not united."[59] Such divisions can serve to hinder trust and so hamper potential study enlistments or discourage women from telling the complete truth. It has been proposed that the scarcity of existing information on this topic may be due to the lack of willingness on the part of the American *ummah*, as well as the African-American community, to trust outsiders enough to allow them into their mosques and or communities. This is due to their historical experiences not only with Islamophobic practices (i.e., FBI monitoring) but also victimization caused by racial stereotyping. African-American women may be wary of outsiders or unwilling to participate in recorded interviews by an outsider who is not part of their religious and/or racial community. This wariness was one of the potential challenges I anticipated.

I also anticipated that when interviews were granted it might be difficult to gain permission to record these interviews and/or to obtain truthful answers. Such obstacles have been mentioned by Jamillah Karim, Aminah McCloud, Carolyn Rouse and Robert Dannin, who have carried out ethnographic work in this field of inquiry. Despite being an "insider," Jamillah Karim, an African-American Muslim woman, had difficulty gaining the trust of her subjects. Her ethnographic study allowed her ample time to gain that trust. For me, it was difficult to overcome such barriers in the span of few hours, as my goal was to conduct interviews which lasted 90 minutes or fewer.

The culmination of the abovementioned concerns, and others unforeseen, may serve to limit or curb the likelihood of truthful answers from interviewees. The ability to communicate honestly about one's religiosity vis-à-vis components of its orthopraxy can

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[59] Karim, *American Muslim Women,* 11.

prove to be problematic—especially in Islam.[60] Despite being assured of anonymity, some interviewees may remain suspicious, and some may be inclined to alter their answers as they may feel judged by a "Muslim sister" or by others. The dichotomy between the immigrant and indigenous Muslims is very charged as it often challenged by issues within the mosque, and can thus have a bearing on how the African-American community desires to be portrayed. Some may perceive this qualitative form of scholarship as an incursion with a predetermined agenda while others may appreciate it as a prospect to get their voices heard.[61]

[60] Given the orthopraxy nature of Islam.

[61] This sentiment was shared by many of the participants.

Chapter IV

First Generation: Transitioning to Islam

> I was not a religious person at all…. My issue was economic development.
>
> Elinor, Los Angeles, CA

> I got a chance to listen to all of Farrakhan's records and cassette tapes, and so I said, "I want [to] be that." And that's how I became Muslim. But at the time I didn't know that it was not real Islam, I just knew that I wanted to be separate from everybody else…. I had a lot more self-identity and my nationalism was confirmed, and my God wasn't a Caucasian man with blonde hair and blue eyes.
>
> Joyce, Bakersfield, CA

"As a young person, I found myself in the Nation of Islam. That was my real introduction to the moral aspects of the religion of Islam—*clearly it was not Islam*," explains Dolores. This first-generation Muslima, whose statuesque frame harmonized with her crown-like *gele*, answered with assuredness when I asked how she had encountered Islam—a paradoxical ideology that is predicated on rituals and praxis, which when put into action by the practitioner is rife with fluctuating understanding and permutations. At the same time, Islam as a religion is ideally believed to be universally consecrated in the oneness of Allah, the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadiths*). For the women of the first generation, the conversion into the Nation of Islam was driven by a desire to create external collective change, in hopes of achieving racial uplift and achieving social-justice. As the women have revealed to me, such a drastic departure from traditional religions to embrace NOI and later Islam was predicated on aspirations of "attaching" themselves to "an identity that was more

dignified than being a 'Negro' in America."[62] What began as "a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism"[63] catapulted them into a dynamic, life-long, ever-evolving, introspective, and divinely inspired journey of self-edification about the true meaning of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim. Besides mastering the "doing" of the rituals of Islam along with having *iman*,[64] the women had to unearth from within themselves the meanings behind their actions: an introspective endeavor that can also be referred to as *jihad*,[65] which to this day they strive to perfect. Even though individually they experienced the Sunnification in different ways, the transition from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam was a defining event of this generation's collective experience. The women say that over time, they did not simply follow the tenets of Islam as prescribed by the Five Pillars; rather they began deciphering the true *intentions* behind them. This was a heuristic process for which the space of the mosque and the associated community served as a nurturing and dynamic conduit. As a result, the women of the first generation possess the agency to make meaning of their Islam for themselves.

Entre to Islam: The NOI

At a young age, the first-generation Muslimas such as Dolores were enticed or rather mesmerized by the political inclinations of the proto-Islamic movements. The Nation of Islam temples served as gathering places for socially conscious nationalist

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[62] Elinor.

[63] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 4.

[64] A believers "faith," in religious belief or conviction in the fundamental doctrines of Islam. However, this faith should not be blind faith.

[65] *Jihad* means struggle or striving.

programs, which sought to rectify the shortcomings of the civil rights era. In a milieu where their identity, in the context of the America of the 1960's, was fixed along race and gender, the women felt liberated and self-assured in the nationalist group.[66] This "Black Religion," as Jackson terms it, was "essentially a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism, an orientation shared with many, though not all, *Blackamerican* Christians and Jews."[67] The narratives of the first generation women demonstrate for me that joining the Nation of Islam (NOI), for them, was a form of resistance to structural oppression. C. Eric Lincoln, writing about the appeal of the NOI and Islamic movements in general, argues that the attraction of Islam for African Americans is rooted in the notion that American Christianity offers nothing but racism for these women, whilst the Black Christian Church postures to accommodate structural oppression.[68] Consequently, in the context of indigenous Islam, it is these first-generation Muslims who incorporated Islam into the consciousness of America and perhaps even the universal *ummah*.[69]

At a time when American society was dominated by racism and white supremacy, the defiant rhetoric of Elijah Mohammad's NOI called for racial uplift based on social justice, self-reliance and most importantly economic development. Such socially conscious messages, loosely coalesced with the mystic and "Oriental" tenets of Islam, resonated with the women. More than forty years after the fact, these women, as a highly

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[66] For a discussion of the Nation's nationalism, see the discussion by Curtis in *Islam in Black America,* 12-13.

[67] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 4.

[68] C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 154. This booklet can be found in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church* in America (New York: Schocken Books, 1963).

[69] These Muslims include figures such as Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammad and Mohammad Ali.

empowered cohort, are extremely clear about their impetuses for joining the Nation. To summarize narratives that are explored in more detail below, they joined because they were experiencing a "righteous discontent" of sorts—which Dawn-Mari Gibson and Jamillah Karim, in *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam*, equate with that experienced by Black Baptist women in the South.[70] In addition, monumental leading figures such as Elijah Mohammad, Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Mohammad Ali and Angela Davis are often cited as being their role models and the "*entre"* into the Nation.

Joyce tells me that she joined the Nation because of her desire to be part of something that acknowledged her for who and what she was, a *Black Woman*, and that offered her an agentive identity:

> [We] were really impressed by Malcolm X, extremely impressed by Elijah Muhammad, and mesmerized by Louis Farrakhan. Because his eloquent speaking really spoke to the soul of African Americans and African-American men in particular. So my brothers became FOI, and I got a chance to listen to all of Farrakhan's records at that time and cassette tapes, and so I said, "I *want [to]* be that!" And that's how I became Muslim. But at the time I didn't know that it was not real Islam, I just knew that I wanted to be separate from everybody else….I had a lot more self-identity and my nationalism was confirmed, and...my God wasn't a Caucasian man with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Joyce could not hide her pleasure and excitement as she gushed about her youth. Her voice still reverberated with the fiery passion, love and admiration for the men she regarded as some of the greatest leaders to uplift the Black youth of her time. The soulful and "mesmeriz[ing]" oratory of Louis Farrakhan in particular is what sealed the deal for Joyce. Thus, at the age of sixteen Joyce followed her brothers, who were the Fruit of

[70] Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 32.

Islam (FOI),[71] into the Nation and discovered the agency and dignity that COGIC[72] and American society had denied her.

Research reveals that African-American women are some of the most religious people in the world.[73] However, Joyce's story, along with those of the other women of this cohort, alludes to something different. At the time of their encounters with the Nation, the women do not cite spirituality or religiosity as the force which pulled them in. Joyce and the others from this cohort make it clear that they were not necessarily seeking religion *per se*. Nor were they burdened with the notion of salvation and all of the *topoi* associated with such doctrines—they just wanted to be a part of something formative. They sought something that was not predicated on the color of their skin, something which would provide them agency or what Jackson alludes to as "peopleness."[74] They did not wish to pray their dissatisfaction away; instead, they chose to take action and reform themselves.

Beverly, a petite olive-skinned woman with green eyes and a dervish-like soul, shared with me her experience of being harassed on her college campus by her organic-chemistry professor: "Brother Lloyd, I remember his name, would come by every Saturday or Sunday morning, and tell me about the devil, and that was happening to me in class at the same time that I was being discriminated against." When Beverly

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[71] The security agency of the Nation of Islam, which was the male-only paramilitary wing of the Nation of Islam.

[72] Church of God in Christ

[73] See Bourjolly and Sands, Neha Sahga and Greg Smith's PEW survey. This is also discussed by Marla Frederick in, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2003).

[74] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 24.

complained to Brother Lloyd, the head of the Black Student union who happened to be Muslim, "he went and talked to the professor, and told the professor if he ever spoke [to] or humiliated me in class again, he'd break his legs." For Beverly, the practical protection offered to her by the NOI Brothers alone was enough to make her want to join, though her desire was reinforced because Christianity "didn't really do anything" for her.

Elinor's pragmatic reasons for joining the Nation were grounded in the group's ability to facilitate economic development for African Americans. She appreciated the group, as she tells me, because she thought that "the Nation had a good handle on the solution to *our* problems." Elinor, a strong, outspoken and poised woman, describes in a discerning voice how her unusual journey into the Nation, which eventually delivered her to Islam, was predicated on injustice and frustration:

> I went to school in the Bay Area, I met some *Black* Muslims….I was not a religious person at all…. My issue was economic development. And I come from a family of business owners, so I thought the Nation had a good handle on the solution to *our* problems, African Americans, [and] it was economic. And they had businesses [and] they had a real strong sense of…. self-reliance. So that's what was attractive to me. That was my *entre* [into] it…I started going to, at that time was called the temple…I considered myself a very *rational* person…But then something happened...

Elinor's upbringing had taught her the value of economic development as a means by which African Americans could persevere and overcome their predicaments. Despite her father's disapproval of the group and her own skepticism of Elijah Muhammad, she was willing to wait and see if the organization was strong enough to outlast the charismatic leader. Such pragmatism was rooted in her sense that African Americans faced problems that urgently needed to be addressed. Elinor's testimony strikingly captures the parallel

struggles of all of the women of the first generation: sentiments of feeling divorced from society and deeply dissatisfied with what it had to offer.

A Primordial Urge: Narratives of Surrender to Islam

> Elijah Muhammad was an elderly man and I said, "Well this looks like a pretty good organization. It's nationwide [and] they've got property [and] they've got businesses. But I don't think I'm going [to] join this until I know what's going [to] happen with Elijah Muhammad. If he dies and if it continues then I'll know it's the real thing. I really wasn't into worshipping him, that wasn't my issue. But then something *happened*.
>
> Elinor, Los Angeles, CA

"I think it was a *transition,*" Dolores shares about the "Sunnification" process of the NOI that started in 1975, "but I remember thinking I had always been Muslim and that W. D. Mohammad articulated Islam in a way that made sense to me *intellectually and spiritually*. I've never talked about this to anyone before…" For Dolores, Islam is a divinely inspired intrinsic aspect of her life, and practicing it means following her inborn penchants. Such spiritual convictions and proclivities are frequently echoed by the women and offer great insight into their affinity toward Islam. The notion of Islam being primordial was also confirmed by those who chose not to participate in formal interviews.[75] The women I encountered are not located in common geographies; they do not share a spiritual *locale* and do not adhere to the same interpretations of Islam. However, *how and why they came to know Islam* is not unique. Edward C. Curtis IV, in *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*, contends that attempts to link indigenous Muslims to quasi-religious racial

[75] I had the occasion to extensively speak to several women who allowed me to take notes during our conversations, but chose not to join me for a formal interview. Furthermore, I had many occasions to speak to women while attending *jummahs* and various activities in the *masjid*.

separatists should not treat African-American Islam as a religion *per se*. Rather he argues that Islam should be approached as a religious "tradition" which is dynamic and adaptive in its varying environments. This kind of adaptation is evident in my many conversations with numerous Muslim women, and at times men, across the country who have regularly opined as to why African-American women choose Islam.[76] Specifically, all express the certainty that Islam is a *primordial* aspect of their lives and souls.

Even many years later, this mature cohort repeatedly voices with resounding conviction the idea of always being or "knowing themselves" to be Muslim. The women interviewed perceive even the inclination to join the NOI as an "*entre*" to Islam. As Dolores explains, she knew about real Islam through her personal readings and studies, and was acquainted with the Nation of Islam because "it was the closest I had ever come to what Islam might have been…At that time, where I was going to school, there were no *masjids* in the area." Dolores's inherent yearning to be Muslim coupled with the lack of a *masjid* delivered her to the NOI Temple. Beverly stresses that she "felt" she was a Muslim the minute she joined the NOI: "I knew the human being was not God. I knew Elijah Muhammad was not God."[77] This immediate certainty is echoed in Karim's findings from the oral histories of African-American women who went through the NOI transition; she states that often the women felt "immediate satisfaction of the new teachings."[78] For the women, such proclivities and *iman* in Islam, was integrally already present within them—*it was primordial*. According to Joyce, her "aha" moment came in

[76] Including some imams.

[77] She should know he was not God, because according to Beverly: "I was the last one to speak to Elijah Muhammed alive" in his hospital room on his deathbed.

[78] Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam,* 83.

1975 at a big conference in Los Angles, where W. D. Mohammed spoke to his "re-found" community. She explains, "his main focus was to move away from nationalism toward orthodox Islam. And the thing that he said that was so impressive to me was that *man equals mind*. And I felt so liberated that I said, 'This is the religion…I know for sure this is the religion for me.'" For Joyce, what began as an oppositional stance, predicated on the dismantling of racist white hegemony, *including the blond, blue-eyed Jesus*—"Islam cleared away." She felt a religious conviction, *iman*, to which she entrusted herself and which in turn liberated her.

The idea of a primordial connection to Islam resonates in the story of Elinor as well, a woman who despite her better judgement surrendered to Islam. Elinor is a very successful lawyer who runs her family's expansive law firm. She knows the Southern California Black Muslim[79] community well. She has over the years evolved into what I would call an inspirational community leader for the Muslimas of Southern California. We had the occasion to talk on the phone several times before my arrival in Los Angeles, as she guided me on how best to approach the task of interviewing my informants. Her knowledge of Islam and the academic study of related topics was apparent in our conversation. The day after I landed at LAX, she and I met in her chic penthouse office suite for our interview. Our face-to-face encounter was somewhat of a surprise for both of us. I had anticipated convening with a woman clad in a *hijab*[80] and some kind of

[79] I have purposefully used the term "Black Muslim" community, as Elinor is a native of Southern California and is well acquainted with the Muslims who came through the Nation of Islam and their history. In my interview with Dolores, she distinctly pointed out to me that the term "Black Muslim," for her and other African-American Muslims, connotes Muslims of the Nation.

[80] Up until my interview with Elinor, every woman I had interviewed had been dressed in a *hijab* and conservative clothing. This included *abayas* along with burkas.

traditional clothing. Interestingly enough, I believe, Elinor had expected the same.[81] Instead, she wore a business suit and I wore a business casual dress. Nestled amongst the high-rises of the downtown Los Angeles scenery, she recounted a riveting and penetrating account of the primal connection that led her into Islam:

> I went to the temple and I actually joined. But the reason I joined, unbeknownst to me at the time, I was actually waiting to go into the main assembly hall. And I heard this—it wasn't a singing…it was something I'd never heard before. And it wasn't in a language I had ever heard before. And I heard this and something just told me. I hadn't decided yet, I hadn't decided whether I was going to join the Nation of Islam, I was on the fence. I was kind [of] going with my roommate, and she was really getting into it. And I heard this, and I said, "OK, I [have] got [to] get with these people." It just wasn't rational…and it was the *adhan*.
>
> It was the *adhan*. Actually it was Louis Farrakhan who was saying the *adhan*, because he was a singer and he had a beautiful voice…I heard this voice, and [I thought], "WOW!"
>
> It was *Allahu Akbar* [and] I didn't understand what he was saying.
>
> [I knew] there [was] something important that I needed to do and I needed to be here. So against my rational thought, against everything that I had actually grown up with—it was not something my parents really thought was a good thing…

For Elinor, Louis Farrakhan's beautiful oratory of the *adhan*[82] produced a transcendent encounter with a God she had yet to know. She had no inkling of what *Allahu Akbar*[83] meant. She did not care what Louis Farrakhan had to say—it was only his recitation of the *adhan* that drew her in. She immediately recognized that she needed to do

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[81] Other women in California also made comments about expecting me to be dressed in a more "Islamic fashion."

[82] The Muslim call to prayer.

[83] God is Great!

"something important." She tells me that unlike Christianity, Islam was not a religion with which she was familiar. She was a practical and rational university student, not inclined to pursue spiritual experiences. She knew of the "Muhammadans" from her history texts and a little through the autobiography of Malcolm X. She certainly knew about the Nation, which for her was a pragmatic alternative to other religions or movements. However, despite her suspicions of the Nation and her rational disinclination to be religious, the overpowering experience of hearing the *adhan* in Arabic resonated with her soul, and drew her in. This is the type of spiritual connection that many African-American women allude to, though few describe their epiphanies in such powerful and passionate terms. It is this primordial awakening or knowing that makes Black Muslim women into life-long believers.

Accounts of dynamic conversions to Islam have been documented by many. For example, Carolyn Rouse's ethnography *Engaged Surrender* presents profound stories of women, also in Los Angeles, for whom Islam occasioned an epiphany. Stories of "surrender" have also been documented by McCloud and Dannin.[84] What I find most thought-provoking in my own informants' accounts is that, unlike Christianity, Islam was largely foreign to their upbringing and experience, and yet they willingly chose to reorganize their lives in order to practice it. Why? McCloud, an African-American woman who is a convert herself, argues that most African Americans view themselves as part of a "lost nation" and hence consider themselves to be "found" in Islam.[85] Such sentiments are frequent in the narratives of the women I met as well. In addition, accounts of divinely inspired urges or "knowing" are common among all of the women I

[84] See McCloud's, *African American Islam*, and Dannin's, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*.

[85] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 166.

interviewed—not just the first generation. The desire to surrender is a common and salient theme. My reflection on the "conversion stories" of the women often leads me to ponder the passion with which these women enter into Islam. Their commitments seem to transcend the boundaries of reason. Thus the women who converted directly into Sunni Islam and those born into the religion *all* speak about the deep spiritual conviction—what in Arabic is often referred to as *iman,* or the "faith"—that they hold in the fundamental doctrines of Islam.

Praxis: Doing Islam

> Yes, community is very important. But then when I heard W. D. Mohammed, it connected with me intellectually, morally, spiritually. This was Quran. This was Quran, thinking about how Quran was revealed, how [the] Quran manifests in the Prophet's life. But even more than an intellectual thing, but the spiritual and the moral were what came from W. D. Mohammed first. I began to pay more attention to my behavior, what was right, doing what was right, and what was wrong.
>
> Dolores, Los Angeles, CA

Though the transition out of the NOI was a "crash course" on Sunni Islam, as described by Elinor, it catapulted this generation of women into a lifelong journey of challenging their *nafs*[86] whilst delivering them into a new worldview. In this process, the mosque became a point of convergence where the women could not only put into practice their newfound faith, but also be surrounded by a community of believers. The women of the first generation deliberate on their experiences of implementing the ritual orthopraxy of Islam, or correct conduct, as prescribed by the Five Pillars of Islam and made tangible under the guidance of Imam W. D. Muhammad. They explain how overnight, the space that had been referred to as a Temple was transformed into a *masjid*—where the chairs

[86] *Nafs* is most often defined to mean the self or ego according to Sufism.

were removed, shoes taken off, women's heads covered, prayers were recited in Arabic, the Quran was read and taught in Arabic and group *shahadahs* were conducted as the community got "serious" about learning "true Islam." And at that time, Elinor was told, "oh, by the way, White people are actually OK, we don't have to be nationalists, [and] we can open our doors to anybody who wants to be a Muslim."

To put into action the beloved *iman* is to become a Muslim, which as McCloud clarifies, necessitates "stepping into a worldview that is some fourteen hundred years old. This worldview, which Muslims call *deen*, provides the framework within which all Muslims must attempt to live."[87] In 1975, when confronted with transitioning or embracing orthodox Islam, the women had no shortage of *iman*, as they had already surrendered to the unknown (God). However, what the first generation of Muslimas had to calibrate was the arduous, temporal process of actuating Islam into successful practice—*the right doing of Islam*—for which the mosque was a vital conduit.

Additionally, with the elimination of mortal men such as Elijah Mohammad as intercessors of Islamic doctrine, it became necessary for the first-generation Muslimas to turn to the sources of Islam and fill the "empty vessels"[88] for themselves—a undertaking which required approaching the Quran and the *hadiths* directly in order to elucidate for themselves their newfound or "re-found" faith. For this, as McCloud clarifies, one must commence a "life-long study of Islamic history and Muslim scholarship, in addition to

[87] McCloud, *African American Islam,* 3.

[88] McCloud, *African American Islam,* 74. See McCloud's discussion on the Imam Muhammad explaining his father's philosophy in the context of the Nation and why Elijah Muhammad had not pushed for the sources of Islam vis-à-vis slavery and its affiliated oppressions.

study of the Quran and the Arabic language."[89] Indeed, the women say that they knew that becoming Muslim meant not only taking the right action (i.e., following the Five Pillars, as discussed below) but also turning to the sources for divine guidance—that is, reading the Quran—all of which was facilitated in the space of the mosque.

In addition to having *iman*, faith in God, becoming a Muslim necessitates practicing the five essential *and* obligatory practices of the Five Pillars. The Five Pillars are: 1. *Shahadah*, the profession of faith. 2. *Salat,* prayer. 3. *Zakat*, almsgiving. 4. The fast of Ramadan. 5. *Hajj*, pilgrimage.[90] These core ritual activities are the praxis or the manifestation of Islamic doctrine—*the doing of Islam*—and, according to Reza Aslan, are meant to help the Muslim express his or her belonging to the Muslim community.[91] W. D. Muhammad, as the women tell me, guided the community through the transition and taught them how to put into action the Pillars. At times he visited the women's local *masjids*, or as Dolores shares, provided audio "pipe-ins" which directed the community as to how to successfully actuate the Pillars of Islam. He, along with his team of local *imams*, took the newfound *ummah*, a "community of believers" that is divinely inspired, and unified it to submit to the Will of Allah,[92] and hence brought it into the fold of Sunni Islam. The women deeply respect him for this move, acknowledging that it would not have been possible without the very supportive *ummah* for whom the mosque became a point of convergence.

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[89] McCloud, *African American Islam,* 3-4.

[90] For more in-depth information, see Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path*, 88-93.

[91] Reza Aslan, *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2006), 145.

[92] McCloud, *African American Islam,* 4.

In the context of America, the *ummah*, or the community of believers, at the time of the women's transition (1975) could only be found within the new *masjids*. In these spaces, the new community could gather and bear witness, by taking the *shahadah,* to their faith: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's Messenger."[93] As Kambiz GhaneaBassiri explains in "Religious Normativity and Praxis among American Muslims," this individual affirmation is a means by which one becomes a member of the *ummah* and in turn contributes to the notion of the universal Muslim community.[94] What this means for a convert, such as the women of the first generation, is that the seminal act of becoming a Muslim—taking the *shahadah*—is a way for her to avow her belonging to the *ummah* and in turn the manner in which other Muslims receive her as part of the *ummah.* Furthermore, this acknowledgement demonstrates the triangular relationship between God, individual and the community,[95] a conceptual structure which is embodied in all Islamic acts of worship. Hence the coalescing of individual *iman,* faith in God, the doing of Islam, and worship of God also requires an *ummah*—something that the new indigenous Muslims found in their mosques.

Coming from mostly Christian backgrounds, the women were acquainted with religions and theologies which emphasize orthodoxy—correct doctrine or belief. Thus, converting or "transitioning" into Sunni Islam meant that the women would now need to

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[93] Aslan, *No God But God*, 150.

[94] Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "Religious Normativity and Praxis among American Muslims," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 213.

[95] Ibid. 213.

place primacy on orthopraxy, meaning correct action.[96] However, this emphasis on correct action, as explained by John Esposito, is not meant to preclude the importance of one's faith, as in Islam faith and right action, or practice, are intertwined.[97] It is this dichotomy of orthopraxy and orthodoxy that a Muslima must negotiate for herself. For the women, the community of believers, via the *masjid*, emerged as a vital source of illumination that could model the doing of Islam. Furthermore, the education (in Arabic and Quran) that was engendered via the *masjid* provided the women with the tools to discern for themselves how they would read their Islam.

The women tell me that over time, they had to take action and at times negotiate for themselves the meaning of their Islam. As any seeker of truth would agree, one's faith is not idle; it is a constant ebb and flow. This negotiation was particularly evident at the time of the transition from NOI to Sunni Islam. In the refashioned faith, unlike the NOI, there were no custodians or monitors to track their activities. And contrary to the women's Christian upbringing, there was not a set of Islamic doctrines which could fully disclose the meanings behind their actions or the words they read in the Quran. They therefore had to continually negotiate how to be Muslimas. Sister Joyce explains, "you know, there's a saying, it says, 'Trust in God but tie your camel.' Well there [are] no more camels right now, OK? …the significance of that is that yes, trust in God but do all that you can do to be Muslim, to uphold what Allah *subhanahu wala tala* wants you to do, and to be." For Sister Joyce, this proverb means more than worrying about one's

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[96] Aslan, *No God But God*, 144.

[97] Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path*, 88.

camel. For her, it is a metaphor, which she interprets from *her worldview and understanding of her Islam—that is, it is about the need to trust in God.*

For others, such conciliation came in the form of dress. Elinor tells me about how she went through many phases of deciding if she would cover her head. During the NOI days, she resisted and hated the uniforms and the "fez-like" hats. However, as she embraced Sunni Islam and came across the more conservative *but nurturing* community of Muslims in the San Diego mosque, she decided to don a head-covering out of respect for them. Elinor's love for the community and her faith were so strong that they outweighed the external pressures to conform to white America at large. Furthermore, she points out that she felt that wearing a head covering was a way of connecting with her African ancestors. She quickly clarifies that she was not pressured by anyone as "everybody was very accommodating… no one ever questioned it, which is amazing to me…" As for her conservative employer at the time, they just dismissed her head-covering as a "cultural thing…" They assumed, as she tells me, "Oh, well, she's Black, so she's just going [to] wear all that stuff…because they didn't know about Muslims either." For Elinor, the community and the mosque served as guides for her to interpret, implement, and negotiate her Islam in the fashion she deemed most fit.

The women say that at the time of the transition, they found the implementation of the Five Pillars and other performatory requisites to be straightforward and not too difficult. For some of the women this time of actuating their *deen* seemed exciting and new, while for others it was a natural progression building upon their *iman*. The women say they never doubted their *iman*; what they were perplexed by, at times, were the meanings behind the actions. Elinor bashfully recounts the case of a woman calling the

adhan in a mixed-gendered congregation in the former Temple number eight, in San Diego. She clarifies, "we realized, OK, women aren't supposed to do that. But there wasn't [any]body there to tell us not to. So for a while, she was doing it." The mischievous smile she and I exchanged was a signal about the ongoing deliberation on the role of women in the mosque and gender issues, which I will address in future chapters.[98] Or in Beverly's case, she to this day does not cover her head as she has interpreted her Islam to absolve her of that duty—a notion which is held by many Muslim women.

Hence one of the most important facts at this juncture is that as a new *ummah*, the indigenous Muslim community of America, including the women, had no other significant Muslim communities nearby to guide them or model for them an Islam.[99] Additionally, during the transition there were no internet or local mosques into which a new convert could conveniently walk and take a brochure or take a class about "Islam 101." The women had no significant links to the global *ummah* either. Hence, as a community, they had to decipher what their Islam was going to mean for them within their own newly established mosques. The circumstances were made more complex by the fact that they as an *ummah* were in the diaspora of America and had to negotiate for themselves the application of Islamic norms which would have been simpler had they been residing in a Muslim-majority state. A simple example of this can be found in

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[98] This also alludes to Amina Wadud's leading of the first-ever mixed-gender *jummah* prayer, in America, in 2005 in NYC. This provoked controversy from all corners of the *ummah*. Coupled with the fact that she is an African-American theologian, the event was quite "scandalous."

[99] Movements such as *Darul Al-Islam* and MSA were present, as noted by Robert Dannin and Aminah Beverly McCloud. However, from the narratives of the women, there were no other Muslims around to show them how to "do Islam."

dietary restrictions, which dictate that food consumed by Muslims be *halal* and forbids pork, akin to kosher laws. In the United States such restrictions are often impossible to follow, whilst they are a non-issue in Muslim-majority countries. So given that there were no camels or *halal* food options at the time of the transition, it was up to the new Muslim *ummah* to take action, make meaning, invent, interpret and implement the right doing.

Encountering the Global *Ummah*

At the height of the Civil Rights movement, President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1965 Immigration Act, and in turn opened the floodgates to a new wave of immigrants from all corners of the world. For the first time, these immigrants came from post-colonial Muslim nations. At its signing, Johnson stated about the Bill: "It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives…This bill says simply that from this day forth those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationship to those already here."[100] Nonetheless, this influx of immigrant Muslims had a profound effect on the indigenous Muslims of America. As Zain Abdullah explains in "American Muslims in the Contemporary World: 1965 to the Present," even though Lyndon Johnson played down the effects this bill at its signing, it has forever changed the demographics and the

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[100] For a full copy of President Lyndon B. Johnson's speech, see online archives at: "Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island" (speech, New York, October 3, 1965). http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/selected_speeches.asp. Or *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*. Volume 2, entry 546, pp. 1037-1040. Washington, D C: Government Printing Office, 1966.

religious fabric of American life.[101] According to GhaneaBassiri, the number of immigrants from Muslim-majority parts of the world rose from 134,615 in 1960 to 871,582 in 1990.[102] The impact of this new legislation coupled with anti-discriminatory Civil Rights Era laws made way for the notion of the "melting pot ideal" of America to be replaced with a more "pluralistic vision for America in which cultural and ethnic differences were not only recognized but increasingly valued for their distinct contributions to American society."[103] For the African-American Muslims of America, the ensuing decades and their encounter with the newly arriving immigrant Muslims resulted in a paradoxical reality that is rife with tension, to say the least.

Despite the concept of brotherhood and racial harmony as an Islamic ideal of the *ummah,* the arrival of the immigrant Muslims on the shores of America did not result in their forging deep bonds with the indigenous Muslim community. Instead, the cultural baggage of these immigrants was, as Abdullah suggests, "imbued with their colonial ideas about skin color and ethnic difference,"[104] which coupled with linguistic differences added to the division and exclusion of indigenous Muslims. Furthermore, given their history with colonialism and its successful overthrow back home, as GhaneaBassiri explains, they were well equipped to maintain and preserve their cultural and religious norms even in the diaspora of America:

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[101] Zain Abdullah, "American Muslims in the Contemporary World: 1965 to the Present," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 65.

[102] GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America,* 294. His numbers are taken from data collected by the Census Bureau.

[103] GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 272.

[104] Abdullah, "American Muslims in the Contemporary World," 72.

> As a result of their own experiences with colonialism, most of the post-1965 Muslim immigrants were thus unlikely to willingly change their names, dissimulate their religious beliefs, or forgo their cultural practices or identities. Quite the reverse. Soon after their arrival Muslim immigrants began participating in existing mosques and national cultural organizations. Where such organization were not available they built their own mosques, Sufi centers, and cultural Associations…the number of mosques established in the 1970s was five times the number of mosques established in the 1950s or the 1960s, and the number of mosques continued to grow…[105]

For them, the desire to socialize with co-ethnics and raise their children in an Islamic environment to which they were accustomed took priority over the *ummah* ideals. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian revolution, and the American government's outreach to the Islamist[106] to procure influence in the Muslim world led to greater politicization and Islamic revival amongst the Muslims of America and abroad. In turn, an effort was made by the Islamist networks to garner the support of the sizeable immigrant Muslim population. As GhaneaBassiri explains, "To lead effectively and politically mobilize a population of varying ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, they distinguished between the 'pure' Islam of scriptures and the 'cultural' Islamic practices. They touted the Qur'an and Hadith as the only 'pure' sources of Islam. Muslims' allegiance to the sources, they argued, would obliterate any cultural differences that they may have had."[107] However, such efforts to unify the Muslims of America by the

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[105] GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 325.

[106] I am using the term *Islamist* as defined by Amina Wadud: "The term "Islamist" has been used recently to refer to the neo-traditionalist, neo-conservative return to *shari'ah* as distinct in the role of politics. Islamists hope to re-establish traditional *shari'ah* as the means for returning to an imagined pristine Islam perfectly attained at the time of the Prophet." *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2006), 267 n. 17.

[107] GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 326.

Islamist activists were no match against the "distinct cultural practices or varying understandings of Islam."[108] Therefore, as GhaneaBassiri concludes, "No single national Muslim organization was able to unite Muslims under a single cause or single understanding of Islam."[109] The impact of these events was felt by the indigenous Muslims in the form of a complete segregation, where the indigenous community of Muslim was left alone to practice their Islam under the guidance of the W. D. Muhammad community.[110] Elinor remembers this segregation well:

> The first time I remember seeing large numbers was in the late 70s. We were in San Diego when the whole thing with the Iranian revolution. Then we started seeing larger numbers of Muslims come. But the mosque was very separate from the immigrant community. It was almost exclusively African American. [There were] a few Hispanics…a few Caucasians, but [about] 99.9% [African American].

Such patterns did not alter over the years, as the immigrating Muslims chose to build separate mosques rather than join the indigenous Muslim communities.

African-American Muslims operate as a diaspora of the global Islamic *ummah*. The mosque has emerged as an essential space for nurturing and helping grow this community. Dannin states that the time of the transition, the NOI had nearly one hundred thousand members and constituted one of the largest "reservoirs of unchurched African Americans."[111] Today, however, many from this cohort of "unchurched Muslims" are firmly housed in American mosques and their number is growing exponentially. It is at

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[108] Ibid. 235.

[109] Ibid. 326.

[110] Ibid. 319.

[111] Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam,* 73.

this crossroads of the diaspora and the *ummah* that the mosque is positioned. The way for this cohort to signal its religious identity in an outward manner and commune with fellow Muslims is through the mosque, which in turn helps solidify, fortify, and authenticate the American diasporic *ummah*.

Nafs: The Second Conversion or Leap of Faith

> You don't have to go to an intercessor, you don't have to go to a priest and ask a priest, who is just a *man* to forgive you for your sins and give you ablution. You don't have to pray to anyone else, you don't have to pray to Jesus, or Christ, or anyone, [and] you can go straight to God. And then the fact that God wants you to use your intelligence, what God is reaching for you is not your physical body because that'll pass away. It's your *mind* and your intellect [and that] is what drew me to Islam. The intellectual part of it that says you don't have to go for this touchy-feely stuff, this jumping around and this make-believe, fake stuff, you know, use your mind. You can think. And I want [to] be a thinking person. And I think that appeals to women. And says you know what? You can be a thinking person in this religion. I know it does—that's the appeal to me, I can't speak for everybody else. And I think that the protection that Islam gives you is, it's a separation that you can feel. I'm proud to say I'm Muslim. I'm separate, I want [to] be separate from the masses.
>
> Joyce, Bakersfield, CA

> But I think people can be Muslim without the ritual. A baby can't say anything. A baby just is Muslim. There are some people who have a spiritual and moral recognition of their relationship with God and their place in the world, and I think they can be Muslim. They're not really Muslim until they recognize it. I think they have to recognize [it] too. So I think that there are a number of different ways of being Muslim.
>
> Dolores, Los Angeles CA

> I never really made that leap [of] faith. It wasn't until many years later that I realized, "Oh. I believe in this. I'm a God-fearing—I believe in Allah, I believe in *this*." And then I said, "I better get serious," [laughing]. And that's what happened, but it took a long time. It was maybe 1990 I think? So from 1974 to 1990, here I am a mother of three kids and I'm sending them to Muslim schools, and I'm praying, and I'm doing this and then it really clicked that "OK, this is really mine," I'm not just there in the community, I'm not just there because of my husband…I've got [to] own this. So then I really began to study more, I started really getting serious. I [had] better learn Arabic. And then I [had the] intention to make the *hajj*, [and] I was able to make the *hajj* in 1992.

What is often portrayed as a "seamless transition" from the NOI to Sunni Islam necessitated a monumental spiritual adaptation and challenged the *nafs*[112] of these first-generation Muslim women. Often, the challenges that the women faced were played out (or instigated) in the space of the mosque, where the women had to readjust their outlook, seek out the *deen* and begin the process of learning the "abc's"[113] of Islam. Building on these basics, the women began to dig in deeper, and what slowly emerged as a salient aspect of these women's religious identities is the examination into the *metaphoric* meaning of the Five Pillars—meaning the orthodoxy behind the orthopraxy.[114] In fact, just as Aslan makes clear, "The single most important factor in the performance of any Muslim ritual is the believer's intention, which must be consciously proclaimed before a ritual can begin."[115] This examination was initially occasioned by the transition, but even after the transition was complete, the women chose to embrace a decades-long process of unearthing the meanings of their actions and rituals.

Some of the women were familiar with Islam in the theoretical sense and had even read the Quran. Beverly and Dolores both tell me that despite the NOI's disregard for the Quran, they had begun to read it for themselves. Elinor, in contrast, had not read the Quran before the transition. Dolores tells me, "I started studying [Islam] for real in college, as a freshman in college, and I knew then that I was Muslim." Furthermore, as

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[112] "Breath," the self or ego according to Sufism. Common origin of all mankind.

[113] Beverly.

[114] See Aslan's discussion on the Orthopraxic nature of Islam and how the Five Pillars are meant to be a metaphor for Islam in *No God But God*, 44-146.

[115] Aslan, *No God But God*, 145.

Dolores explains, "as I think back on it now or even in the ensuing years, all the mythology and stuff made no sense, *but the moral system made sense to me. I was a Muslim*…Actually, it saved me." However, she goes on to illuminate, "I knew a lot already because I had been studying, but the main education came under W. D. Mohammed." Starting in 1975, the women not only began to learn a new language, Arabic, but also confronted the sources so as to illuminate for themselves the right acting or what is referred as *adab*[116] related to their newfound faith. Despite being given a framework and guidance by W. D. Muhammad, the women had to decipher for themselves how to put their *deen* in action—a challenge that every sincere Muslim must face.

For Beverly, a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon, there was never a burning bush moment that crystallized her Islamic identity. Nor was the Sunnification process a monumental moment for her. "Muhammad may have died, but you still live"[117] had always been the truth for Beverly. "I knew Elijah Muhammad was not God!" Thus, the consecration of orthodox Islam did not make a "huge difference" after the transition, as she had always been a Muslim. She, as before, continued to attend her local San Diego mosque and continued studying the Quran there. More interesting for me was the fact that in our conversation, Beverly referred to the Temple as a "mosque," even when discussing events that transpired prior to 1975, thus suggesting that her affinity with Islam and her

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[116] Discipline of mind and good qualities of mind and soul. Good manners, politeness.

[117] Beverly recounts this as a verse that was read from the Quran by W. D. Muhammad when he took over the leadership of the NOI in 1975.

community was primordial—something that existed perhaps before she herself could even recognize it.

Sister Joyce, a petite woman with a powerful stature and even stronger conviction, shared how profoundly the Sunnification process affected her and how far she was willing to go to seek out the "perfect" Islam: "in 1981 I left this, what I called capitalistic pigsty, from UC Berkeley and I went to Africa or the Middle East looking for the perfect Islamic socialist state." Nearly thirty-five years later, the "sourness" can be heard in Sister Joyce's voice as she recounts her disappointment. Upon her arrival in Morocco, she says, she "was so crushed that women were so subjected to the cultural aspects of the religion." Distinguishing between the religion she embraces and the cultural manifestations that troubled her, Joyce immediately clarifies, "it wasn't the culture of Islam, *it was the culture of those people*!" Joyce's search for an environment more conducive to practicing Islam, in my perception, is her spiritual *hijra*.[118] In my interpretation, Joyce's symbolic and "transformative"[119] *hijra* made her appreciate the fact that no Islamic utopia existed as she had envisioned. Rather, she is now resolutely carving out her own "small portion of Islamic Nirvana" here in America. In my opinion, she had to seek out for herself an Islam which could be practiced anywhere. And she had to generate an Islam which was still a "growing, breathing, living religion"—a binary

[118] The most common nomenclature defines this term as something like this: the migration of Muslims or emigration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina to flee persecution in 622 A.D., where he established the rule of Muslim community-state (this is a combination of definitions from Rouse and Esposito). However, Dannin defines this as "Migration of Muslims and Muslim communities conforming to tradition," 272. He explains that "The Prophet Muhammad led his followers into exile in Medina (*hijra*) for precisely this reason: to establish a community that lived according to divine law," 66.

[119] As described by Joyce.

jihad or journey she still strives for.[120] Thus she was the authoritative agent in her spiritual journey. Joyce's words expose a deep conviction and an intense desire to actuate her faith based on a harmony of correct action and correct doctrine, for which she was seeking a more conducive environment, which she found upon her return in the Oakland *masjid.*

Right action, which Islam necessitates, is something that Dolores says she was already implementing before the transition: "I began to pay more attention to my behavior, and what was right, and doing what was right, and what was wrong. The Nation of Islam had a system, 'This is right to do, and this is wrong to do.' That was important. Since the people that I met were interested in behavior, they were interested in the moral aspects, that's what I gravitated toward." Dolores proudly tells me that the Sunnification was just a "formality for something that already existed"—something primordial. Hence, she made it a point to tell me that the *shahadah* for her was not as important as her *iman*: "I know that Muslims worldwide see that [the *shahadah*] as something that's very important. For me, it was a formality." Furthermore, Dolores's attestation of her faith was a metaphor for what she was already practicing—the right action: "Like I said, I was Muslim, and what Imam W. D. Mohammed talked about solidified what I already knew to be truth and what I already knew to be me. I didn't have an 'aha' moment." For me, Dolores's words demonstrate the persuasion with which she proudly owns her Islam, which was further "solidified" by what she heard in the mosque.

Elinor's submission to Islam, in contrast, was two-fold, initially when she was stopped in her tracks by Louise Farrakhan's recitation of the *adhan* and then "in the same way" again in 1990, when she realized to her surprise that she could finally take what she

[120] This is what Sherman Jackson calls the "Third Resurrection."

describes as a "leap of faith" into a full embrace of Islam. After sixteen years of practicing Islam and showing up for the community and her husband, she realized that she had to "own" her Islam and get "serious." Elinor's conclusions about her journey reveal that it took many years of belonging to the mosque community and practicing Islam before she could fully internalize her faith and make it solely hers. For Elinor, her second submission was just as unexpected as her first brush with the divine. She explains: "I remember in 1990, and I was making the *salat*, and I said…it just kinda came to me in the same way when I first heard the…*adhan* back in the 70s, when I heard it, I just [thought], 'OK. Now, I [have] it.' I'm Muslim…I really [have] it. And from then on…I knew I was Muslim." Hence, her surrender to Allah is ultimately complete, as she tells me: "There was nothing else I could do about it."

These narratives lead me to believe that at least for these four women of the first generation, their transformation into becoming Muslimas occurred as a process over a long period of time. The initial stages entailed a primal urge to join the NOI followed by the actual attestation and implementation of their *iman* and *deen*. However, as the women point out, in the case of actuating Islamic praxis, they were not conciliated with just the performance; rather, they found themselves employing their *nafs*, an agentive right which Sister Joyce opines is God-given: "God wants you to use your intelligence, what God is reaching for you is not your physical body because that'll pass away." The women initially implemented the praxis of Islam in their mosque communities without being fully cognizant of why they were doing what they were doing. However, over the years and at times decades, they started to turn inward and fashioned their *iman* to be more individualized—as God had intended. Today they are sure about their *iman* and

this mastering of their *deen* in turn affords them the freedom to own their Islam within the parameters of their *deen.*

Furthermore, I posit that initially belonging to a mosque and a community made way for the women to master and in turn thoroughly possess their Islam. Today, in fact, they seem at ease and more unrestricted within the confines of their *deen* than in the past. They share with me and model through their actions[121] that they no longer feel that their worldview is constricted or tethered to just one mosque, nor must they adhere to any one particular interpretation of Islam. All of the women told me that they "mosque hop" and find themselves gravitating toward the more esoteric leanings of Islam. Beverly enlightened me with her Sufi piety as she shared her experience of traveling throughout Turkey this past summer with a highly respected Islamic scholar, Hamza Yusuf. However, I also found myself praying next to her in her local *masjid*, where she had raised her children and had met her husband many many years ago. Joyce often finds herself being more reclusive and pulling away from the mosques of Bakersfield, as she feels their *khutbas*[122] to be too remedial. Instead, she is resolute in fostering new avenues via her non-profit, which provides an alternative space for the women of her town to pray and find solace and peace. Elinor, too, is laying down such foundations, as she delivered a *khutba* at the newly founded Women's Mosque of America, a *masjid* for women by women. Dolores's *dawa* lies in her PhD dissertation and non-profit work. For all of the

[121] I had the occasion to pray side by side with the women in various settings, which included the traditional mosque setting as well as attending *jummah* at The Women's Mosque of America. The women also shared with me about attending *dhikers* and meetups, which entailed more alternative/esoteric prayer settings.

[122] Friday sermon.

women of this cohort, their encounter with the divine has led them to find freedom in their Islam via the *masjid* and their *nafs.*

It is in this is in this manner, I propose, that the mosque emerged as an important conduit for the self-education, performance and expression of religiosity of the first-generation Muslimas—a space where they could carve out their own Islam and in turn an agentive identity. It provided agency for a people who were in liminal space, in both a literal and figurative sense. In this space, under the leadership of W. D. Mohammad, the indigenous Muslim community merged with the universal Islamic *ummah* and embraced the Five Pillars of Islam. For the African-American Muslim community this consecration, or "miracle" as Elinor described it, of the Pillars facilitated the process of signaling and coalescing the "re-found" community of African-American Muslims with the global *ummah.* Most importantly, however, it engendered or rather authenticated the identity of the indigenous Muslim community—which in turn contributed to the religiosity of these women.

Striving for Islam Today: *Dawa*

> Islam has outward meanings, inward meanings, and all kinds of meanings in between. You can do things that are outwardly teaching to propagate faith. That would be one kind of *dawa*. Another kind of *dawa* would be your example. For instance, when I was working, how can I hide 'Dolores Mohammed'? I can't hide that. I'm not into hiding it. People know who I am. Regardless of how I dress, they see my name. "Are you Muslim?" "Yes!" Then later on if there is something to be said, I will say it. But my example speaks for me. Sometimes I actually get a chance to talk to people. I don't push anybody. I'm not like your *imam* in Boston who tries to get people to—that's his job. It's not my job. So it depends on the situation, whether I'm actually there to speak at an organized function or just to be who I am. I think that's a way of propagation.
>
> Dolores, Los Angeles, CA

> I kind [of] put it in two different categories. There [are] Muslims capital "M," who identify with the group. And I see it in the same way I identified with the Nation of

> Islam…And I see younger women today, and they're militantly *'hijab'ed'* up. They're *hijabis* like, "*I'm Muslim!* Capital M, don't mess with me, accommodate me, I need to make my prayers," and they're very in-your-face about it. Then there's the Muslims, lowercase "m." And I have friends, who have never taken *shahada*, who would not even consider themselves Muslims, but they're Muslims lowercase "m" because they have the Muslim values. And their character and their heart makes them Muslim as opposed to some of the people who are militantly capital "M"s. So, I'm striving to be Muslim lowercase. I want the Muslim values. And that's the *jihad* that I'm on…I want [to] get that part of it, and *inshallah* Allah will bless me to do that and give me the tools that I need to do that, to be that kind of Muslim…not that capital "M"s are bad, but…I don't want [to] go through this life and miss the big, the real stuff, you know?
>
> Elinor, Los Angeles, CA

> I pray in the middle of the night, you know…And I think Islam has a lot to do with who I am. But I've learned not to go around wearing it as a badge the way I used to when I was first Muslim and gung-ho, and all that.
>
> Beverly, Los Angeles, CA

> But I think people can be Muslim without the outward – without the ritual. A baby can't say anything. A baby just *is* Muslim. There are some people who have a spiritual and moral recognition of their relationship with God and their place in the world, and I think they can be Muslim. They're not really Muslim until they recognize it. I think they have to recognize, too. So I think that there are a number of different ways of being Muslim.
>
> Dolores, Los Angeles, CA

Nearly forty years after surrendering to Islam, the women of the first generation are just as engaged within *their* Islam as they ever were—this is their *dawa and jihad.* Their convictions compel them to disseminate Islam for the *ummah* and for themselves, all the while striving to elevate themselves for the sake of humanity, while submitting to Allah. Such a negotiation of agency while staying true to the objective of uplifting the *ummah* is what the women say grants them peace. It is these convictions that, as many of the women informed me, prompted them to allow me into their inner sanctuary and share with me about their *iman*, *deen* and praxis in the context of the mosque. For the women, Islam is a salient aspect of their identity, which they tell me has imbued their lives with discipline and in turn contributed to character-building. At this juncture of their lives,

these women have gone beyond the elementary (though fundamental) step of believing in Allah and His Prophet and with deep, introspective, critical self-analysis, have found, as Dolores tells me, "different ways of being Muslim." By reading and interpreting the Quran for *themselves*, the women of the first generation are now practicing a more individualized and liberatory Islam which is esoteric and mentally engaging for all of the women of this cohort.

All this is to say that the permutations of the women's Islam and its practices have evolved from the fiery, "gung-ho" badge of honor to a more inward practice, which calls upon them to use their own internal "compass"[123] to dictate the outward forms of their religiosity. Such an individualized manifestation of their own Islam is precisely where the solution to the paradox of indigenous Islam lies according to Jackson:

> If Blackamerican Islam is to maintain its efficacy as a source of inner strength, a builder of human character, and a bridge to salvation, commitment to God-consciousness and personal piety will have to maintain their place above and beyond the revolt against second creators and false *mysterium tremendum*. Ultimately, if God is to remain the center of Blackamerican Muslim consciousness, the final result for their existential struggle will have to be left in the hands of God.[124]

It is within the "high mosque" Sufism that Jackson directs indigenous Muslims to seek out salvation—something that the first generation of Muslimas demonstrated and verbalized for me. Whether the women's practice is indeed a form of Sufism is a question beyond the scope of this study. What is evident, though, is that the women I interviewed

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[123] Elinor.

[124] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerica: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*, 197-198.

are enacting Jackson's prescription that the next step for "Blackamerican Islam" is to assume a more esoteric form filtered through each individual's lens.

The women of this cohort tell me in varying words that today, they place primacy on principles and character and are striving for the values of Islam, which they believe are universal and found in the hearts of all—not just Muslims. And yet, their Islam is more individualized than ever before. They tell me that even those "who have never taken *shahadah,* who would not even consider themselves Muslims," are more Muslim than those who are "militantly" practicing their Islam, because the former have Muslim values.[125] They tell me that today they realize that they too have always been Muslim because of the values imbued within them by their "internal compass" via their upbringing and parents. However, as Dolores tells me: "I am Muslim in a different way than I ever have been because I'm paying more attention to the principles, and I think that that's important. Because I'm spending more time with Quran, that's important. It's part of the definition"—a more individualized practice of her Islam. This pattern is confirmed by Rouse's findings: "A convert's beliefs may start because of an identification with African American nationalism, socialism, or interest in community uplift. Ultimately, however, the majority come to rely on the Qur'an to shape their identity and consciousness."[126] The agency that my interviewees feel within Islam is afforded to them via their mastering of the sources and in turn is a testament to the *ummah* that fostered the nurturing education.

The life of the First Generation women reveals that the relationship among the individual, her faith, and the space of the *masjid* all are dependent on each other. It is at

[125] Elinor.

[126] Rouse, *Engaged Surrender*, 76.

times a relationship rife with tension between an individual's reality and religious devotion. There is a tension between what is prescribed and what is understood, the tension between Islam as a political movement (which inherently looks outwards) and Islam as a spiritual movement that arguably looks inward at least some of the time. Despite, or perhaps because of, this tension, the women of the first generation have gone from being students of the mosques to educators and leaders within the *ummah*. They all tell me about their struggles and the rewards that they have procured on their lifelong journey into building their true Islam, a struggle that involves laying the groundwork for a diasporic American Islam that will be inherited by future generations. The women tell me that this evolution would not have been possible without the very supportive *ummah* which they entered via the mosque. As a result of the agency they have assumed, they now see themselves as the role models for the younger generations of Muslimas. Still, many do not deem the *masjid* to be as important for Muslim practice as they once did. Instead, these women find themselves engaged in alternative spaces where they can engage their *nafs* and quench the thirst for knowledge which has lingered for over forty years. They tell me that they continue to carve out their own Islam—what Sister Joyce calls her "spiritual nirvana"—as deemed fit by their *nafs*. Given this turn toward a more individualized practice of Islam, the relationship they still have with the *ummah* testifies to their commitment to its uplift—a commitment not only to their fellow indigenous Muslims (the former NOI community which later evolved into W. D. Muhammad's community), but also to the global *ummah*. The women tell me that their *dawa* lies in their conviction to promote Islam in a positive light in the American context. They are teachers of life for the next generation of Muslims. They are the role models showing the

potential of Islam not only for their families and the *ummah*, but for all Americans—all of whom have assisted in their endeavor to unearth individualized agency.

Chapter V

Second Generation: A Nation Within A Nation

> So, I was actually born in the Nation of Islam, and my father and mother were both educators at the Muslim private school. So we learned Arabic. We learned a lot of – it's funny, because it's very pan-African perspectives…our education was integrated with an Islamic perspective as like a supplement or the only thing, because there was no supplement at that time. That was the only experience I had with education. So what that means is that in addition to learning your ABCs in English, you were learning the Arabic alphabet. You were learning how to speak Arabic.
>
> Nadira, Los Angeles, CA

> It was very important, and I think it's different, now. It's very interesting in that the mosque, or the *masjid*, in that time was like the center of everything. We spent a lot of time, there, with the different community members. My mom was always volunteering for something, she was cooking for something. She was always learning Arabic, and then later teaching Arabic. Everything was centralized, in the *masjid*. A lot of the friends that I had – and still have, today – I met through the *masjid*.
>
> Henna, Los Angeles, CA

The second generation Muslimas are the first cohort of African-Americans to grow up and live their entire lives as Muslims in America—an *ummah* which is uniquely their very own and serves to authenticate their "Muslimness." This identity, I posit, is a function of the mosque and is afforded to the second generation based on the processes of their Islamic inheritance *and* appropriation, which in turn inform and form their Islamic authority, an emblematic privilege their parents did not necessarily possess. (By "authority," I mean that Islam is predicated on each individual's interpretation of his/her Islam, hence each Muslima is responsible for owning her own Islam. This authority thus implies agency on the part of the women of the second generation) Whereas the first generation of African-American Muslims had to broker, negotiate, carve and build from the ground up what Sherman Jackson calls a "Black Religion" based on the tenets of

Islam, the second generation found in the *masjid* an authentic Islamic *ummah*. As such, the second generation Muslimas' narratives portray the *masjid* as synonymous with "community, family, friendship, and sense of belonging…a good safe space."[127] Therefore, the women of this generation regard the mosque and participation in it as the axis of their Islamic identity—an agentive space where they are liberated to practice *their* Islam in the manner they deem most pious. Here the intersectionality of being a woman, Black and a Muslim in the United States is (or can be) successfully negotiated and provide agency. The *masjid* for the second generation is the "nucleus,"[128] a space where they can "huddle together as one body."[129]

The fundamental ideals of the concept of the *ummah* are meant to sustain and nurture a Muslim community, as the Quran makes clear: "Thus we made you an *ummah* justly balanced, that ye might be witness over the nations" (2:143). During the process of "Sunnification" of the Nation, the former NOI Temples were rapidly transitioned into seminal mainstay *masjids* to disseminate the newfound *deen*.[130] These *masjids,* along with other mosques, would emerge to function as a "nation within a nation," a phrase coined by E. Franklin Frazier in his seminal text *Negro Church in America*. This "invisible institution" offered the unchurched African-American Muslims a means of social, economic, political and most importantly educational cooperation. For the "re-found" African-American Muslim diaspora, the structure and space of the mosque was the conduit for establishing a successful orthodox Islamic life.

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[127] Compilation of Henna, Nadira, Fatima and Jamillah.

[128] Henna.

[129] Nadira.

[130] The religion of *Al-Islam*.

The women in particular found the mosque space to be agentive—an apparatus, a dynamic space, within which they could negotiate their gender, race and religion based on the tenets of Islam in the context of the United States. Mona from Bakersfield, CA explains, "…it's a new institution that gives you freedom to really be all you can be, on your terms." Nadira from Los Angeles, CA suggests that it is a space where they can be authenticated, recognized, reaffirmed, acknowledged, form a "sense of community," have a "sense of self," and literally *exist*: "Like one of my professors said, 'I didn't even know you guys existed.'" Nadira, now a professor herself and a published poet, goes on to reveal in a sober tone:

> Well, basically this is part of what we had to do to survive in this society, which we know was white male, patriarchal. In order to be able to exist in a society like this, which we knew we had to create our own spaces, and those spaces became spaces that supported us, because outside of that, at that time we were not able to see ourselves as our true selves in terms of businesses, in terms of beauty…It's interesting, all this getting back to natural. We've been natural for years. We've been like this for years, getting back to the land and, what is it, going green. We've been green for years….We've been existing on nothing and building on nothing for years without the traditional support system of American culture, American society.

The women tell me that their lives growing up and to this day are centered on the mosque and other Muslims. Recalling her childhood, Rashida explains full of boisterous joy, "My friends were Muslim. I didn't have much contact with non-Muslim friends. You know, just to socialize! That was my social network, you know, going to the *masjid*." This notion still holds true for her today, as she shared that if she meets a non-Muslim, she does not deem it necessary to remember their name: "I mean, *you're important*, but you're not that important to me that I need to remember your name because I might not ever see you again." Whereas she "might remember the *Muslim* woman's name, you

know what I'm saying?"—she appealed to me, hoping for an acknowledgment from a fellow Muslim sister. "I might do *dua*[131] for her, you know?" she remarked, thus reinforcing her religious ties to the community or *ummah*.

The desire to associate with other Muslims reveals the wish for kinship that would serve to strengthen their Islamic identity and the *ummah*, which are interdependent. As another sister jokingly opined about her ex-husband, who had converted to Islam for her, "Anybody who's not Muslim, is Christian." This comment reveals a clear boundary*, the border of her identity that must not be transgressed*. Some women shared feelings of obligation to say *Salam*[132] to a fellow Muslima,[133] even a stranger, on the bus or at Costco —a signal which is a mutual acknowledgment of their co-existence in the sphere of Islam. These women go on to concede that if they resided in Muslim-majority nations, such signals and boundaries would be superfluous. The narratives and actions of the women are not meant to denigrate anyone or any religion; rather they reveal the importance of the *ummah* in the women's lives. Neither is such reasoning evidence of an "us-versus-them" mentality. What I wish to emphasize is how it signals a clear boundary in these women's minds that reaffirms their Muslimness. Therefore, for the second generation of indigenous Muslim women, the *ummah* experienced via the mosque helps preserve their religiosity and consequently their identity, and in turn strengthens their agency as African-American Muslim women of the global *ummah* living in the American diaspora.

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[131] Prayer.

[132] Hello in Arabic.

[133] Who would be identified by her dress, and most likely her head-covering.

Unlike the first generation, who went at it alone, the second-generation Muslimas' religious lives include their parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—a whole nation of people to model an *ummah.* Jamillah, a bold and vibrant Muslima, shares about her mother's influence as not only a role model, but more importantly, a precedent for what a "Muslim mother" looks and acts like. She wore "cultural attire," and "she went from headscarves to *geles* to turbans…it's a kind of a *dated* culture mix is definitely where I get my variety of taste from…" I noted that Jamillah's attire echoed the description of her mother, complete with an elegant silk *gele*. For Jamillah, her mother's commitment to Islam and the *ummah* was further evidenced by her involvement:

> And even as far as the Temple, and or *masjid*, or whatever form we were in, she was very involved…so she's always baking cakes, pies, and cookies, and she still does to this day. And so she just was always *involved*. And even as far as my sisters, we always saw *that*. She was always involved in community life, like being a stay-at-home mom, to her, literally didn't mean literally just *staying* at home.

Today, Jamillah and her sister lead a youth camp at her *masjid,* both cover their hair and are always involved—thus modeling their mother's piety, commitment and devotion to the *ummah*.

In the absence of a Muslim family, the mosque community substituted as one, and provided the link to the *ummah*—the role model for kinship. Aisha and her mother Leila, both women that I interviewed, view Leila's best friend Sonia and her children as family. Leila met Sonia, an Egyptian Muslima, in high school and converted directly into Sunni Islam in 1960s, when she was sixteen years old. For Leila, Sonia has become a "blood sister" and for Aisha, she is an aunt: "Like my mother's best, best, best, best, best, best friend who I call her my aunt because I grew up with her, they're Muslim and we would go to the mosque together as often as we could. And she—her and her husband are big

into—like they go, her and her husband goes to mosque a lot and when they can they always go out in *jammat* so they're very big on going out in that." Leila told me about her first husband—Aisha's father—who was an Arabic teacher who assisted new converts in learning about the *deen*. Ten years after Leila embraced Islam, her mother, Mahasan, also embraced the *deen*. Now the three generations of Muslim women are a vital part of the Muslim community, where they not only teach at the Islamic Academy but serve as hosts to international Muslim travelers from all over the world.

The story of Aisha and Leila shows what Kambiz GhaneaBassiri characterizes as "adaptions of traditional practices to changing times,"[134] in that in the context of the American diaspora, the women improvised upon their circumstances to create around them an Islamic *ummah*. For Leila, what began as a solo journey into Islam at the age sixteen has bloomed into a little nation of her own. The *ummah* not only reinforces her religiosity but also provides her the chance for *dawa*,[135] a form of spreading Islam, as she works as a full-time teacher at the Islamic academy. The kinship she forged with Sonia at the age of sixteen still sustains, reinforces and helps maintain her *iman* and devotion. In fact, Leila, her mother and her daughter all live within walking distance of the mosque, as it is the center-point of their lives.

The first generation chose to depart from their upbringing in order to make Islam their religion, whereas the second generation inherited Islam as their faith (before choosing to continue in it in adulthood[136]), a distinction that contributes to the nuanced

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[134] Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "Religious Normativity and Praxis among American Muslims," 224.

[135] *Dawa* is the act of inviting to Islam, proselytizing, presenting a positive image of Islam.

differences in how women of each generation experience the mosque. For the first generation the mosque served as a conduit through which they could create an *ummah*. Elinor explains her initial affinity for the NOI and later Islam as having to do with the *community*: "You know, it's a community. And I was really seeking...I didn't grow up [with]…the Muslim community, [so] it fulfilled something that I think I really had missed that I wanted." Sister Joyce may have already had a religious community, but it did not fulfil her or give her the identity she desired. COGIC did not address the social injustices of the America of the 1970's, while NOI "was supporting the community" along with strengthening her confidence to by confirming that her "God wasn't a Caucasian man with...blonde hair and blue eyes." For Dolores, Islam was a life-saver as the community members she encountered "were interested in behavior, they were interested in the moral aspects, that's what I gravitated toward." Today Dolores views her Islam as having "outward meanings, inward meanings, and all kinds of meanings in between"—a nuanced view of Islam which she has mastered in part due to the space of the mosque. Islam quenched these women's thirst, and they gained access to it through the *masjid*.

In contrast, for the second generation, the mosque was a privileged space in which they inherited a worldview, as this chapter illustrates. What they have in common with the first generation is that they experience the mosque as a place where their *iman* is nourished through the *ummah* as embodied in kinships with fellow Muslims. Mona, a member of the second generation, makes this point: "It was alive. It was happening. It wasn't just something that you're reading about, because that's pretty much what Islam

[136] Fatima shared with me that at the age of sixteen, her father gave her a Quran and instructed her to choose for herself if she wanted to be a Muslim as an adult.

was [doing in Bakersfield]…When I went to Sacramento, I saw Islam in action. That was really the first time I saw it on that level." For Mona, the large Muslim community in Sacramento revealed the potential of what Islam and the *ummah* could be: alive! At a time when she felt dissatisfied by her sparse mosque in the small town of Bakersfield, her move to Sacramento facilitated the "resurrection" of her *iman* and cultivated her *deen*. Hence, for the second-generation Muslim women, Islam and an Islamic identity were modeled by their parents and the *ummah*. As this is a generation who grew up fully immersed in Islam and its actuation, there is no uncertainty, doubt or confusion in the praxis of their Islam vis-à-vis the *masjid.*

Masjid and Community

What is a *masjid?* First, it is the Arabic word for mosque. In *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, Akel Kahera states that the word is semantically derived from a term meaning "a place for prostration."[137] In practical terms, a *masjid* is a functional space where Muslims gather to perform prayer and other community rituals and observances. In keeping with the *hadith*,[138] however, "the [whole] earth is a *masjid*,"[139] and the term may be expanded to mean much more. Despite the well-documented presence of Muslims in America due to the slave trade, too little is known about the chronology of the mosque in America. The earliest known mosque structure to be built in America was

[137] Akel I. Kahera, *Deconstructing The American Mosque: Space, Gender and Aesthetics* (Austin: University of Texas Press: 2012), 13.

[138] *Hadith* is a tradition, saying, narrative, or written report of action attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; the source of material for the *sunnah*. Regarded as a source of Islamic law.

[139] Kahera, *Deconstructing The American Mosque*, 147.

constructed in 1921 in Detroit.[140] Given the brutal nature of slavery and its requisite to eliminate any identity markers, such as religious structures, this deficiency is unsurprising. As an architectural historian, Kahera attempts to fill this void by proposing that "an antebellum mosque may have been a rudimentary building, quite temporary and unrefined; and in some instances, a simple demarcated space on the ground—under the dome of the sky—facing Makkah would have sufficed without an enclosed structure."[141] Such a view of the *masjid* reflects the flexibility and diversity of a mosque as a space where even in the absence of other Muslims and a physical structure, a Muslim can face Makkah and pray, knowing full well that as part of the *ummah* he or she is not alone.

In the present time, *The US Mosque Survey 2011* tallied a total of 2,106 mosques. This number represents a 74% increase from 2000, when 1,209 mosques were counted. As an institution the mosque is fairly young, as two-thirds of the mosques in America were built after 1980. As the report reveals, the vast majority of mosques are located in metropolitan areas and are highly diverse, in that only 3% of the mosques have congregants of one ethnic group. The report also cites immigration, expansion of the Muslim population and "divisions within the Muslim community" as some of the leading causes for the exponential growth of the number of mosques, meaning that congregants and/or religious leaders have branched out to establish new mosques that complement their religious views.

Unlike the Catholic Church, the mosque as an institution has no central governing authority or body—there is no Vatican for the mosque. Instead, the practitioners,

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[140] Edward E. Curtis IV, "Five Myths about Mosques in America," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2010, https://www.washingtonpost.com/

[141] Kahera, *Deconstructing The American Mosque*, 147.

meaning the individual Muslims and the *ummah*, are equivalent to the Church. The control and management of the mosque's physical space and what transpires within it are the result of a consensus that the community must collectively reach, or *ijma*. According to Aslan, this lack of a standardized religious hierarchy is what makes the Muslim community, the *ummah,* the nucleus of Muslim faith: "Put simply, the community is the Church in Islam: the '*bearer of values*.'"[142] Consequently, the interpretation and in turn the actuation of the faith and its values vary broadly amongst those who practice Islam. No two mosques are alike, as each *masjid* caters to the needs of its congregation, based on *ijma*. GhaneaBassiri explains, "American Muslims gather in mosques with people from their own ethnic, racial, or sectarian background, where they can hear sermons in their own language and continue their particular traditions."[143] Therefore, mosques of America are most often an ethnocentric expression of their congregations, a phenomenon known as "denominationalism."[144] Within these mosques, Muslims perform acts of worship that are their own religio-cultural interpretation of their *deen.*

"I would go, just because I *need* some level of face-to-face, human spirituality. Like, I'll use a metaphor that I heard in a workshop, an Islamic workshop...lumps of coal... stay warm when they're together. And when you remove one lump of coal... that coal becomes cold." Like Jamillah's comment, the narratives of the other second-generation Muslimas indicate that their childhood and later adulthood were deeply saturated with the tenets of Islam via the *masjid*. For the women, the mosque as a space clearly played a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing their Black Muslim identity, as it

[142] Aslan, *No God But God*, 146.

[143] GhaneaBassiri, "Religious Normativity and Praxis," 220.

[144] Ibid. 220.

was not only a place for them to pray and actuate their Islam, but also a social nexus where their community and identity were rooted. Some women share how they met their African-American Muslim husbands, while others forged life-long friendships. For most, the *masjid* is a home away from home—a refuge. For others, it was an actual home, a mosque which their parents built with their own hands. The women of the second generation grew up and continue to live in a worldview which is Islamic. As Jamillah states, with the most assured tone, "we *have* to stay close to the fire. We *have* to in order to remain engaged."

Henna, a graceful and astute Muslima, confides about her Islamic upbringing in the suburbs of Los Angeles that the *masjid* was for her the "center of everything." As the daughter of the "core charter founders" of her small community mosque (founded by a group of African-American families), Henna beams with pride when describing the lifelong friendships forged in the *masjid*, where she grew up in a small community of African-American Muslims, "all the time, hanging out with each other, engaged with each other, interacting with each other, learning together, cooking together, [and] praying together." As an adult, Henna serves on the Board of Directors of her parents' mosque, now her own.

On the other side of the country, Rashida also spent her childhood deeply immersed in Islam and the Muslim community of Atlanta, affiliated with the W. D. Muhammad community. She attended elementary school at the mosque until eighth grade and only had Muslim friends: "I spent time with my Muslim friends who lived right around the corner, stuff like that. *We were a real Muslim family.*" Jamillah, who grew up in East Lansing, MI, tells me about her six siblings: *"*We're all still Muslims.

We're all still practicing, raising our children as such. *Al Hamdullilah!"* Additionally, she tells me that she considers her mother and Clara Mohammad as her role models that have made her the Muslim woman she is today. The formative years of Nadira, Henna, Rashida and Jamillah's childhood were spent connected to the mosque. The love, affection and nostalgia with which the women recall their very Islamic upbringing, I posit, is a byproduct of the mosque.

Inheritance

> A lot of playing. A lot of enjoying outside. Feeling *very* nurtured—very protected. A lot of those sisters, those older sisters, I still would consider them, you know, almost like a godmother. When my mother passed twenty-some years ago, they really took my sisters and brothers, my siblings, under their wing. And you know, really protected us. And you know, a lot of just *positive* memories. *Of course*, being scolded at times….
>
> Fatima, Los Angeles, CA

> Both my parents were teachers, so of course, you know—See, that's the other thing. My mom is deceased. So this story is favoring my dad, but I should actually be speaking about it in terms of my mom. She passed away at like 44….So when I think about the mosque, my experience as a kid, a lot of those memories involve my mother and these really tightknit Muslim women circles where they were preparing food, getting ready for festivities, and also educating us. Then we were praying. We were making our five prayers…I had a lot of grandmothers as well as moms for sure by default, but then there would be these certain Muslim women who would just take me and just love up on me in a way that I actually just – I miss that if I'm not in that space, comfort me in a way.
>
> Nadira, Los Angeles, CA

"I was born and raised as Muslim, under the Nation of Islam. I was born in 1970 and so initially I went to Sister Clara Muhammad School at three years old. And we wore our cute little uniforms," Jamillah replies energetically when asked about her religious upbringing. For the women whose families came into Islam via the Nation, or in the case

of Jamillah, the Five Percenters,[145] their childhood was on the cusp of their parents' transition into orthodox Sunni Islam, a seminal event that today seems inconsequential for the women I met. "Yes, I was about eight years old. And I guess...the big difference was...the mosque was different," Mona says. Her recollection of the transition in Bakersfield, California does not reveal any hesitation or concerns: "And then when we became into orthodox Islam, it wasn't any major difference. We just started learning some memorization of Quran, the prayers." The nonchalant manner in which the women recount these events must be seen from the eyes of Jamillah and Mona, who at age of five and eight simply followed their parents' and community's lead and were taught by the *ummah* how to be Muslims.

In contrast, the transition served as a defining moment for the women of the first generation. By embracing orthodox Sunni Islam, they had to make difficult decisions along with re-negotiating issues of identity and agency, as they chose to surrender to an unknown god (in response to a primordial urging). For a cohort whose disposition to join the NOI was based on nationalist agendas, the transition into the spiritual realm was painful at times. Although 1975 was a pivotal year for Black Islam in America, the "transition" that historians and researchers put so much emphasis on and often utilize to draw a distinct line was not on the radar of most young girls who lived through it. Their fond memories of weekly visits to the temple, school attendance at the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, and religiously oriented summer camps along with family journeys to various religious conferences all meld together to reveal a childhood which was simply

[145] Also, referred to as, The Nation of Gods and Earths. A proto-Islamic movement, founded by Clarence 13X, in 1964 in Harlem. Clarence 13X was a former student of Malcolm X, who broke away from the NOI after a dispute with Elijah Muhammed over theological differences over race. For more see discussion by McCloud in African American Islam, 57-61.

fun and preoccupied with Islam. When asked "what was your religious upbringing?" the women answer without hesitation that they were *born and raised Muslim*—thus leaving no doubt as to their religious identity.

Nadira and Fatima, two brilliant and accomplished sisters from Los Angeles, illuminate how they as a family grew up Muslim and their "father did a lot of work, [and] mother did a lot of work to create" a space where they are "heard" and their opinions are "valued." For the women, being Muslim meant growing up "covering" and going to a Muslim school, which was for them a normal experience that has shaped them for life: "We didn't really know that there was—I knew there other schools that weren't Muslim, but it seemed very normal for me and natural that this was my—primary, as you know, is shaping your idea….my son's father [her ex-husband] and I both went to Sister Clara Muhammad School. So we were used to that very individual, focused, very small school, like your own world." The women also discuss their personal journey into fully embracing Islam for themselves. Fatima tells me, "I [went] to Muslim school up until the seventh grade. I studied Arabic, I studied the Prophet's life—my father gave me a Qur'an at twelve. And at sixteen, my dad said to me, 'You have to choose Islam for yourself.'" The Islam they know and practice today has always been *their Islam*.

"There's a saying that Elijah Muhammad cleaned us up. And then Imam Muhammad *woke* us up!" Jamillah's quick recitation of this saying reveals the nuanced admiration she and her community hold for Elijah Mohammad, who despite having taught *shirk*[146] vis-à-vis his claim to be Allah (as described by the women), is appreciated as the community feels indebted to him for what he started by "cleaning" them up. More importantly, Jamillah's continuous mention of what the *"Imam did"* (W. D. Mohammad)

[146] *Shirk* is to obstruct the Oneness and Unity of God in any way.

highlights the profound respect she and her community have for him for illuminating them with the true *deen*—so much so that the women of the first *and* second generation spent hours upon hours listening to the transformative leader's profound lectures in various *masjids* across the country. Elinor and Beverly, first-generation Muslimas, both acknowledged that Imam W. D. Muhammad provided a very "nurturing community, especially as a young mother it was amazing," which in turn abetted their desire and love for the *deen* along with their fellow brethren Muslims—their *ummah*—in the space of the mosque.

The Imam's progressive reform on gender issues was a paradigm shift from the male-centric Nation.[147] His reading and teachings on Islam and the sources were received by the women as agentive. For the women, their Islam as relayed via the Imam is a religion that provides them with equity and respect. Such admiration is conveyed by all of the women. Elinor in particular recalls his dress reform: "he said, you know, 'You don't have to wear a uniform. You don't have to wear all that stuff.'" She goes on to narrate his disapproval of polygamy. Most fascinating for me was a conversation about the Imam upon my first visit to *Masjid* Bilal, a former NOI temple in Boston. I was given a firsthand account by one of the elder administrators about her suspicions around the Imam's passing. The older woman opined that his last bath had been poisoned—a

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[147] The NOI is known to have been strict and generally intrusive in its members' lives. As an example, they would make unannounced house calls to inspect women's homes to ensure proper clothing, diet and sanitary conditions as per NOI regulations were being followed. If a member was in violation of the rules there would be repercussions. For more serious violations, members could be kicked out. Thus, the NOI was heavily regulatory and in the case of the women, considered to be more intrusive. For more see Jamillah Karim's *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam.* My informants also relayed similar sentiments, as Fatima noted "they were *more strict…The dress…if you had committed adultery or fornication, you got kicked out!*" She, along with Jamillah, likened them to Jehovah's Witnesses.

story that I was more than eager to hear, as this was my first field visit to a Black mosque. I remarked upon the love and concern she had for the Imam, as nearly seven years later she still could "not believe he was gone." For the first- and second-generation women, the journey that led their nation to Islam is conveyed in a very positive manner—as a blessing.

During the period of transition from the NOI to Sunni Islam, the women (then children) of the second generation did not ask many questions. They did not care why chairs were being removed from the temples, which would be designated as *masjids* going forward, or how the ministers became imams overnight. As children, they simply began to "read the Quran by Arabic, but they used to use[d] a transliteration." Mona, an engineer, shares about her Islamic education during the Sunnification, "So we learned how to – did all, like, the *fatiha*,[148] read short *surahs*,[149] just the prayers and everything…" Nor did they question why the "cute little uniforms" were traded in for modest mainstream clothing: "I mean, we didn't go from headscarves to hot pants, but, you know, we still had to dress very modestly. But there were just some things that my parents didn't want to *force* upon us?" Jamillah's witty and precise memory provides great insight into how the Sunnification affected the family dynamics of all those involved in the endeavor. For Jamillah's mother, the Imam's relaxation of the dress code meant she could begin to adorn herself with various styles of modest clothing and head coverings—a tradition that Jamillah and her daughter would go on to inherit.

Though W. D. Mohammad did not require women to wear the *hijab*, Jamillah Karim reports that she found conflicting narratives among the women she interviewed for

[148] The first chapter of the Quran.

[149] Chapters of the Quran.

Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam. However, at the time of the transition, such matters of agency vis-à-vis clothing were left to the elder first generation to negotiate. The second-generation women, who were all under the age of ten, simply *inherited* the practices of their parents until they were old enough to negotiate them for themselves. It seems that the hardship or confusion along with the re-negotiation of their faith that the first generation had to endure was absent from the second generation at that time. For the second generation, it was simple as Jamillah states: "And we went right into it…" Today, the most important feature of this group of women is the fact that the backbone of this cohort's religious identity rests on the tenets of Orthodox Sunni Islam. Therefore, the Sunnification process for the second generation was a normalized, natural experience.

Mastery and Appropriation of Pure Islam

> But like I said, majority of African Americans, they do one thing – the major difference is they do read a lot on Islam. And that's the major difference, too. While a lot of times they can't function with Muslims who are mainly just cultural Muslim, because they – because of conflict with what they're reading. You know what I mean? They [African American] do read a lot….They read, because once they read the Quran, it's like a thirst, and then they're – I mean, and I'm going to say lightly, they do read.

Mona, Bakersfield, CA

> So we're dealing with two things, because we're dealing with Muslims or we're dealing with the mystique of something that nobody really at that time understood. The visibility of Muslims in America, especially in Los Angeles, no, Black Muslims put that visibility down in the West for sure in America in what they call the hells of North America. My research shows that we are directly responsible for that. African-American Muslims are responsible for that, and this obviously holds over from the relationship that – I'm sorry, that the structure that the Nation had put in place. Then it covers over into orthodox practice.

Nadira, Los Angeles, CA

"I was determined to practice what I read in Islam and not in with anybody's culture," Mona declares with gratification as she defines her procurement of her *deen.* The women of the second generation have no hesitation about their Islamic identity, *iman* or *deen*, as they are firmly rooted in Islam and the sources because of their upbringing in the mosque. The sense of pride that the women feel in their Islamic roots and more importantly their pure *deen* serves as a compass for their lives. Fatima's proficient discourse on lessons learned during *hajj* exemplifies her ability to disentangle culture from Islam and boldly assert herself: "I think what opened my eyes a lot was when I went to *hajj* in 2007. I really see that—a lot of it's culturally, what we see. And I've expressed to people about like, '*Don't put your culture on me*!' I mean, whomever you are." Mona and Fatima's comments on culture *and* Islam highlight one of the underlying issues that this generation is dealing with—that of untangling the two, so as to practice a pure Islam—that is unadulterated by cultural baggage.

Despite African-American Muslims' mastery of and longstanding history with Islam, one of the most common misconceptions about American Islam is the perception that "real" Islam is only practiced by Muslim immigrants—a notion further fueled by the events of 9/11 and its aftermath.[150] The most visible genesis of Islam amongst African-Americans is linked to proto-Islamic movements and Muslims such as Malcolm X and Elijah Mohammad. Therefore, African-American Muslims are often regarded as a people whose identity and religiosity is conflated with protest in a quest for identity.[151] Such misconceptions are held by society at large and further fueled by immigrant Muslims

[150] McCloud, "African-American Muslim Intellectual Thought," 172.

[151] Ibid.

because of their ethnocentric Islamic worldview. Thus Mona's and Fatima's declarations that their Islam is "pure," a sentiment oft repeated, directly contest this racialized disregard for the indigenous Muslims of America.

In his groundbreaking text *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*, Sherman Jackson provides a critical analysis of the state of Islam in America. In particular, he focuses on African-American Islam and lays out a blueprint—a manifesto—for its practitioners in the face of the rife marginalization at the behest of the immigrant Muslims. He clarifies that the challenge for "Blackamerican Muslims has become how to negotiate a dignified, black, American existence without flouting the legitimate aspects of the agenda of Black Religion or vesting the latter with too much authority, and without falling victim to the ideological claims, prejudices, and false obsessions of Immigrant Islam."[152] The solution to this predicament, posits Jackson, is the "Third Resurrection"—an emerging reality in which "whatever future Islam has in black America will be one in which the authenticating agent is almost certain to be the structured discourse of Sunni Tradition."[153]

Edward E. Curtis contributes to the discourse on the "primal importance of Sunni Islamic tradition and norms" by claiming that emphasizing this importance is the legacy of Imam W. D. Muhammad. In less than a decade, the Imam endeavored to dismantle the "black particularistic" tradition of Islam and merged African-American Islam with Sunni Islam.[154] However, for the second-generation women, the paradigm shift that Jackson dictates as a necessity has already come to fruition. By turning to the sources and

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[152] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 5.

[153] Ibid. 6.

[154] Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 127.

learning *for themselves,* since childhood, the true tenets of Islam—rather than foreign cultural practices—the women have grown up to transcend their *deen*. The confidence in their knowledge is echoed by all of the women. The conduit for this paradigm shift and "re-appropriation" I propose *was and continues to be the American mosque*—a space that for the second-generation Muslimas I interviewed is synonymous with community, meaning that in order to have one, you must have the other.[155]

The culture of the mosques within which the women grew up is also a testament to W. D. Mohammad, who starting in 1975 made a push for his community to learn Arabic as a requisite for the recitation of the Quran and the performance of *salat,* prayers. By doing so, the Imam ensured that the re-found nation would become proficient in Islamic discourse and not have to capitulate to the Islam of the immigrants, which he knew to be conflated with cultural practices.[156] Furthermore, the Imam made the mosque a family-friendly environment where, as Fatima describes, "Women talk. Men Talk. Everybody's talking and discussing things, and women have just as strong role as men do in developing the community, and that's recognized. *It's accepted*. It's not seen as anything out of place."

Besides creating a family-friendly space, the Imam endeavored to empower women by arming them with the *deen*.[157] Many of the second generation Muslimas attended Sister Clara Mohammad schools, which were an offshoot of the Muslim Girls

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[155] Where just as Aslan posits, a believer or a Muslim can articulate, through actions, his or her membership in the Muslim community.

[156] There are many accounts of W. D. Muhammad's disapproval of immigrant Muslims and his efforts to secure Black Islam in the sources of Islam via Islamic education which was a source of indoctrination in Arabic and the Quran.

[157] See Gibson and Karim, chapter two.

Training (MGT), set up by the NOI. These schools were housed in or affiliated in the *masjids* in major cities and provided both a primary and Islamic education. For others, their local mosques supplemented the Islamic education that was vital for the acquisition of the *deen*. In the absence of a mosque, the small tight-knit communities built their own. In the meantime, as Henna shares, "I got a lot of my education from just my family, as they were learning, and from the community."

In addition, the formative years of the second-generation Muslimas were not only consumed by "doing" Islam, but also produced an Islamic worldview, which McCloud characterizes as an essential component of one's *deen*.[158] Consequently, the mastery of their *deen* continues to be authenticated by not only their participation within the *masjids*, but also their roles as teachers and leaders. These women serve on the board of directors of mosques, teach Arabic, go to *hajj* and in one case deliver a *khutba* at an all-women's mosque. The consensus of the second generation leads me to affirm that because the second generation grew up in the mosque, they are extremely clear and knowledgeable about the requisites of Islam and are firmly rooted in the sources, the Quran and the *hadiths*. Their Islam is therefore unlike the ethnocentric Islam of the immigrants, which is heavily weighed down by cultural baggage. The Islam of the second generation is engendered in the sources and is considered by the women to be "pure."

Most remarkable is the passion or the *iman* with which the second-generation Muslimas approach their faith. Such divinely inspired commitments by African-American Muslim women in the framework of America raise profound questions regarding the power of their *iman* and how it informs and forms their identity and

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[158] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 3.

religiosity. Despite the hostile socio-political-cultural milieu of the American polity, which always seems to be at war with Islam, women and Blacks, these women continue to forge ahead with their mastery of Islam. Therefore, the narratives of the second-generation Muslimas confidently validate an Islamic identity and upbringing which marks what Jackson calls the era of emerging "mastery and appropriation of Sunni super-tradition."[159]

Piety and Practice

> It's because I think it's our spirit. It's who we are. We survivors at the end of the day. We've survived great—we've survived being a slave—we've survived so much tragedy that for us, the mosque has become a comfortable space and a refuge. And so, with having the refuge, we hold it dear, you know? And I think it's been a great experience. And I think it's going to be a better experience as we grow.
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> Mona, Bakersfield, CA

> A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He neither oppresses him nor humiliates him nor looks down upon him. Piety is here—and he [Prophet Muhammad] pointed to his chest three times. It is evil enough for a Muslim to hold his brother Muslim in contempt. All things of a Muslim are inviolable for another Muslim: his blood, his property, and his honor.
>
> Jamillah Karim

My mother considers herself a devout, pious and practicing Muslim—however, the first time she ever set foot inside a mosque was around the age of forty. My mother was born in 1956 in Pakistan, officially known as the Islamic Republic, the first country to be founded on the basis of religion: Islam. By virtue of being born in the Islamic State, my mother vis-à-vis her family lineage and nationality grew up saturated in an Islamic worldview, which means that my mother grew up surrounded by Muslims who modeled

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[159] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*, 5.

for her an Islam based on the sources—the Quran and the *hadiths*. She knows how to read and recite the Quran in Arabic, which is a compulsory part of the education of Pakistan, along with all of the prayers. Besides carrying out the tenets of her *deen*, my mother considers herself a practicing Muslima because of her belief in *tawhid*.[160] At the age of twenty-nine, in 1984, my mother along with her family moved to Bakersfield, CA to join her eight siblings and parents. I was seven years old. It was not until a good ten years later, somewhere around 1995, that my mother set foot inside a mosque for the first time in her life. Up until then, as my mother told me, "I had no idea what the inside of a *masjid* looked like."

When I lay out these facts about my mother to the women I meet, there are a mixed range of reactions. Often I must go on to explain that my mother is not an anomaly and that neither my grandmother[161] nor my aunts went to the mosque until they immigrated to America. Furthermore, I share with them that my grandmother, who died in Bakersfield at the age of eighty, did not cover her head, except to pray once in a while. In fact, neither my mother nor any of her four sisters don any type of head covering. With the exception of a few first cousins and one second cousin (who was born and raised in southern California), the women in our family do not cover their hair, as per the model set by my grandmother. It must be noted that I have at least a hundred and fifty first and second cousins, more than two-thirds of whom were born and raised in Southern California. I also attempt to illuminate that these are the cultural practices of Pakistan[162]

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[160] God's Oneness and Unity.

[161] With the exception of the *hajj*, which my grandmother took part in.

[162] It must be noted that many of the practices that I refer to have changed in the Pakistan in the last 30 years. As now, more and more women are donning the *hijab*. I still do not know of

and probably are similar in most of the majority-Muslim nations, where women, as noted by Ann Braude in "Women's History Is American Religious History," are either "discouraged or prohibited" from participating in mosques.[163]

Furthermore, the lack of mosque participation by the women in my family is not based on religious restrictions, nor is it a reflection of their lack of piety or religiosity—it is simply their cultural norm that was probably a function of safety issues in the context of Pakistan. "Don't prohibit the female servant of Allah from entering the mosque," said the Prophet, thus removing all prohibitions for women's prayer in the mosque. The traditions and norms of the current Muslim world are unlike those of the time of the Prophet, Kahera points out, where women such as the prophet's wives had free access to the mosque.[164] In America, the women of our family, especially younger generations, are steadily getting more involved in their local mosques and aspire to practice Islam "more actively" than my grandmother or her daughters. This pattern, is affirmed by Catherine A. Brekus in "Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History": "when world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Islam are transplanted to the United States, immigrant women often become particularly active in their religious communities."[165] Today, my mother is what is often referred to by the women as an "*Eid*

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any women in our family back in Pakistan who attend mosques. However, they do seem to be becoming more religious and signal this through their clothing.

[163] Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93.

[164] Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, 15.

[165] Catherin A. Brekus, "Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining in the Past*, ed. Catherin A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 8.

Muslim,"[166] meaning she attends the annual *Eid* prayers along with her family once a year. The example of my mother and the women of my family, at the most anecdotal level, reveals that the level of engagement in the mosque by the women in our family has increased in the diaspora of America.

As a Muslima, one can be pious and practice one's Islam without ever setting foot in a mosque. With the exception of *hajj*, a Muslim woman is not required to attend mosque for prayers, although she is not restricted from doing so. The five pillars and other rituals required for a Muslima can all be carried out within the confines of one's home. However, in the context of America, as evidenced by the women I meet, mosque attendance is not an abnormal practice and has become a normative one. In fact, by most of the women I encountered it is understood as a compulsory act of piety that increases one's *iman* and enriches one's *deen.* Henna, who is well versed in the Quran and Islam, posits: "From my understanding…maybe there's several places in the Quran where it talks about it, but it says, 'O you who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday, hasten earnestly to the *masjid*….'" Some even perceive mosque attendance and participation as a requisite for piety, a way to be a "part of a community"; Mona states, "I really believe in the concept of *ummah* sister- and brotherhood, because I think it makes…a better society…." The example of my mother and the women of my family seems radical to most indigenous Muslimas, but must be contextualized vis-à-vis Pakistan where the normative religiosity is a product of a particular process rather than solely being dependent on legal or scriptural dicta.

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[166] Dolores, a first generation Muslima, made a reference to women who only come out for Eid and hence are called "Eid Muslims."

The reaction of the African-American Muslimas to the example of my mother is something I find productive in fleshing out the religious norms of indigenous Islam in the American context, particularly in regard to women's mosque participation. The most common reaction is that my mother, the women of Pakistan, and those from other Muslim countries are not "free" and are culturally "oppressed."[167] Fatima poses this question: "So there were no rebels around there, would you say?" She views the mosque as a God-given right—a form of liberation. Rashida wants to know, "Do they have a place for them to go?" No, I explain, the women pray at home as it is probably not safe for them to leave the house. In response to this she chastises,

> But Allah is looking over you. Allah has angels that are on your right shoulder and on your left shoulder. They write down your bad deeds and your good deeds. They look over you. They protect you. Allah protects you. So if anything is supposed to happen to you, it's going to be Allah's decree. So wherever you are, if whatever's going to happen to you happens to you, it's going to happen to you whether you're at the house or not, do you know what I'm saying?

Rashida goes on to share that the *one thing* her husband has never stopped her from doing was attending the *masjid*—thus for Rashida it is a space where she is free, even from the demands of a rigidly observant husband and family.[168] It is an agentive space where she and the women can practice their religion in the manner they deem to be most pious.

The piety modeled by Fatima and Rashida vis-à-vis mosque attendance and verbalized by Henna in her quotation and exegesis of the Quran provides empowerment for the women in the spiritual realm. Braude cautions, "In assessing women's involvement in religion, we should not limit our perception of power to those forms that

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[167] Sister Joyce.

[168] Rashida's husband at one point took on a second wife without her permission. Polygyny will be discussed in a future chapter.

are publicly recognized within religious institutions."[169] In fact, she argues, piety provides "ordinary women with a source of moral power in the family, in the community, and more important, in their own lives, where religious practice has enabled generations of women to endure apparently unendurable situations."[170] The narratives of the women reveal that they are fully cognizant of the kinds of alternative power that Braude alludes to, as they proudly cite the longstanding tradition of the Black Church and women's involvement in the Civil Rights struggle as a model which they must live up to and even outperform. When Nadira states, "There's something about being a Black Muslim woman. There's also being a Muslim woman, but there is something about being a Black Muslim woman—that is next-level stuff!" she affirms the power that she and the other women hold within their gender, faith, and society at large. Henna also alludes to such notions when she states, "aside from just the history and the culture of slavery, I don't think that's been a part of our cultural experience. [meaning not going to the mosque] I think that, for the most part, African-American women have been more active, involved, again, having a voice. And I don't think that that's true in all cultures." Mona gives a similar opinion: "I think that Islam gives African-American women a new culture that they can embody, because African Americans coming here and living in America, they didn't have a culture that they were allowed to keep. That was all wiped away from them, and then their experiences was always third-class." For the women the mosque and the time spent in it are "special" and "sacred"—which serves to empower them via their increase in piety.

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[169] Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," 91.

[170] Ibid. 91.

In the multi-ethnic circumstances of America, there is a lack of normativity of Islamic praxis due to lack of conforming means or structures. In contrast, in a country such as Pakistan, where my mother learned her Islam, the longstanding history of cultural norms along with governmental control of religious practice serve as a coalescing apparatus—a means for producing conformity or religious consensus. A consequence of this signals all Pakistanis, both men and women, to demarcate the *masjid* as a male-centric spiritual space, a locus which for a Pakistani woman, such as my mother, never has been and never will be a requirement for piety nor emblematic of agency. This view of the *masjid* is starkly different from that of the indigenous Muslima, whose life is spent saturated with the mosque, where her identity was authenticated and her Muslimness is affirmed.

Encountering Cultural Baggage

> I feel like African-American women really spearhead in our *masjids*. We can take charge. We have a joke, we kind of call ourselves "Sapphire!" It's a joke. Sapphire means we can be this very humble, you know, almost take orders from anybody. But if you step on our toes—like when we started hearing about, they wanted to screen us. You know, like have a screen up. Like you know, some *masjids* you go there's a screen where they sit behind, right? That started coming about and we were like, "We don't need a screen."
>
> Fatima, Los Angeles, CA

Unlike their parents, members of the second generation no longer solely experience American Islam in a diaspora setting. With the influx of immigrant Islam and other globalization processes, the second generation of Muslims are at a crossroads where they aim to construct an identity which is not only concentric to America but also rooted in the global *ummah.* The challenge for this cohort lies in their relentless negotiation of a

religious identity that by many is deemed incompatible with American identity. Hence the phenomenon of "American Islam" as described by GhaneaBassiri "contests the binary opposition assumed in the oft-repeated phrase, 'Islam and the West.'"[171] Political and academic discourses on such conceptual incompatibilities, as GhaneaBassiri highlights, have created a dichotomy that questions the assimilation and identity formation of Muslims in America. Just as in the past, where the notion of Islam as a binary opposite of the "West" facilitated the idea of the separatist tendencies of "Black Muslims," many in the post 9/11 era assume that Islam is foreign to the American experience and thus incompatible with the expected norm of integration.

The double jeopardy that the second generation women currently must negotiate is based on their race *and* religion[172] and is further compounded by their gender. In the United States, they must prove their Americanness whilst staying true to their religious affiliations and prove their Muslimness to the *ummah*, to immigrants, and to fellow Muslims. The battleground for this "encounter," as I have shown, is often the space of the American mosque. Empirically, religion constantly interacts with local contexts and is variously adapted and reinterpreted in light of local circumstances.[173] Over the past several decades, immigrant Muslims have attempted to impose *their* ethnocentric Islamic practices, in the context of America. By touting the long-gone affiliations of indigenous Muslims with proto-Islamic movements and questioning their "authenticity" or mastery of Islamic *deen*, the immigrant Muslims of the American *ummah* have contributed to

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[171] GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 4.

[172] Varying interpretations and practices of Islam, based on ethnicity, race, and sect. What GhaneaBassiri refers to as "denominationalism."

[173] Ibid.

divisiveness and hostility. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that most immigrant Muslims originate from cultures where women are not visible or active participants within the mosque or in religious discourse. The culmination of the theological and social practices of the immigrants, who are themselves represented by at least sixty different ethnicities, deeply affects African Americans within American mosques.

Karim, an African-America second-generation Muslima scholar, argues that despite the unifying fundamental ideals of the *ummah*, indigenous Muslims find themselves excluded and isolated at times and deliberately separate themselves from immigrants in order to practice their Islam in majority Black mosques.[174] The women that I encountered seemed to have varying degrees of the kind of separation posited by Karim, but the reason behind the separation may be a little different than what she suggests. Most of the women I interviewed cited the "cultural" differences from the immigrants as a legitimate problem that must be negotiated within the American *ummah.* As a South Asian immigrant, I suspect that the word "cultural" may be a coded way of implying that the immigrants are motivated by racism; the coded language may be used in a kind effort to soften the critique in the presence of a listener who is part of the criticized group. When broaching the topic of racism within the *ummah*, I received varying degrees of acknowledgments followed by some sort of explanations. The answers were meandering and often alluded to the immigrants being "unintentionally" or "culturally" inept in dealing with diversity and race. At times I noticed a change of topic or avoidance of the question all together. On the whole, the women seemed reluctant to focus on negative experiences with immigrant Muslims, instead emphasizing their conviction in their *deen*

[174] Karim, "To Be Black, Female, and Muslim," 226.

and hope for *all* of the Muslims of America to realize the ideals of the *ummah* together on the basis of Islam.

Mona, from Bakersfield, CA (my hometown), discusses the matter of conflicts among indigenous and immigrant Muslims at length, as the influx of immigrants in the small town had a profound effect on her and her family. In her recollection, the original NOI Temple was transitioned into a *masjid* starting in 1975, when Mona was eight years old. About ten African-American families were part of that original Muslim community and up until the age of eighteen, the only image of Muslims she had were that they were Black. The only diversity or "cultural difference" she encountered in her *masjid* growing up was an imam who was from Trinidad. He was, as she describes him, "a biracial mix, maybe with Indian." The first religious contention arose in her mosque as the Imam from Trinidad "was more orthodox and had more knowledge" and took the community through the Sunnification process. At the time, this displeased the elders and as Mona opines, some of them are still "trapped in a time warp" as they are "very suspicious" of outsiders.

When Mona was about eighteen or nineteen, starting college, "that's when the Pakistani community and some Arabs both had started coming to that *masjid*." Soon after the immigrants broke off and established a new *masjid* as they felt that the imam at the existing mosque, the first and only in Bakersfield, was not sufficiently proficient in Arabic and other Islamic discourse to lead a congregation. The indigenous Muslim community felt "really discouraged," but as Mona tells me, her "father went ahead and went over with the immigrants…maybe one or two of the gentlemen." This move was especially challenging for the women to digest, as the immigrant *masjid* was not female-friendly. It was a big change, "because the African-American community was family-

oriented, and the immigrant community was male-oriented. And so it wasn't focused on children, women. It just seemed like it was a male-oriented thing going on, and so people didn't know how to fit into that." Mona states that many of the African-American families did not follow and some even went back to church. By the early 90's, Mona recalls, "the community really started to boom," and soon "the immigrants sort of weren't jiving with that. [meaning the mosque] They broke off and started the *masjid* on Kentucky." Mona's recollection lays out the typical pattern within the American *ummah,* where multiplicity within the American *ummah* leads congregants to denominate.[175]

From Mona's perspective, racial, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and theological differences collided to disenfranchise her and her community in their own house of worship. With the influx of immigrants, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Egyptian and other Muslim immigrants all intersected with the African Americans in the mosque and could not synchronize—so another mosque was founded, the mosque on Kentucky Blvd. The pattern continued and today Bakersfield has two Main Sunni mosques, one Shi'a Twelver mosque, one Ismaili mosque, a Dawoodi-Bohra Mosque and a NOI Temple. Against this backdrop, African Americans sense, as Mona suggests, "that they're not respected amongst immigrant Muslims. They feel that Black is less, and they feel like it's constantly being reiterated nonverbally, you know?" She also added about the older indigenous Muslims (including her father), "mostly have not adjusted to operating with a lot of immigrant Muslims, although they attend the *masjids*, and some of them do better than others, depending on what they were – like, it depends on how their experiences in

[175] "Denominationalism" means that "American Muslims gather in mosques with people from their own ethnic, racial, or sectarian background, where they can hear sermons in their own language and continue their particular traditions." GhaneaBassiri, "Religious Normativity and Praxis," 220.

education have –younger people are really seeing beyond the racial lines." This is a model she has set for her two daughters, one of whom I had the pleasure to interview.

Mona's story for me is invaluable, as it highlights the intersectionality of race, religion and gender in my hometown. In our discussion I was able to share with Mona that from my and my family's perspective, we also feel marginalized within the *masjid*. My mother[176] and several female cousins have openly discussed the hegemonic control that the "Arabs" attempt to hold over the South Asians—as they feel the need to dominate *all* Muslims based on what they perceive as linguistic superiority. Furthermore, coming from a family where men and women socialized in mixed gender spaces, we as a family find the segregation of men and women to be very offensive. The men in my family also are discouraged by the cultural baggage of the Arabs that is often conflated with religion in the space of the mosque. At the same time, I am fully cognizant of the fact that racism based on skin color is rampant in the South Asian culture and further contributes to the division of the American *ummah*.[177]

"I'm recognized as a *Sayed*. You know, they may not know *which Sayed* I am because there's so many of us, which I'm fine with that," Fatima tells me about some of the reasoning behind which mosque she chooses to engage in. At times it is simple as: "I can retreat to that *masjid* and feel comfortable in that space. Especially African-American *masjids* because my family has really done a lot of work in this community." Besides the verbal acknowledgment of the racial tensions, the choice of which mosque(s) to attend sheds light on how the women negotiate racial and cultural divides within the *ummah*.

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[176] Who rarely goes to the *masjid*.

[177] As discussed by Abdullah, in "American Muslims in Contemporary World."

Nadira and Fatima's original familial *masjid*, a predominantly African-American mosque (the mainstay NOI temple of Los Angeles), had theological splits, as the new imam employed a more conservative, *salafi*[178] interpretation of Islam. One of the issues that showed fissures in the community was based on the desire of a new imam to discontinue employing music in the education of the children. Some members saw this type of interpretation of Islam as too oppressive and chose to break off and set up a new *masjid*. Like their parents, the women are active participants in their religious communities and have gone on to become teachers and leaders within these mosques, as in the case of Henna, who now serves on the Board of Directors for the *masjid* her parents founded.

The rapid growth in the number of mosques in America also sheds light on the fact that the Muslims of America have plenty of choices and can easily "mosque hop." Some women feel more comfortable in mixed or immigrant mosques, whilst others feel more affinity with predominantly Black mosques. For some the decision is predicated on the size of the mosque—larger mosques give them the chance to interact with more members of the *ummah*—while others are attracted to a *masjid* by the language and quality of their *khutba*.[179] "So I fell asleep during the *kutba*, and I usually don't do that. So I was like, 'I'm not coming here no more!'" Rashida shares about the mosque closest to her house, which delivers *khutba* in Arabic. Instead she is willing to take two buses and one train to reach Boston Islamic Center (BIC), the biggest mosque in New England, as their *khutba* is in English and resonates with Rashida. The Boston Islamic Center for

[178] Salafi is defined by the Mosque Study as: ""Follow the salafi *minhaj*" (way of thought). The salafi approach is akin to Wahabi thought, and is associated with a more literal understanding of Islam, in an effort to follow strict ways of the first three generation (the salaf) of Islam," Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders*, Report Number 1, 18.

[179] Sermon.

Rashida is most akin to the *masjid* where she grew up in Atlanta, where Muslims from all ethnicities congregated and the mosque was open 24 hours a day. Jamillah's choice is based on geographical convenience and the fact that her husband was raised in the oldest Black mosque, which is a former NOI temple. But she also mosque hops and prefers to go the larger mosque for holidays, explaining, "BIC is almost like a twenty-four hour machine. So no matter what, it's kind of always open."

In the face of theological marginalization, the women feel vindicated in their mastery of the *deen*. For all of the women, issues of gender segregation, mosque leadership, dress, head covering, mosque facilities, and other ritual practices serve as deciding factors in their choice of mosque. In our conversations, the women speak of and model an Islam that is based on the fundamentals that *they* have studied for themselves—not based on others' interpretations of Islam. As I have shown in this chapter, the Muslima of the second generation, those whose childhood was saturated within the tenets of Islam, are assured of their *deen* and its actuation. Such mastery and appropriation, I propose, functions to empower the women to utilize the space of the mosque as an agentive conduit through which they are liberated to practice *their* Islam in the custom *they* judge to be the most pious.

Chapter VI

Converts: Islamic Worldview and Gendered Issues

Conversion is a radical act through which individuals can rewrite their personal history and forever transform themselves. For the African-American women who choose to embrace Islam, such an act is encumbered with multiple connotations and intersectionality. Such implications, as Rouse suggests, lie in the notion that "African American women have surrendered to Islam because of the way Islam has been used in the community as a legitimate framework for challenging racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. Islam is their epiphany."[180] Talal Asad, in "Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," asserts that Islam is a religion of "discursive tradition" and that special attention must be paid to the Muslims' discursive relationship to the foundational text, the Quran, as that is where all Muslims begin.[181] For African-American women who embrace Islam, such a tradition relates to their past, present and future. For those who surrender to Islam the journey begins with the concise attestation of the *shahadah*—"There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's Messenger." With this simple commitment, the women step into the new worldview within which they must negotiate agency (or agentive identity) within the confines of their faith and their mosques—which at times contradict each other. In this chapter I will flesh out what it means for a Black woman, in the context of America, to steps into the new "worldview" of Islam—and what (if any) role

[180] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 216.

[181] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (Spring/Summer, 2009): pp. 1-30

the mosque and its affiliated communities play in that spiritual trajectory. I argue that, the women of this cohort came to know Islam in a more individualist route and hence embrace the faith with a distinct identity, which in turn has a profound influence on their relationship with(in) the mosque. What is it that is required for these women in this world? What does it require of them? Such requisites, for the women, tend to be focused on gendered and racialized issues.

African-American Muslim women are not a monolith; as the stories presented in this chapter will demonstrate, they step into the new worldview of Islam via multiple routes. For the women who convert to Islam, there are many permutations from which to choose and their Islam is often saturated with the culture of those through whom they enter the faith. For African-American women, embracing Islam affords them an opportunity to transform themselves in an effort to impact society in a positive manner. The women tell me that Islam for them is a reality within which they have been empowered to find personal liberation after being dissatisfied with what society had to offer. Like the other Muslimas, the women of this cohort, the converts, perform a dynamic renegotiation in order to redefine their identities and appropriate an Islamic worldview. As I have shown in previous chapters, the transition to Islam for the first generation of Muslimas was more standardized, as it was taught by W. D. Muhammad. For the second generation, Islam and its praxis were inherited from their parents and were later influenced by the incoming immigrant Muslims. As the narratives of the women whom I have categorized as "converts" will reveal, this cohort came to know Islam in a more individualist manner, often through immigrant Muslims, and thus embrace the faith with an individual identity that is often rooted in notions of personal morality and Black

consciousness and reflects a desire for social change. Therefore, the nuanced mode and timing of the converts' entry into Islam, I propose, has a penetrating effect on their affiliation with(in) the mosque and its associated community along with how they negotiate their Islam and identity.

Though not a direct focus of this study, the issue of how and why a woman experiences her conversion into Islam is a major question upon which her relationship with the mosque and its associated communities rests. Such a transition, as evidenced by all of my informants' narratives, proves to be, as described by McCloud, "a part of a continual process of spiritual, moral and symbolic progression already in motion prior to acceptance of or conformity with Islamic particulars."[182] Therefore, McCloud suggests that the word "conversion" implies a drastic reprieve from one's past and recommends the term "transition" as an alternative. Amina Wadud, in *Inside The Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, agrees with McCloud and utilizes the terms "'transition' and 'transformation' interchangeably to determine that Islam does not start or stop with the *shahadah*, declaration of faith."[183] Michael Muhammad Knight, in "Converts and Conversion," adds to the discourse by explaining that "strictly speaking, there is no Arabic term for conversion to Islam, apart from *aslama*, 'to submit,' the verb from which Islam is derived."[184] Knight goes on to state that Muslims in America most often regard taking the *shahadah* as the seminal act of "reverting" to a state of submission. Similar to the women of the other cohorts, the women of this group also cite a "knowing," a

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[182] Wadud, *Inside The Gender Jihad*, 263 (n2).

[183] Ibid.

[184] Michael Muhammad Knight, "Converts and Conversion," *in The Cambridge Companion to American Islam.* ed. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 83.

"yearning," and often characterize it as a primordial urge that "reverted" them back to Islam.

Amira, a wise and graceful woman, describes her Islam as being hers, a state of natural submission: "it's me and God. It's my forehead to the ground. It's like this humbling thing." Furthermore, when she took the *shahadah*, as she tells me, "it was a releasing to something that I had already known to be true." The women substantiate Knight's position, as they allude to the desire to submit to the unknown and educate themselves to become more familiarized with it. Yasmeen, a vivacious young woman from Washington D.C., shares about a friend who facilitated her transition: "she's a revert, but she's been Muslim for a while…So she's very experienced in *dua*, and she's very, very experienced in talking to new Muslims, people – because she can relate, in a sense." Tahzeeb, a retired lawyer, makes clear through the dissection of the term "conversion" that she was already on a path to familiarizing herself with the unknown and found Islam to be a natural progression of her spiritual trajectory. She explains, "Yeah, the word conversion – I object," as she characterizes her submission to Islam as reverting back to what "struck [her] as the truth"—the Oneness of God. Such proclivities and epiphanies are what draw the women into the framework of Islam.

Compared to the other two cohorts, the first and second generation Muslimas, the women of this cohort vary in age greatly and come from a diverse set of circumstances, socially and economically. With the exception of two, all of the women in this cohort that I encountered seemed highly educated and career-oriented. Many are mothers who are raising or have raised their children in the *deen* and married Muslim men; some have been in polygamous marriages. Two of the women are teachers at the mosques where I

met them and hence find their lives revolving around those particular institutions, while others like to "mosque hop" and expose themselves to various mosque cultures. One Muslima in this cohort, Leila, embraced Islam in the early 70's when the NOI was active; however, overall the women of this cohort have no particular link to or awareness of proto-Islamic movements nor their political messaging. Nonetheless, the reason for their surrender to Islam does echo that of the other cohorts: it occurs through an epiphany.

As a cohort, the first generation departed from tradition and embraced Islam as a "pragmatic holy protest,"[185] in an effort to create an identity that was communal for the purpose of external change. This was a process for which they had to procure their own *ummah*, their own mosque communities and a *deen*. Karim explains that those who "converted to Islam through an African American community, established a place of belonging there, and then began to negotiate ethnic borders."[186] As discussed in the previous chapters, the women whose entrance into Sunni Islam took place through what Karim labels "Black Power"[187] had a different trajectory and hence relationship with the mosque. Karim describes these baby boomers as the "first generation" of African-American Muslimas. The second-generation Muslimas are their offspring. Following Karim's categorizations, the "converts" are those who tend to be younger and embrace Islam directly. Their experience is different from that of the other two cohorts, as Karim makes clear: "Young converts, in contrast, are often forced to negotiate ethnic lines in the

[185] Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 4.

[186] Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 111.

[187] Ibid.

very process of conversion."[188] Unlike the first-generation cohort, whose entrance into Sunni Islam occurred through the "Black Power" movement,[189] the women of this cohort have diverse trajectories and in turn permutations of their *deen*. Unlike the diaspora *ummah* experience of the first generation, the converts, who embraced Islam directly, do so most often with the assistance of an existing *ummah* and mosque communities, and often take on the goals and ideologies of those communities. Such differences in their entry into Islam must be explored in order to understand how they approach the mosque and in turn its affiliated communities.

In the previous chapters I have discussed the first generation's stories of becoming Muslim: the conversion (via their transition from the NOI) and what it requires, both physically and mentally. In the chapter on the second generation I have provided insight into the space of the mosque, the *ummah* and how the praxis of the *deen* is manifested within those parameters for those who inherited it. This chapter will place emphasis on the racialized, gendered women who choose to surrender to Islam and negotiate a new identity within the worldview of Islam—and what (if any) role the mosque and its affiliated communities play in that spiritual trajectory. Surrendering oneself to Islam necessitates discipline of body and mind, where a Muslima must not only adhere to the basic requisites of Islam but also manage to reconstruct herself whilst preserving the tenets of her *deen*. However, for *all* of the women, as highlighted by Wadud, "Islam is perceived and experienced as a dynamic way of life consisting of praxis and ideology. In order for it to bear positively on the life of African-American Muslim women, then the history and experiences of these women must become a part of

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

the articulation and implementation of Islam in the American context."[190] The lived stories of the women, as shared with me, reveal such a dynamic intersectionality—which for the racialized gendered bodies is a constant negotiation for agency within the confines of the Islamic framework. Therefore, given the wide range of ages and time of exposure to Islam, the religious trajectory of this cohort significantly influences their relationship with the mosque.

"I'm supposed to be Muslim, but I don't know *how* to be Muslim because the ladies in the jail confused me so much. And my teacher that was teaching the [anger-management] class happened to be Muslim also, but he was an Orthodox Muslim and that made all the difference. I said, 'there [are the] the holes being filled,'" Haseena says, explaining how her spiritual quest delivered her into Islam. The man who bridged the gap happened to be her assigned social worker, who led her into the mosque and in turn Islam. Haseena, a middle aged woman, grew up in the Christian church and knew the "importance of prayer," but felt that she could have easily switched "over to be a Catholic, because they dress the way I knew that they should dress"—modestly. "But when they said," Haseena jokingly clarifies, "that nuns don't have sex and marriage and things like that, I knew that was not correct in my heart. When I got to [the] Muslim service, they explained that that stuff [meaning sex and having babies] *was* allowed. And we *should* cover." The culmination of Haseena's upbringing and her study of "every religion," along with her experience of being in prison, cleared the path for Islam until it was a logical choice for her, because she had always known the importance of prayer and valued modesty.

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[190] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, 152.

With the aid of her social worker, Haseena found the courage to walk into a mosque and took her *shahadah* in the year 2000. She then commenced the study of orthodox Islam, which *for her* included polygamy, as her social worker proposed such a marriage six months after she was released from prison. In order to become a co-wife, Haseena expresses: "I had to study polygamy, and how to be a Muslim and what to do and what not to do. Proper etiquettes. All this stuff that combines you into being somewhat of a good person. Or even a better one." The absolute assuredness with which Haseena defines her experience of being a "co-wife" was to a certain degree a surprise for me. Haseena captivatingly went on to share that this particular marriage (with her social worker) was not the only time she would find herself being a co-wife to a Muslim man. She pronounced her understanding of such a marriage as "ordained" by Allah:

> My understanding is that you have to be *very* unselfish. And you have to love, *really* have to love Allah. Because Allah ordained it so. He's not going to ordain something that's going to hurt us. And it is said that it is for some people, and not for others. And I knew that it was for me. Because I like living alone, but I like being married too. So how can I do it? [By] going [into] polygamy. And then my second marriage that I went through, I was in polygamy. Right now I'm not married, thank God. But you know, I had enough for a little while. But I was in polygamy a second time too, for five years.

According to Carolyn Rouse, "Muslim women view polygyny as the choice of both the man and the woman, and if a husband breaks a contract forbidding polygyny, a woman has a legitimate reason for divorce."[191] Such an approach to polygamy is not uncommon amongst the women I encountered, as most regarded it as an allowable and justified act under the dictates of Islam.[192] Therefore, Haseena's position on polygyny, similar to her

[191] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender,* 68.

surrender to Islam, should not be viewed as a disempowering act; rather it must be regarded as something which gave her the control and direction she was lacking in her life, which prior to embracing Islam she describes as being on the wrong path.

The story of Haseena, for me, is a radical example of the new "worldview" that one must step into, which McCloud suggests is necessary for one to become a Muslim in the context of America.[193] Though not reflective of most indigenous Muslimas, or Muslim women in general, the story of Haseena is, however, representative of the dynamic renegotiation that a Muslima must undertake in order to redefine her identity and her frame of reference. The results of this dynamic renegotiation produce a framework, as posited by McCloud, "within which all Muslims must attempt to live."[194] What the women of this cohort model and tell me leads me to consider that such negotiations are profoundly influenced by social, economic, ideological, political and educational circumstances. Therefore, the Islamic framework that a convert Muslima creates for herself is an ever-evolving, dynamic journey of "the ongoing act of submitting one's individual will to the Will of Allah."[195]

Avenues to Islam: Conversion Stories

> I had a Quran for years and I was reading it, but I couldn't quite make the leap because my Christian roots were so deep, and also because for me I couldn't quite make the culture shift. A lot of it looked culturally uncomfortable to me, so I couldn't make the leap actually until I came to this community. One of my friends that I went to Spelman

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[192] However, most of the women also clarified that it is not something they themselves would be interested in.

[193] McCloud, *African American Islam,* 2 to 3.

[194] Ibid.

[195] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 3.

with, she came home to visit and I happened to be in L.A. considering moving here. And she [said], "Oh, come to *Al-Noor*." I met her family and at the time *Masjid Al-Noor* was different than what it even is now. It just felt very familiar. And so then I [said], "Oh, so it doesn't require me to make this huge culture shift." Then I felt like I could convert. Take my *shahadah*. So I took my *shahadah* actually here in [Los Angeles] on a Christmas break.

Amira, Los Angeles, CA

The word 'conversion' – I object. Probably nothing more than just being able to see that there's a whole group of people who believe what I see in this Quran – that there is only one God. It's just nice – you can't really have a religion all by yourself. So just going and seeing so many people, bowing down and listening to the *adhan*. Bowing down in unison, bowing down in one direction – this is a good thing. As I said, I read a lot of things by that time. It just struck me as the truth.

Tahzeeb, Los Angeles, CA

Islam means submission to Allah and to me submission to Allah is do your due diligence or your best effort to submit and to obey the command…for me especially if you're converting, why are you going to convert and half do it?

Sara, Irvine, CA

When you come into Islam, it's like you're in a whole other world. Because people literally – I remember when I first took my *shahadah*, I covered all the time, and – it was a gradual thing, though, because I still would wear jeans and stuff like that, but people knew that I was Muslim. I would get on the bus [and] three people would get up out of their seats to let me sit down.

Yasmeen, Bakersfield, CA

The avenues to Islam for converts are wide-ranging and ever-expanding, due to the internet and mainstream media. The women interviewed tell me that they were exposed to the new worldview of Islam through a friend, a co-worker, a romantic partner, the biography of Malcolm X, online or even in prison. Fascination and at times disillusionment with Christianity made them keen on the study of Islam and those who follow the second-largest monotheistic faith. In turn, the thirst for more familiarity with Islam often delivered them to a mosque or a community of Muslims. Conversion for the women, though radical, was a lengthy, multifaceted and evolving process that was

heavily influenced by their social and cultural circumstances. Embracing Islam for the women is an act that Rouse explicates as potentially providing them with the ability to achieve "control...over the recreation of a personal history."[196] The women tell me that Islam for them is a truth within which they have found liberation; it is their epiphany.

According to the 2011 Pew Survey, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism," among African-American Muslims who were born in the U.S., 63% are those who converted into the faith. The report also highlights that weekly attendance at mosque is more common among native-born Muslims, especially African-American, than among foreign-born Muslims. Such trends point to African Americans as being highly engaged within the mosque and as converts constituting a majority of the total indigenous Muslim population of America. Yvonne Haddad, in "The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam," reveals that converts often find themselves attracted to Islam because they are in awe of the "inner peace, serenity, and strength of belief they witnessed in"[197] the Muslims they encountered. She writes, "For many, their investigation of Islam was initiated by curiosity, a quest for knowledge or spiritual fulfillment. Many report that they began to look into Islam and to learn more without any intent to convert."[198] As the conversion narratives of the women of this cohort will make clear, their initial affinity with and examination of Islam led them to surrender.

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[196] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender,* 133.

[197] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam," *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin Van Neiuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas, 2006), 27.

[198] Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission," 27.

For African-American women in particular, Rouse in her ethnographic research cites some of the rewards of embracing Islam as lying in the procurement of a "more just community and society, more successful interpersonal relationships including marriage, and, most importantly, the knowledge that one is living according to the will of Allah."[199] Dannin suggests that for African Americans, conversion to Islam in most cases "is depicted as a return to the cosmic order…a road back to virtues obscured by the forces of subjugation and injustices."[200] Knight (a white male convert himself) adds to this as he highlights that the affinity for Islam is often characterized as a "reversion," in the sense that entering Islam is viewed by many African-American Muslims as a "reclaiming of lost Islamic heritage, a 'reversion' to ancestral identity."[201] My interviewee Amira, sharing about her "awakening" that occasioned her "returning to being Muslim," confirms Knight's assertion: "Yes, many of us were enslaved as Muslims, and that's true. Many African Americans came to this country as Muslims already because they were from West Africa."

The patterns described by Haddad, Rouse, Dannin, and Knight are also reiterated by the Muslima converts I interviewed. As the women of this cohort tell me, they most often found themselves surrendering to Islam after a reflective examination of the faith as well as those around them who were and continue to be models of Islam—the Muslim *ummah*. At times the women were startled to find themselves attracted to Islam; in fact, at first many were defensive or cautious about their inclination toward Islam but later

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[199] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 9.

[200] Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam,* 7.

[201] Knight, "Converts and Conversion," 83.

discerned rational reasons for their choices. Others cite a familiarity with the faith and its followers. Islam grants the women a sense of empowerment, and has been an avenue to gaining control and building a new life or a new identity, which in turn can result in a new community, all of which makes possible a liberation from their former selves.

Upon their initial examination of Islam, the women could not comprehend that it might fit into their existing frameworks and worldviews. Diya, a spirited woman, shares about sporadically attending the *masjid* in Denver by saying, "I wasn't trying to be a Muslim, but if there was some event, I would go with my husband." Sara, a woman in her late thirties, converted in college in the South, but as she clarifies, "I was already at a transition point in my life too where I was already searching for answers…I wasn't looking to become Muslim but I was already searching inside." She recalls being surprised to learn that an Indian male friend was Muslim, as she only knew Muslims who were Black members of the NOI. For her Islam was something foreign and was brought to life by a caring friend. Others were well aware of the requirements of converting to Islam, and characterized conversion as "stepp[ing] into another world" and even "culturally uncomfortable."[202] However, after examining Islam and interacting with Muslims and their communities who modeled what Islam is as lived out by those who embrace it, the women found themselves at ease.

Sara first came to know of Islam through a romantic partner who was of Indian decent. The relationship soon ended due to his parents' disapproval of Sara's religion and race (as she had not converted yet). Despite their breakup, Sara continued to study Islam and took the *shahadah* with a neighbor, at her apartment: "I did it with one of the sisters…She is a Hindu convert." Sara describes the time surrounding her conversion as

[202] Amira.

being a “really tough year,” as “changing religions,” which her parents thought she “rushed” into, coupled with a break-up, made it “emotionally challenging.” Nonetheless, she found solace in her friends and fellow Muslims whom she encountered at the mosque: “They kind of just took me in and they were really nice.” Sara stresses: “They welcomed me so I kept going.” She goes on to recount: “They became my extended family…I was included in everything. They told me how to do everything…They were mostly Indian or Pakistani. And a few others were converts too, but it didn’t really matter. Some of them were Kurdish and I’m still in contact with them and I go visit them when I go home.” For Sara, the Muslims she encountered through the mosque bridged her knowledge and gave her a kinship which she missed with her ex-boyfriend and family, who thought her new religion was just a “phase.” Within a year of her conversion, Sara married a Pakistani man and they both are active members of the Southern California’s Muslim community.

Amira, a professor of literature and a mother of two daughters, “started questioning [her] own faith” in high school and found some conciliation in the “reading of Malcolm X that...sparked” her interest in Islam. After becoming conscious of African-American history, she began to regard Christianity “as a force for domination and a force that helped perpetuate slavery.” During her years at Spelman, a prestigious historically Black college, she was part of the “consciousness movement,” she tells me: “I think that's where the first introduction to kind of a more orthodox Islam started.” After studying Islam and being around Muslim friends at college, she had the desire to embrace Islam, but was held back by her deep “Christian roots.” Amira goes on to highlight the concerns she had about Islam: “A lot of it looked culturally uncomfortable to me, so I couldn't

make the leap actually until I came to this community"[203]—who modeled for her what Islam could potentially be. It was only after attending a friend's family mosque, *Masjid Al-Noor* (which is predominantly Black), that she could surrender. She tells me: "It just felt very familiar. And so then I [thought], so it doesn't require me to make this huge culture shift, then I felt like I could convert." Thus, for Amira it took the culture of her friend's mosque to facilitate her leap into Islam.

Such sentiments of religious and familial ties and concerns over their loss are expressed by others as well. McCloud explains, "Since most African American women who become Muslim find themselves engaged in a different worldview and sometimes estranged from their nuclear families, they also make new friends and sometimes even create new families within the Muslim communities. These surrogates become the only families for some."[204] For Amira, letting go of her church roots was a difficult act that required not only the study of Islam but also understanding its practice as modeled by Muslims like herself, both African-American and women. For Amira, the mosque and its affiliated community played a profound functional role in her resolution to take a leap of faith. In order for Amira to fully surrender to Islam she had to find another community before letting the church go. This was because, despite disapproving of the church, she still felt *rooted* in its affiliated community, which highlights how much Amira values bonds within communities and cultures. It wasn't until she found another community or "surrogates" within her current mosque that she could let go of her church roots. Amira's best friend Nola, who brought her into the mosque, also introduced her to her current

[203] The Muslim community of Los Angeles, where she now is an active member.

[204] McCloud, "African American Muslim Women," 614.

husband. Nola's brother and Amira have now been married nearly twenty years and are active members of the mosque. Hence, Amira explains the purpose of her mosque and its affiliated community by saying, "it's kept me rooted. It's given me community and it's why I'm still Muslim." In contrast, her best friend, she states, "end[ed] up not being Muslim," which Amira considers a consequence of the lack of "a community around her," which she believes could have pulled her back in.

Diya embraced Islam after studying and practicing other religions—a type of spiritual journey which Haddad describes as that of a "serial convert."[205] Diya tells me that she found herself on what she designates as an "almost dangerous path. I stumbled in something that was turning into a cult." She dabbled in many religions and even studied "African – or ancient African religious practices," while trying to add it all up. It was a "very long journey," she tells me, before her eventual submission to Islam. When asked how she came to know Islam, she replies: "The short answer is after I married my husband, who is an African-American Muslim who converted in the '70s, and we married in 2009." However, it was not until she herself studied Islam and even discussed it with other new converts that she fully submitted.

A woman who has become a good friend counseled Diya before her transformation: "But if you ever convert, you're doing it for Allah. You're not doing it for anybody [else]. You have to want to do it." Once she converted, all of the women welcomed her into the mosque and facilitated her education. She went on to clarify that even if she and her husband were to divorce she would stay with the community and the

[205] "Serial converts," those who have set out on a spiritual journey, studied numerous religious traditions, converted to a variety of faiths before looking into Islam. Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam," 28.

faith. Diya proudly points out, "I'm so engrained [with the community and faith], I would never leave! I've made my fifth pillar,"—*the hajj*. For Diya and Amira, to fully surrender themselves to Islam required a community—the African-American Muslims of Los Angeles—to be surrogate family and the Muslims within that community to model the potential of Islam in the framework of America. What initially seemed unimaginable and even foreign, the women found to be palatable and even familiar once they witnessed Muslims like themselves practicing the faith.

For some, the Quran played a central part in their conversion as it "fit in" with what they knew to be true—the oneness of God, *tawid*. Tahzeeb tells me that as a child she felt a "disconnect" with her Christian upbringing. She describes her upbringing as "nominally Christian" and says she knew Islam and other religions existed due to her mother's desire to expose her to "a lot of things." These things ranged from visits to the Baha'i temple to the House of David and even Sunday School—which she jokingly likes to say she was "kicked out of" for voicing her doubts about its teachings. Tahzeeb proudly describes studying "a little bit about various religions" and always knowing that "there was only one God." However, it was not until the early 1980's that she began to take on Islam in a more serious manner and made a leap of faith upon reading a copy of the Quran that she received at a party. For Tahzeeb, as she explains, "It absolutely fit everything I had ever been taught. Right then and there, I just literally went down on the floor and submitted because it was just the truth as far as I had ever learned." Her profound response to reading the Quran is akin to the "inner logic" and "common sense" reported by Haddad's informants as well.[206] Today as a Muslim she makes clear that her simple submission did not require anyone to "convert" her, as she had always believed in

[206] Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission," 27-28.

the tenets of Islam. For Tahzeeb, that moment of getting down on the floor was her *shahadah* moment: "That was it. Oh yes!"

Zoe's story of how she came to embrace Islam is one that stands out from the others because she started out with YouTube and the *hijab*. Zoe, a Muslima in her mid-twenties from Boston, accidently stumbled into Islam because, as she tells me: "What brought me to Islam was really a funny thing. It was head scarves. I was researching on YouTube different ways to tie headscarves *because* I liked scarves." Before Zoe knew it, she found herself exploring further:

> And so as I learned more about it, it was a really beautiful outward symbol of what somebody believes inside, and I thought that was special. And then from there, I kind of wanted to know if this is part of Islam, is it part of other religions, and I found that it was some kind of head covering in general. So I found that. And then I asked myself the question. Okay, all three of these religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, start with Abraham. So what makes them different?

While she was residing in Brazil for a study-abroad program during her junior year of college, the decision was crystallized after she went to a local Catholic church where she saw various murals, statues and "charms of either an elbow or an ankle or different parts of people's bodies that had been healed from having prayed to her [Mary]." For Zoe, the confusion and unease produced by her experience of visiting the church confirmed her sense that "this isn't right…There has to be one [religion] and it has to be simple, straightforward and easy." Zoe now teaches at a local mosque and is married to an imam. The mosque is the center point of her life, as she purposefully chose to work there so as to be near other Muslims and learn from them; it was also the site of our interview.

Yasmeen similarly found her way to Islam through the internet and a friend who normalized Islam for her. She converted about a year ago and recently moved to

Bakersfield to marry her now-husband, whom she met on Facebook. Though she had dabbled with the idea of becoming a Muslim, she did not convert until after she and her sister got into watching Adam Saleh, a "YouTube Muslim sensation" who according Yasmeen "brings normalcy to Islam." Yasmeen and her sister's inquiry was further fueled by a co-worker, Hanna, who happened to be Muslim and showed them that Islam was not so "strict." This friend guided the sisters into the mosque, as initially they found it to be "intimidating" and "it was kind of nerve-wracking," Yasmeen tells me. When she and her sister took their *shahadah* in a large mosque in Washington D. C., Yasmeen describes it as a very personal moment. From that moment on, Hanna and her husband became her friends. However, as Yasmeen shares about her journey into Islam, "it was a really, like, a self-seeking journey, because we didn't really have that much help. I think our fear of what people would say kind of hindered us from going out to reach out for help." Yasmeen's friend Hanna, the internet, and YouTube combined with some of the basic books provided by the mosque launched her into her journey into Islam. However, for Yasmeen the mosque community of Bakersfield along with her husband is what gave her a "better outlook on Islam," as the mosque in D. C. was intimidating and made her feel excluded.

Yasmeen and Zoe's conversion stories point to the notion that some of the younger generation of Muslimas may be drawn to Islam via the internet, hence being exposed to the global *ummah* in a way that was not an option for the women of the older generations. For these young Muslimas, their inquiries into Islam can be launched at the click of a button, as they not only have the option to experience the *ummah* in America but can also connect with the global *ummah*. Such trends open up the gate to many more

permutations of Islam than ever before. Another avenue lies in their exposure to other Muslims on college campuses. Indeed, as Karim notes: "A second generation South Asian Muslim college student is more likely to create friendships with African American Muslim women than her first-generation immigrant mother would have been."[207] The integration and familiarization of immigrant and indigenous Muslims has opened up the likelihood that younger Muslimas will interact and learn from each other. As in the example of Sara,[208] interracial marriages are also becoming more common, as the younger generation congregates together in the very diverse setting of the mosque. Sara tells me that she met her husband on an Islamic marital website and after communicating for several months, he followed the Islamic dictates and proposed marriage to her—something that came as a bit of surprise to her family. However, for Sara, the fact that he was an observant Muslim was all that mattered, as was the case for him. The couple is now a role model for many others who wish to negotiate racial-ethnic divides, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The women of this cohort share that they have varying degrees of attachment to the mosques and their associated communities, which I have tracked with the phase of their religious trajectory. In my observations, as a recent convert, a Muslima is more prone to engage herself within the mosque and its affiliated communities. Zoe, for example, even chooses to work at one. For those further along their religious trajectory, such as Amira or Tahzeeb, their engagement within the mosque is not as hyperactive. Amira and Tahzeeb are firmly rooted in their mosque, but after being Muslims for twenty and forty years, respectively, they do not find it necessary to be as active as Zoe.

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[207] Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 207.

[208] Sara is married to Pakistani man, as discussed in the preceding section.

The "conversion stories" of the women that I encountered are fascinating. Some of the women cannot pinpoint what prompted them to the epiphany of Islam, but all can clearly recall the moment they took the *shahadah* and the Muslims who ushered them into the *deen*. Based on the way the women express their experiences, I conclude that the attestation to Islam is a moment that separates them from their former selves and delivers them into a whole new worldview. As the women tell me, this newfound eternity is a commitment that surpasses reason. Today they are resolute with their spiritual trajectories and are firmly implanted in their mosques and communities.

Mosque Selection

> Walking inside it just felt like I was in a different place. The architecture here I think is very – it's reflective of Arab culture and I've never been anywhere in the Arab world, so it's kind of like a way to see that within the city in the U.S. [and] it's interesting.
>
> Zoe, Boston, MA

> It's the community, the *ummah*...and the people, not the mosque itself. Because every mosque is different, and there's so many cultures influencing [it], especially here in L.A. with these mosques. So every one you go to is a different experience almost. …I've only been to one where I was truly uncomfortable, just because they were just kind [of], you know, men being a bit too conservative. [I thought], 'Okay, I can't handle this."
>
> Diya, Los Angeles, CA

Given the exponential growth of mosques in America in the last fifteen years, Muslims have more choices than before when selecting a place to worship. For converts, the diversity of ideologies as presented in the mosques of America is endless. With experiences distinct from those of the other two cohorts, particularly the first generation, the convert Muslimas have a multitude of choices when seeking out space and permutations for the praxis of their Islam. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ihasan

Bagby reported in the US Mosque Survey of 2011 a 74% increase in the number of mosques from the year 2000. The study's authors attributed the emergence of new mosques to the growth of the Muslim population, due to immigration and expansion into new areas. Other factors such as "denominationalism"[209] and difference in leadership thought, where a Muslim leader or scholar leaves an existing mosque to start his own mosque, were also cited as reasons for the growth. For the convert Muslima, such trends not only produce a greater number of mosques from which to choose, but more importantly provide a broadened spectrum of variations in Islam. In contrast, the first generation lacked choices because they had to create an American Islamic *ummah*. For the second generation, mosques were most often an inherited space. Hence, besides a variety of mosques, the women who convert to Islam have a variety of choices in what Haddad refers to as "America's supermarket of religions,"[210] meaning choices among permutations of Islam and affiliated mosques and communities. Most importantly, the trends have allowed Muslimas to find mosques whose ideologies best reflect their own understanding of Islam. Such diversity of ideology as articulated in the space of the mosque may be manifested in the form of accommodation of women in the mosque, gender segregation or the lack thereof, female representation in mosque leadership, allowing of polygyny, educational and social programs directed toward women, and programs and resources directed toward women's activities. Therefore, women who choose to embrace Islam can attach themselves to and align with permutations of Islam that best fit their understanding and needs.

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[209] Varying interpretations and practices of Islam, based on ethnicity, race, and sect. What GhaneaBassiri refers to as "denominationalism."

[210] Haddad, "The Quest for Peace in Submission, 28.

With the exponential growth in the number of Muslims and mosques, the women of this cohort also find themselves encountering an Islam which has been changed by the attacks of 9/11 and by contact with the global *ummah*. Compared to the first- and second-generation Muslimas, the women of this cohort are more cognizant of and in contact with the global *ummah*. Since the attacks of 9/11, public discourse has often focused on the rising number of converts and mosques, an example of which can be found in the case of the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy.[211] Because of the geopolitics of the Islamic world and the ways it interacts with America's political landscape, the worldview that the converts step into and negotiate within is starkly different from that of the other two cohorts. The influx of immigrants from the Muslim world also contributes to their experiences. For example, Elinor from the first generation pointed out that she had never seen an immigrant Muslim until the 1980s, whereas most converts embraced Islam after the Sunnification of the NOI and came into contact with immigrant as a primary avenue into Islam. When comparing Sara's story to Elinor's, we see that Sara not only converted through immigrant Muslims but also went on to marry one—this is a different experience than that of the other cohorts. Furthermore, the converts such as Sara also have a wide range of Islamic permutations to choose from. For example, Sara discussed her experiences visiting a Black *salafi* mosque and found that particular permutation of Islam to be not to her liking. For the women of the other cohorts, such routes were not accessible, as evidenced by Elinor.

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[211]Anushay Hossain, "Park 51: The Ground Zero Mosque Is Not a Mosque," *Huffington Post*, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anushay-hossain/park-51-the-ground-zero-m_b_686950.html; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama Enters Debate with Mosque Remarks," *NYT*, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/us/politics/15mosque.html?_r=1.

When examining conversion trends, we see an increase among Americans, and women in particular, as substantiated by the US Mosque Survey of 2011. According to the study, 41% of the converts in 2011 were female whereas only 32% were recorded in 2000—the data reveal that conversion amongst women in mosques is on the rise. The study also highlights that the average conversion rate per mosque over the past two decades has remained stable, while the number of mosques has increased: "In 2011 the average number of converts per mosque as over the last 12 month period was 15.3. In 2000 the average was 16.3 and in 1994 it was 16.5."[212] Most notably, the average conversion rate for African-American mosques is 20.3 new converts per year, thus underlining the fact that they do a better job than other mosques of attracting new Muslims.[213] However, given the smaller number of African-American mosques, the overall number of converts embrace Islam via immigrant mosques. Of the eight converts I interviewed, at least five recalled taking the *shahadah* in the mosque, while others embraced Islam in an informal setting.

For the women who choose to surrender to Islam, the avenues into the *deen* are endless. When it comes to choosing a mosque, converts are a "blank slate" and have no familial ties or obligations to any mosques and can attach themselves to any of their choosing; additionally, their choices are abundant due to the growth in the number of mosques. Such experiences contrast with those of the women of the first generation, whose choices were limited due to the smaller population of Muslims and smaller number of mosques when they embraced Islam. As the mosque study has shown, the

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[212] Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders*, Report Number 1, 12.

[213] Ibid. 12.

majority of mosques in America were built in the last twenty years, thus highlighting the metamorphosis in choices between the different cohorts. For the second generation, who were born into Islamic families, their place of worship was often chosen by their parents—they "inherited" these mosques. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nadira, Fatima, Henna, for example, all discuss feeling most comfortable and recognized in mosques which their parents helped build and which are predominantly Black mosques, often affiliated with the W. D. Muhammad communities. This is not to say that those who inherited a familial mosque are not permitted or inclined to visit other mosques; however, given the frequent self-segregation of African-American Muslims and their history of somewhat negative encounters with immigrant Muslims, the mosques have emerged as spaces of worship that parallel racial lines/divides. In my observations, the first and second generation tend to feel the most comfortable and "at home" in mosques which are predominantly Black and in those which they inherited through the Sunnification process. Additionally, for the second generation, their "inherited" mosques are the ones where they attended the auxiliary Sister Clara Muhammad Schools and where they have grown up within their own "nation within a nation." Lastly, as evidenced by the Mosque Study, African-American mosques, especially those affiliated with the W. D. Muhammad communities, are the most female-friendly mosques and often for this reason the women of the first and second generation prefer to worship there instead of in immigrant mosques.[214]

On the other hand, Ihsan Bagby notes in the US Mosque Survey of 2011 that Muslims hold the belief that "mosques belong to God" and thus "do not have a strong

[214] See discussion in previous chapter about self-separation by African Americans. This matter is also discussed by Karim and cited in previous chapters.

sense that they belong to one particular mosque," as they might about belonging to a church. Thus for Muslims, Bagby clarifies, it is strange to say "that a particular mosque is 'my' mosque."[215] He also highlights that a "significant percentage of Muslims pray their Friday prayers near their work but attend another mosque near their home."[216] Such an "openness"[217] of the mosque institution makes way for a mosque to potentially host a congregation on any given *jummah* which is male dominated and not reflective of its core constituency or the surrounding community within which it is housed. Consequently, for Muslims rotating through different mosques is not viewed in a negative light; rather it can be often viewed as way to promote knowledge and contribute to the brotherhood of the *ummah*. This phenomenon is often referred to as "mosque hopping."

An example of the abovementioned trends was observed in my visits to various mosques. I documented historically African-American mosques and mosques situated in African-American neighborhoods being used by an overwhelming number of immigrant Muslims at *jummah* prayers, the majority of whom were male. At times these same mosques reveal a very different pattern during smaller, informal events, where the core constituency of African-American men and women is equally represented. For example, in Boston the Boston Islamic Center, the largest mosque in New England and the second largest on the East Coast, is considered an "immigrant mosque," despite being situated in a historically African-American neighborhood of Roxbury. This 70,000 square foot

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[215] Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders*, Report Number 1, 14.

[216] Ibid. 14.

[217] By "openness" I am referring to the fact that the doors of most mosques are open to any and all who wish to pray within its confines. Such a labeling is not meant to reflect a mosque's openness toward ideology and other social issues.

mosque can accommodate 1200 men and 400 women and also houses an Islamic school. About a mile away, *Masjid* Bilal, a former NOI temple, utilizes a former Jewish temple to house a predominantly African-American congregation on a small side street in an African-American neighborhood. Men outnumber the women five to one during *jummah* service and are evenly split amongst immigrants (including many from Africa) and African Americans. However, during other non-*jummah* events, the core Black constituency can be found at *masjid* Bilal. In southern California, *Masjid Al-Noor* was founded by a core group of African-American Muslims in the 1970s and houses a mainly African-American congregation—that is their "core." This small mosque on a large boulevard in the suburbs of Los Angeles is overwhelmingly populated on Fridays by immigrant men, who work in the local area and make their *jummah* prayers here. One of the board members described this mosque as a "travelers' mosque" which on Fridays hosts travelers (mostly immigrant men) and caters during the rest of the week to the core constituency of African Americans, who live in the area.

For the women such patterns affect their choices about how to engage with the mosque and its affiliated communities. Diya considers the community of *Al-Noor*, whom she encountered through her husband, to be an integral part of her Islamic religiosity. However, despite "belonging" to *Al-Noor*, Diya "mosque hops," she tell me:

> Because my husband and I like to visit different *masjids*. So, even though we would primarily go to *Al-Noor*, even now we'll go to *Al-Noor*, then one Sunday we might – I mean one Friday we might go to *Bilal*, and then another Friday we might go to Islam. And we like to gravitate. We like to – there's – I don't know if you know this *masjid* that's out in Walnut, Rowland Heights – Sheik Abu-Hathan – well, he's Imam Abu-Hathan; he's got a Sheik name, too. A really lovely man from Morocco. But anyway, they built a brand new mosque, and I've been there before it was ready, but I haven't had a chance to go now that it's ready. But I just like to go. The other day – yesterday in fact,

> I went and made *salat* at a little, teeny *masjid* on Las Tunas, San Gabriel, because I realized I missed all that time in Mecca Medina. You know, you can just go to the mosque; it's so beautiful. I miss going to the mosque to pray. I'm like, "Okay, I'm tired of praying at home." My husband was somewhere. "I'm just gonna run over here, see what it's like." You know?

For Diya, and most of the women interviewed, there is no obligation to belong to one mosque and she takes full advantage of her agency to "mosque hop," viewing it as an act of piety which helps nurture her Islam. As a recent *hajji*, an honorary title bestowed on those who complete the pilgrimage, Diya's *iman* is flourishing and the mosque continues to play a vital role in her religiosity. Diya's example reveals that women who convert into Islam have many choices when choosing a mosque and they exercise this agency to the best of their ability. Furthermore, it must be noted that the vast number of options are now also available to the women of the other cohorts. Some, such as Beverly and Elinor, discussed their tendency to rotate through different mosques. The women from the second generation also are free to "mosque hop" but again tend stick to the mosques and communities they grew up in, where they feel the most comfortable—often because of the gender freedom in the Black mosques.

The women who choose to embrace Islam as a consequence of their encounters with other Muslims often find themselves aligned with the mosque communities and the theological interpretations of those who brought them into the fold of Islam. As the women tell me, the time surrounding their conversion was filled with confusion, insecurities, anxieties, nerve-racking, and soul-searching, as they often felt out of place. Hence the mosque and the Muslim community in those spheres emerged as profound and vital influences on their religious worldview and trajectory. The friendships and affiliations that the women forged during this time often led to life-long kinships, and as

the women tell me, they helped foster and strengthen their *iman*. Amira finds herself participating in her best friend's (now her sister in-law's) and husband's childhood mosque, *Al-Noor*, where I met her. "So that community is what?" she asks, and quickly answers: "it's like roots." Amira cheerfully attributes her ongoing practice of the faith to the mosque community which has kept her rooted. Haseena could not build up the nerve to walk into a mosque without the help of her social worker. She tells me: "When I came home from prison, I was too scared to walk in a mosque because I didn't know what to wear." Eventually her social worker took her under his wing and facilitated a smooth entry into a predominantly Black mosque, *Masjid Al Islam*, where she could take the *shahadah.* It was at this same mosque that I met her during a *jummah* service. However, similarly to Diya, she is also active in other mosques and has been employed by many of the mosques in the Boston area.

Interestingly enough, the decision about in which mosque(s) a convert establishes herself does not follow racial and ethnic lines. According to the US Mosque Survey of 2011, 52% of African Americans chose to embrace Islam in a non-African-American mosque. This pattern was also reflected by some of the women I encountered. For some, such as Amira, Diya and Haseena, a predominantly African-American mosque provided the best example and support system to facilitate their conversion. For others, such as Sara, Yasmeen and Zoe, immigrant mosques, which are for the most part more integrated, seemed better equipped to handle their needs and provide the support needed to let go of their old life so as to embrace the new. As Zoe tells me, she desires to be around as many Arabic speakers as possible and finds worshiping and working at BIC to be the best route to meeting her needs. For Zoe, the culture of the mosque which in her

view is the "most Islamic" takes precedence over any desire to share the mosque with co-ethnics.

Unlike the experience of the women from the other two cohorts, the experience of the converts is often quite positive when encountering immigrant Muslims. The women of this cohort also tend to be affiliated with ethnically mixed mosques. Zoe, who was introduced to Islam via the internet, tells me that when she steps into BIC, where she took her *shahadah*, the mosque felt "very welcoming, very inviting" as it transported her to a "different place." For Zoe the "architecture," including the tall green minaret of the massive mega-mosque, is "reflective of Arab culture" and makes *her* feel more connected to the *ummah* when juxtaposed with the busy street on which the mosque sits: Malcolm X Boulevard. After converting, she returned to college for her senior year and was welcomed by the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on campus, which was comprised of immigrant Muslims. Thus Zoe's encounter with Islam has been modeled after and influenced by immigrant Muslims of America.

Nearly fifteen years after embracing Islam, Sara attributes her ongoing commitment to the *deen* to the welcoming mosque community that she first stumbled upon. For *her*, the immigrant mosque community and particularly their ideology were and continue to be conducive to her reading of Islam. In Sara's opinion, they provided "context" to the "content" with which she had already begin to familiarize herself through her personal study of Islam. As an active member of the "New Muslim Support Group," Sara speaks throughout Southern California and points to the failures of Muslims to welcome new converts as having to do with providing improper "context" and lack of

"friendliness." Sara points to her own negative experiences when visiting *salafi*[218] leaning mosques, both in her hometown of McDonough, Georgia and throughout Southern California, which she found to be too rigid and unwelcoming to women—an observation corroborated by Bagby, who reveals that *salafi* mosques have the lowest rate of female *jummah* attendance. On this point it must be noted that the 2011 survey found that "although *salafi* mosques are few, most *salafi* mosques are African American."[219]

What is most interesting about the case of Sara, is how for her, all Black mosques have come to be equated to the few *salafi* mosques that she has attended. In our conversation, her distaste for the patriarchal and strict mosques could be felt. When I shared with Sara the finding that overall Black mosques are more "female friendly," she was a bit surprised, as her experiences with the Black mosques has been the opposite. Jamillah Karim explains, "*Salafis* are known for their literal interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, and African American *salafis* are known for their criticism of the practice and patriotic attitudes of the WDM community."[220] Sara, who wears a *hijab*, makes clear her disapproval of many of the practices of the *salafi*, including the *niqāb*, polygyny and her perception that the *salafi* women "really hold themselves in high esteem…when it comes to Muslim practice. So they look down on a lot of other people." Though not to Sara's liking, the attraction toward such an interpretation of Islam is explained by Ann Braude, who states in "Women's History Is American Religious History" that "Some

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[218] Salafi is defined by the Mosque Study as: ""Follow the salafi *minhaj*" (way of thought). The salafi approach is akin to Wahabi thought, and is associated with a more literal understanding of Islam, in an effort to follow strict ways of the first three generation (the salaf) of Islam," Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders*, Report Number 1, 18.

[219] Ibid. 20.

[220] Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 134.

studies suggest that women are attracted to conservative religious communities precisely because they offer access to traditional roles of wife and mother." In Sara's opinion, the women of the *salafi* mosque were not accommodating to her lack of knowledge on religious discourse and etiquette upon her initial visit nearly fourteen years ago. Though she is not a member of any particular mosque, nor does she attend *jummah* prayers regularly, she does however consider herself an active member of the Muslim community. Sara's clear rejection of the *salafi* women and their interpretation of Islam makes way for an examination of the ideologies or permutations of Islam that the women choose to utilize in their submission to God.

Gendered Issues and Body Politics

> But then, when you become a Muslim, and these guidelines and rules are in place, it's kind of liberating, as a woman, to know that, I don't have to wear high, high heels, or a tight, tight skirt, to be accepted as a woman. Or, I don't have to be gawked at. The level of respect was what intrigued me the most. And then, from that point on, the knowledge came, and it was eureka.
>
> Yasmeen, Bakersfield CA

> Yeah, I absolutely love it. I love the attention that the men *do* have…not so much the attention, but the *respect* level, it's off the hook here when it comes to Muslims. It's like that in New York too. When I go to New York, people kind of get out your way and you know, the trains are really really crowded and there's always somebody that will say, "Sister, do you want my seat?" Even here, I've had a *wonderful* experience being Muslim.
>
> Haseena, Boston, MA

> So I wore *hijab* before actually converting to Islam. But then it can be a month or so before as I expand because I just thought it was a really beautiful way of showing a commitment to that. So like I said, this was all my junior year. And then after that summer, I went back to school for my senior year. And of course people had known me for the past three years.
>
> Zoe, Boston, MA

McCloud contends that "becoming Muslim in America...involves stepping into a worldview that is some fourteen hundred years old."[221] Accentuating her assertion with Wadud's statement that "[in] America, the mosque reflects aspects of gender relations and conflicts"[222] leads us to ask how the racialized bodies of the Muslimas become sites of a "gender *jihad*." Yvonne Haddad defines the term in the following way:

> The term gender jihad has come into popular use as a way of categorizing the efforts of these women who are contesting the prescriptions of the traditionalists, the reactionaries, and the fundamentalists but who are clearly working with a mandate to affirm the divine message of the Quran and the ultimate viability of the Islamic system. Those who practice the so called gender jihad are struggling to create new and viable interpretations of Islam based on the Quran and the Sunnah, opening the discourses of new possibilities of individual interpretation and collective consensus.[223]

The women's narratives reflect the gender disparity that has become part of the fabric of the sacred space of the American mosque. It is important to note that Wadud clarifies, "Despite the many cultural, ideological, and logistical variants in the degree of separation between women and men in the mosque, there is nothing essentially Islamic about it."[224] Antithetically to the model of the Prophet's mosque, the Quran and the *hadiths*, ethnic and cultural norms have relegated women to separate, and most often unequal, spaces

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[221] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 3.

[222] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, 174.

[223] Yvonne Haddad, defines the term in the following way: "The term gender jihad has come into popular use as a way of categorizing the efforts of these women who are contesting the prescriptions of the traditionalists, the reactionaries, and the fundamentalists but who are clearly working with a mandate to affirm the divine message of the Quran and the ultimate viability of the Islamic system. Those who practice the so called gender jihad are struggling to create new and viable interpretations of Islam based on the Quran and the Sunnah, opening the discourses of new possibilities of individual interpretation and collective consensus." Keller and Ruether, *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion*, 607.

[224] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 175.

within the mosque. Furthermore, the lack of female representation in mosque leadership roles often produces an *ijma*, consensus, which further negates the concerns of at least fifty percent of the Muslim population. For the indigenous Muslimas, the issues of gender disparity are further compounded by race, as some of them believe that "lots of immigrant Muslims have brought racist attitudes with them from Eastern cultures."[225] Karim notes, "By choosing to participate in public worship, women...must negotiate both ethnic spaces and the gender practices that often mark mosques as immigrant and African American."[226] Thus, the intersectionality of being a Black Muslim woman is at the heart of the women's gender *jihad*.

The emphatic and passionate narratives reveal that gendered issues relating to the praxis of their faith vis-à-vis the mosque are a salient concern for the Muslimas interviewed. Spearheading concerns at her mosque, *Masjid Al-Noor*, Tahzeeb found herself to be the only woman speaking up against a proposed partition which would place a "trellis"-like partition between the men and women, who were already in the back of the mosque.[227] Although other women, such as Amira, found the proposed "cage-like" partition highly offensive, none of the women felt confident enough to speak up against its implementation. Tahzeeb spoke up and articulated her views on gender segregation: "I have told them [the leadership] any number of times that they need to do something about having the women in the back. Especially as African Americans, our entire existence in this country has been predicated on the concept of 'separate is inherently

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[225] Tahzeeb.

[226] Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 174.

[227] The partition was proposed by an immigrant man who wished for his wife to pray more comfortably behind a partition.

unequal.' So if separate is inherently unequal in the larger culture, why is it somehow okay in the *masjid*? So I told him, I said, 'Really, they need to do something about this.'" Tahzeeb's choice of words is often echoed, as women from *all* cohorts (especially the older generation) liken the issue of gender separation to the racial segregation of the civil rights movement. The women question how the immigrant men and women of color who inherited the greater freedoms won in the Civil Rights struggle can expect them to acquiesce to gender hierarchies based on cultural norms from their homelands. The women tell me that they view gender segregation as "humiliating," "oppressive," "uninviting," "uncomfortable," "no colored allowed" and as Elinor puts it, "the challenge of Islam" for women.

Here are brief descriptions of some of the mosques within which my informants participate. (For more details see Appendix, mosque profiles.) Mosques that utilize an open prayer hall concept without physical barriers are: *Masjid Al-Noor* in Los Angeles, CA, founded by a core group of African-American families, which houses a majority immigrant male crowd on Fridays and has a partial physical barrier for those who wish to pray behind a partition. The mosque is housed in a home on a boulevard in the suburbs of Los Angeles. *Masjid* Bilal in Roxbury, MA, which is housed in a former Jewish temple and follows the teaching of W. D. Muhammad, has an open prayer hall where the women pray behind the men without any physical barriers. The Women's Mosque of America, which utilizes a community center, is a pop up mosque which is for women by women and has no male presence, thus eliminating the need for segregation. Lastly, BIC, a 70,000 square foot mega-mosque, also has an open main floor where the women can pray in the main prayer hall behind the men. If they choose they also have the option to go

upstairs and pray in the expansive balcony overlooking the main prayer hall without any physical barriers.

Another arrangement that I encountered separated the genders by physically placing them on different floors or spaces. I encountered such arrangements when visiting the mosque in Cambridge, MA, a mixed-ethnic mosque, which relegates the women to the basement without any visual of the *khutba* and pipes in an audio of the sermon on Fridays.[228] *Masjid Al Islam*, in Boston, MA, a predominantly African-American mosque with no ties to W. D. Muhammad, and a more *salafi*-like leaning, is a small three-story house, which has restricted women to the second floor with a video and audio live feed of the *khutba*. The two mixed-immigrant mosques in Bakersfield, CA[229] put the women behind a physical partition. One of the mosques has the women in an upper balcony-like floor from which the women can overlook the main prayer room. However, a plexi-glass barrier has been installed and thus serves to further separate the women from the men. Such variety in the layout of the mosque is a direct reflection of the diversity of ideologies and interpretations which can be found in the mosques of America.

The issue of gender segregation is further problematized when we consider *how* the mosque observes this cultural tradition. Wadud clarifies, "Gender separation is neither a matter of faith nor a principle of Islamic dogma and creed. It was never

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[228] This is a mosque which Rashida referred to as being one which she avoids due to its lack of English *khutbas*, but she also cited the lack of visual contact with the imam as detracting from her inspiration. Thus, she chooses to pray at BIC, where she feels more connected to the entire *ummah* and can see her *imam*.

[229] Mona referred to these mosques as being unfriendly to women and families. Sister Joyce also referred to these mosques as being "oppressive" toward women due to the Yemini and South Asian cultural norms of not allowing women to participate in the mosque and its leadership.

emphasized in the Quran, which instead recommends ways for women and men to observe modest limits while *in each other's presence*."[230] The manner in which "modest limits" are implemented is where the heart of the issue lies. In some mosques, as we have seen, men and women pray in the same prayer hall without a physical partition. Women in such a case pray behind the men so as to avoid physical contact and also avoid prostrating in front of men. Karim cites, "Most hadith reports indicate this [women in the back] as the gender practice that the Prophet Muhammad endorsed in his own mosque in Medina."[231] Such an arrangement, Karim relays, was found to be the "most logical gender arrangement" by most participants in the mosque. Most of my informants hesitantly agree that such an arrangement is the most logical, but as exemplified by Tahzeeb, view it as being inequitable. According to the 2011 Mosque Study, the use of architectural dividers, curtains or dividers to distinguish women's spaces increased from 52% of mosques in 1994 to 66% in 2011.[232] Most interestingly supporting my observations is the finding that only 39% of African-American mosques utilize dividers to separate the genders. In comparison, South Asian and Arab mosques utilized dividers at rates of 80% and 70%, respectively. The study also compared mosques within the African-American category and found that only 10% of those that use dividers follow the leadership of the late W. D. Mohammad.

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[230] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, 175. (Italics in quote carried over from Wadud)

[231] Karim, *American Muslim* Women, 171.

[232] Sarah Sayeed, Aisha Al-Adawiya, Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Women and the American Mosque,* Report Number 3 (March 2013), 6-9.

Such an arrangement at times is a function of a lack of resources and space, as many of the smaller mosques are housed in buildings which were not built for such purposes. Of the total mosques in America, only 30% were built as mosques. This means that 70% of America's mosques are housed in buildings that were formerly churches, store fronts, houses and commercial structures.[233] However, physical separation can also be observed in mosques which were purpose-built, such as the mosque in Cambridge, MA.

For the women who convert to Islam, the issue of gender segregation and partitions is just one of the challenges they must negotiate when stepping into the new worldview of Islam. As the women tell me, the arrangement of the sexes has an immense impact on which mosque they choose to engage with and how they do so. Zoe chose to wear the *hijab* even before converting, but when it came to choosing a mosque, she consciously made the decision not to take her *shahadah* at a mosque which relegates women to the basement. Amira likens the partial partition in her mosque to a "cage" and found it to be a bad example for her young daughters. Diya and her husband Omar both found the lack of accommodations and food for women at a small, conservative African-American mosque in West Los Angeles to be a turn-off. She relays a story of one of their mosque-hopping visits during Ramadan, to a mosque where, she says, "they had an opening where you could see downstairs where the men were, but they had drapes all over that. And I'm like, 'Okay, that's overkill.' But there was no table up there [on the second floor] for the food for the sisters. They just had a tarp on the floor." She and her husband left dismayed by the lack of respect for women and she tells me that her husband

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[233] Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders*, Report Number 1 Mosque study, 11.

felt “uncomfortable” with this arrangement. For Diya and Omar, *Masjid Al-Noor* best reflects their Islam and its interpretation of gender arrangements—all within one hall with the women in the back.

Whereas *jummah* services are overwhelmingly attended by immigrant men, other events, which are mostly attended by the core African-American constituency, reflect a female and family-friendly environment. At Diya and Omar’s *Hajj* slide-show, for example, I found men, women and children co-mingling and respectfully observing and listening to the two as they shared their stories from their *hajj*, inside the mosque. Following the presentation, the core community of the mosque moved outside to the back yard for a meal attended by men, women and non-Muslim friends who came to celebrate their friends’ successful completion of the *hajj*. Of the six tables set up for the meal, four were occupied by women and two with the men were off to the side, hence revealing the overwhelming feminine energy of the mosque, as described by one of the board members, Henna. For an observer such as myself, the stark difference between a *jummah* services at *Masjid Al-Noor*, which are dominated by immigrant men, and an intimate event such as the *hajj* presentation highlights the diversity of the American mosque—and how indigenous women find themselves negotiating a space within it.

Mosque Leadership and Culture of the Mosque

Mosque leadership, which is customarily male-dominated, and its attitude toward gender issues contribute greatly to the tension-filled culture and layout of a mosque. The battle as to how to position women within the mosque often runs along racial and ethnic lines. However, even among individual mosque communities, there are plenty of points

of contention and agreement. Most mosques in America are governed by an Imam and/or a governing body in the form of a board of directors or trustees. The degree to which each entity has decision-making power varies by the ethnicity of the mosque. In the majority of mosques, 69%, the final decision-making power lies with the Board. However, in African-American mosques the Board is less likely to have the final say in decisions, as the Imams in 65% of these mosques have the final decision-making power. Furthermore, ethnicity and race greatly affect the role of women in the governance of mosques. African-American mosques, with the exception of *salafi* mosques, are the most likely of any American mosques to have women who serve on their mosque boards (75%), while Arabs are the least likely (44%). Within the African-American community, 98% of W. D. Muhammad mosques have women on their boards, while 78% of other African-American mosques do so.[234] All this highlights the fact that African-American mosques, especially those which follow W. D. Muhammad, tend to be female-friendly and actually have women involved in the governance of the mosque. Such trends greatly influence the visibility, role and engagement of women within the mosque.

For converts, the mosque is a vital locus for their spirituality and serves to make them feel connected to the *ummah*; it is often where their journey into the faith begins. Zoe shares with me the cultural implications of living in America for someone like her: "The mosque itself serves as a safe place to learn, socialize, worship, and feel part of a community, rather than feeling like an outsider or a minority in the general population." Besides prayer, various educational and social activities attract women to their local mosques. Zoe adds to this point: "Many African-American women are converts to Islam,

[234] Sarah Sayeed, Aisha Al-Adawiya, Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Women and the American Mosque,* Report Number 3 (March 2013), 6-9. See also Report 1 and 2.

that social aspect of learning how to practice the religions [is] all the more important than for someone who was raised religiously and culturally in Islam." Hence, given the rising need for Islamic education for adults and especially children, women's roles in mosques have become more visible and essential. Perhaps as a result, mosques are being forced to not only provide a space for prayer for women but also address issues related to their physical and spiritual needs. The 2011 Mosque Study found that the majority of mosques, 71%, offer women's activities or programs.[235] Furthermore, in my visits to various *jummah* services, I heard many *khutbas* which spoke about issues of gender equality. Several *khutbas* in October 2015, National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, addressed the issue of domestic and mental abuse, while another spoke about the obligations of a marriage for *both* men and women. A *khutba* on September 11, 2015, spoke about the need for empathy for the refugee children of Syria and condemned America's involvement in various wars. At times *khutbas* discussed conversion and the need for converts to stay connected to their families while condemning homosexuality. Most *khutbas* brought in the topic of Black Lives Matter on a weekly basis along with the salient headlines. Such a diverse array of *khutba* topics highlights the fact that in America women and families are part of the fabric of the mosque, and leadership has acknowledged this reality.

The culture of the mosque is something that weighs heavily with the women, for the reason that the women want to create and nurture an environment, for themselves and for their children, which is respectful and equitable for women while acknowledging their racial history. Wadud describes Islam by writing, "At the level of the average Muslim

[235] Sarah Sayeed, Aisha Al-Adawiya, Ihsan Bagby, *US Mosque Study 2011: Women and the American Mosque,* Report Number 3 (March 2013).

man or woman on the street, Islam is whatever they have inherited, culturally and ethnically."[236] The women are cognizant of this point and tell me that they are not willing to capitulate to the "cultural norms" of the immigrants in lieu of real Islam or forfeit their own rich African-American heritage. Tahzeeb tells me, "My spirit will always resist immigrant cultural constructs presented as 'true Islam' for several reasons":

> African-American Muslims aren't willing to have immigrant Muslims interpret how to live as a Muslim here in the U.S. It includes all the artificial restrictions that are directed toward women: stay in the back even if you're nearsighted or hearing-impaired; don't speak in the *masjid*; stay in 'your place." And what is "your place"? It's whatever the men decide (on a whim), is the proper role of women. These same men are perfectly willing to have their wives go to a job, however, and I've even heard immigrant Imams state that here in the U.S. lots of Muslim women work and it's OK if they help pay the household bills, or even support their husbands if necessary. Sooo...bending the traditional Islamic customs is OK, if it benefits the men, I guess....Those same men work around women all day, laugh and share lunch with them, are sometimes supervised, hired, and fired by women. Yet, on Friday they expect those same talented, competent women to act like second-class humans? Again, it's hypocrisy and it won't work. It's what I described as "playing *masjid*." This culture has come through chattel slavery all the way to the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that desegregated the public schools in 1954 (at least on paper). The basic rationale for that decision was that "separate is inherently unequal." That has been the law of this land for over 60 years and there is likely no African-American adult who doesn't focus on that ruling from time to time.

For Tahzeeb, the sacred space of the mosque has become a symbolized space within which gender and racial hierarchy and disparity can be inflicted as an attempt to make the racialized bodies of the women feel inferior, like "second-class humans." For her and many other women, the attempts to limit their movement and engagement based on erroneous interpretations, laced with cultural norms, are simply unacceptable and must be

[236] Wadud, *Inside the Gender* Jihad, 19.

resisted. The women find that such attempts not only stifle their physical beings, hence limiting agency, but also hinder their spiritual growth. The attempts to make women feel inferior and invisible goes against everything African-American women have fought for: their freedoms.

Although many of the women's narratives convey disapproval, or at least a tension, between themselves and the leadership of their respective mosques, they generally choose to stay engaged and negotiate within the dynamic structure of the mosque. Their resistance lies in their desire to change the culture of the mosque. Marla Frederick, in *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, highlights that "much of African American religious experience has involved some degree of capitulation or accommodations in the face of unequal structure of power."[237] However, as the women convey, such "accommodations" or "capitulation" are themselves a form of resistance which commits the women to further promote their cause—racial and gender equity in the mosque—within the framework of Islam. Their commitment echoes Frederick's assertions about African-American women and the church: "Most important, however, their commitment reflects a level of faith that encourages a desire to be a part of what they consider God's work wherever and however it is taking place."[238] Such efforts are recommended by the authors of the Mosque Study, Wadud, and Karim as a primary means to change the landscape and culture of the American mosque—this is the women's gender *jihad*.

[237] Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 6.

[238] Ibid. 4.

The women proudly own their African-American identity and culture. They often communicate that by submitting to Islam, they are not surrendering their history. This history further adds the nuanced manner in which the women approach and relate to the mosque and the *ummah*. They are well aware of the "unique experiences of African American Muslimas."[239] Amira highlighted for me that she chose to embrace and surrender to Islam, but by doing so, she did not choose the "culture" of Islam. She shares: "I've always been clear from the beginning that I wasn't interested in converting my culture. I love my culture…We [African Americans] start with Black consciousness and then we end up wrapping ourselves into someone else's culture or emulating another culture that's non-Black as well." With this caution about the dangers of straying away from Black culture, Amira emphasizes the importance of staying close to the "source" of Islam, the Quran, in order to avoid confusing religious essentials with non-essential culture.

A part of the African-American history includes the Church (and later the NOI and the W. D. Muhammad communities) and the longstanding history of men and women working side by side for the community and social justice. Frederick writes: "It is common knowledge that regardless of race or socioeconomic background women form the backbone of most religious organizations in the United States."[240] Therefore, as Karim explains, "African American Muslim women are culturally accustomed to participating alongside men in most public spheres including churches."[241] Coming from

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[239] Tahzeeb.

[240] Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 4.

[241] Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 179.

Christian backgrounds, the women cite the high visibility of women engaging in public worship in the church and their contribution to running it as a natural parallel for their high level of mosque participation. McCloud adds: "In contrast to many Muslim societies, Africa-American Muslim women spend a great deal of time in the *masjid*, organizing educational programs, doing good in the community activities, attending classes, and praying."[242] Diya shares, "in a lot of African-American churches, the women are – they're right there with the preacher, the deacons and whatever, running the church. That's just part of our collective history." Sara confirms, "I think it's just part of the culture…I think it's the same with any convert—they're active in the mosque just because here [in America]," women go to church. She continues, "But as a society as a whole women go to the church just as much as men; you go as a family." Tahzeeb concludes about gender equality in all aspects of life: "That is the framework in which Islam came to our community...the men and women had to work together to overcome the worst sustained abuse in the history of humanity." For African-American women, the longstanding history of public worship and engagement within the church and now the mosque is a means by which the women can resist inequality and increase their spirituality.

Feminism in an Islamic Worldview

Rouse posits: "If women who believe in and seek out their own empowerment should be considered feminists then African American converts are feminists." She goes on to explain that "Muslim women recognize Islam to be the first 'feminist' monotheistic

[242] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 158.

religion, and therefore when they choose to identify as Muslims, as opposed to feminists, it is more for political reasons rather than any clear objections to women's equality within their families and communities."[243] These reasons lie in the conception of feminism as an ideology which is a dichotomy that assumes a "natural antagonism between men and women" and does not take into account the circumstances of African-American women and other subgroups.[244] For Black Muslimas in particular, as McCloud writes: "African-American Muslim women who struggle against male dominance do so within a framework that does not mimic Western feminism. These women, seek valid Quranic interpretation."[245] A womanist approach as introduced by Alice Walker can produce a better understanding of the intersectionality of the racialized gendered bodies. Walker writes, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,"[246] as she claims feminism is alienating to minorities and fails to acknowledge the diversity of color and culture of Black women. Walker's discourse is central for many African-American religious scholars, and Muslimas in general, who often identify themselves as womanist, based on the argument that liberation was not extended to Black women within the feminist movement. The African-American religious scholars Amina Wadud[247] and Debra Majeed use a womanist lens; Majeed explains her method by saying it "responds to the racist and

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[243] Rouse, *Engendered* Surrender, 150.

[244] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 148.

[245] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 158.

[246] Alice Walker's definition of "Womanist," as presented *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Continuum, 1983), xi.

[247] Wadud herself describes her position as "pro faith" and "pro-feminist." See discussion on page 79-80 in *Gender Jihad*.

patriarchal culture of the United States and is grounded in the nuances of black struggles for survival, in questions of Islamic legitimacy, and in the social activism of African American women."[248] In my observations, the intersectionality of the indigenous Muslimas' circumstances as related to the space of the mosque and gender issues has become a salient aspect of their social activism which serves to empower them.

Nearly fifteen years after the attacks of 9/11, many Americans continue to be in a voluntary cocoon of ignorance about what it means to be a Muslim and how Islam's dynamic teachings play out in the daily lives of Muslimas in the context of America. Our society's obsession with homogenizing and focusing on the "oppression" of women in the Islamic world and their outward portrayals of their faith, notably the *hijab*, has blinded us to its potential as actualized by those who practice the faith of their free volition.[249] For the women, such ignorance has direct consequences; McCloud posits, for example, that it has made African-American Muslim women into "religious artifacts" who in "public spaces are the constant objects of hostilities."[250] Such antagonisms allow the average American to ignore the sanity and Americanness of the women and question why they "choose" to submit to such multiple levels of subjugation. For example, Amira shares the reaction of a well-respected colleague at her university who learned that she

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[248] Majeed, "Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman's 'Must I be Womanism?'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2006) 117.

[249] In a blog post titled "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Obsession Over Muslim Women," Atif Rashid recently observed, "One shouldn't be too surprised over the endless pursuit of issues regarding Muslim women by our leaders. Considering how our society strongly stands for freedom of expression, justice and plurality, it's ironic that the very thing which Muslim women use to express their identity and liberty—the *hijab*—is the exact reason they are highlighted so much more." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/atif-rashid/hidden-in-plain-sight-muslim-women_b_9152868.html> retrieved Feb. 15, 2016.

[250] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 159.

was Muslim: "I don't understand how you're Muslim. I just don't get it. How's that even possible?" Amira opines that her colleague makes this judgment: "because the person that she knows [Amira the professor] doesn't fit into her idea" of what a Muslim woman should look and act like: oppressed. Amira finds herself clarifying for her colleague: "Oh, you're misunderstanding this [Islam]." The "multiple oppressions" that Amira must resist speak to not only her gender but also her race, class and faith.[251]

Wadud adds to the discourse on the post-9/11 state of Islam in America when in "American By Force, Muslim by Choice," she writes, "September 11th and its aftermath solidified the idea that Islam in America is only the Islam of foreigners."[252] She goes on to present the challenges of Islam in America:

> For any religion to remain vibrant, tolerant and accessible to the plurality of human communities, its knowledge base must be constantly transformed from within. Each new era brings challenges of unprecedented proportion demanding new, more nuanced paradigms. No significant institutional or financial support from American academia and US think tanks is lent to the growth of ideas *in Islam*, only to unveiling past ideas or present ideologies. The growth of Islamic Feminism is one such paradigm shift—an articulation with deep roots in the source texts that then branches out across the planet. This new knowledge is evident everywhere except in America, where Islamic feminist theory is made secondary to further case studies of national and international women's movements.[253]

Wadud highlights the deficit in the production of Islamic knowledge, including Islamic feminism, in the post 9/11 world as a contributing factor for the ill-informed misconceptions about Islam and those who practice it within America. For Wadud such a

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[251] Debra King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995) 293-317.

[252] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 701.

[253] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 702.

thwarting of knowledge production directly affects indigenous Muslims (and women in particular) who are made invisible by society at large and further marginalized from within the *ummah*. For the women, the vitality of Islam rests upon fulfilling Wadud's calls for knowledge production and paradigm shift. Similarly to Karim's informants, the women I interviewed are engaged in a transformative way with the gendered space of the mosque and seek out gender justice. The women seek to use their agency to build up an Islamic framework that accommodates Black women's bodies.

Though the women have found comfort in Islam as an agentive religion which is pro- women, they are often disillusioned by other Muslims, including their leaders. Amira's frustration is multifaceted, as she finds the ignorance from within the *ummah* to be just as offensive to her intellect and spirituality as that from outside. "I've been in spaces where," she tells me, "some men will say some offensive things about women or how they're looking at this [passage from the Quran]." Diya's excitement at sharing her *hajj* stories throughout our many interactions was only dampened when she shared a story of an "overzealous man" who with no authority kept "moving the women to the side or to the back…. But you don't have any way to protest." She tells me that before going to Mecca, she had always heard that "men and women can pray together in Mecca. So, I don't know why it's such a big deal when you come back to your own country. In the United States, why can't men and women pray together?" Such ignorance and treatment are emblematic of many of the women's experiences. In fact, at times they must distance themselves from the space of the mosque and place primacy on their own personal spirituality and piety. In "African American Muslim Women are a Rare Gift," Aisha H.L. al-Adawiya writes of her experience as an indigenous Muslima: "our lives are

intertwined with those who oppress and those who seek to liberate."[254] Thus, she highlights the intersectionality of the intra-*ummah* inequitable treatment (which runs along racial and gender lines) with the external ignorance of society at large, which compounds the situation. At times such intersectionality can alienate the women from the mosque as the women find their individual identity to be compromised there.

In the quest for piety and spirituality, the women often turn to the example of the Prophet to acquire a dynamic model for living in America. Given the lack of cultural normative within the context of America, on the issue of women and mosque participation, the indigenous women find themselves turning to the seminal mosque of the Prophet as a model. Kahera notes, "Women [had] the right to go to the mosque, and the Prophet's mosque at Madinah had free access for both sexes."[255] The example of the Prophet's mosque is most often cited as a means to also read the dictates on such matters as the *hijab*, which Wadud dubs the "*sixth pillar*." The word *hijab* means *curtain, partition,* or *screen*, and was not necessarily meant to be applied to all the women of the Sunnah. Rather, as explained by Kahera, it was a separation or elevation given to the Prophet's wives, a means by which "domestic comfort and privacy" could be afforded to women who were in the public arena.[256]

Often the women find that the *hijab* has become a marker of piety amongst the *ummah* and a designation of the "other" by society at large. Rouse describes the "*hijab*

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[254] Aisha al-Adawiya, "African American Muslim Women Are a Rare Gift," *Common Ground News Service*, http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=23271&lan=en&sp=1.

[255] Kahera, *Deconstructing The American Mosque*, 15.

[256] Kahera, *Deconstructing The American Mosque*, 130.

[a]s the performance of moral character [a]s an attempt to undo racist assumptions about the loose morals of African Americans."[257] Besides the religious dictates on the matter, African-American identity can also influence the decision as to which kind, if any, of head-covering a woman chooses to wear. Karim notes that many women believe in the permissibility of different cultural expressions of the *hijab* as long as it expresses modesty.[258] All of my informants in the Boston group donned a conservative *hijab*; in the case of Sister Leila, a *niqāb* serves as the best choice for actuating piety and agency. In Bakersfield, all of the women also chose to wear the traditional *hijab*. In the greater Los Angeles area, I found more diversity in the women's interpretation of clothing and modesty.

For others' spirituality, the matter of head-covering does not play such an important role. A small fraction of the women in Los Angeles did not utilize any type of head-covering. However, as Wadud points out, "though dress may seem coincidental, it is laden with significance in the g*ender jihad*."[259] Using Wadud's assertion as a lens leaves one to consider the choice of the women who do wear the *hijab* as their own form of gender *jihad*. Though not a direct topic of my study, given the gendered nature of my research, the issue of dress and *hijab* seems to be relevant to most conversations. The women have very mixed readings on the issue of *hijab*, which cover all the spectra of its expression.

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[257] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 65.

[258] Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the Ummah*, 82.

[259] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 223.

Polygyny: Liberation or Coercion?

> They [a couple she knows] were in a polygamous marriage. And what she told me is that she thought it would work. Because see, in the African-American community, there's been a lot of dialogue around this, not just in Muslim – just in general…sometimes it's[a] perception that there's so many more women than men. And we do have high incarceration rates. So, there are more women than men in a lot of communities, particularly urban communities…. So, for whatever reason, she agreed to be part of plural marriage. She was one of three wives. They had a huge house. And each wife had a floor. But, she says, "I do believe, in the right circumstances, it can work." But something happened. And so, that's why you may see some – I don't know, you may see some African-American women that would be willing to gravitate to it if they just have always heard that and think it might work or just feel like there's not enough men.
>
> Diya, Los Angeles, CA

> It motivates us, so we have these good Ramadans where we're connected to the community and we come and we break fast and we do it at least 50 percent of the days we're at the mosque, and so I think it's very good for our marriage and our family during that time.
>
> Amira, Los Angeles, CA

The issue of polygyny, the practice of a husband being married to up to four wives at the same time, is also at the forefront of African-American Muslimas' lives. Several of the women I encountered had been in or continue to be in such marriages. None of my informants seemed surprised when I brought up the practice and no one fully criticized it; instead, there often was a level of ambivalence which suggested that it could be a pragmatic solution to a population's real problem. Of the six women interviewed in Boston, four had been in or still were in multiple-wife marriages and one woman had grown up in such a household. One of the informants from the Boston group has a mother in-law with a co-wife. She and I touched upon the impact of such family dynamics as she perceived it through hearing about her husband's upbringing. The sixth woman from the

Boston group lived in a building with Muslim households with multiple wives. This variety of perspectives served to further inform me about the nuances of such unions and how they are negotiated within the framework of Islam.

In Los Angeles, none of my informants reported in being such a marriage; however, it is a percolating issue within the community. A few women acknowledged that their husbands had proposed the idea; this information was disclosed only after the recorder was turned off. One informant had attended a lecture a few weeks earlier, in Atlanta, where Dr. Debra Majeed was discussing her new book, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*. Tahzeeb's response to the lecture was: "It's unmitigated bullshit!" However, she went on to frame the issue in the context of a problem arising from a "shortage of men." She conveyed her approach to the practice: "Well, if it works for you, *hallelujah*, go on about your business. Don't bring it to me." Similarly to Rouse' informants, most often the women do not necessarily view it as "threatening," but often refused to personally be involved in such unions.[260] As Amira tells me:

> I'm 41 and I kind of understand the reality of particularly being an African-American woman and looking for a partner, it's rough. Statistically it's hard to find a partner. And I understand the absence of men in families and the impact on that. It's not always bad, but I think it's a nice balancing thing. I would never want to raise my kids alone. It's hard…I'm not interested in polygamy, so that's just not for me. Now, do I feel like there are ways to do it where people could do it and work it out? Yes, I think there is. I'm open in that sense. I can see it. I can see how you can work it out. I can see if the husband and the wife together decide let's find a co-wife. If we want to bring someone on because we feel like this is something that we need, yes.

[260] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 66.

Despite being personally against polygyny, Amira's and Tahzeeb's practical approach to the issue conveys the tension between their personal interpretations and a reality of Black life. Their rationalization mirrors most women's reading of the issue as a practical solution to a real problem that indigenous Muslimas face. Following my interview with Amira, she and I both made our way to *Masjid Al-Noor* for a wedding reception, which seemed to be such an arrangement with a marriage of an elderly sister to a much younger man, who had a "soon to be ex-wife" in another town. The community of the mosque did not ostensibly acknowledge the matrimony as polygynous, but when the topic of polygyny was brought up during our interviews, most of the women from this particular community pointed to this marriage as an example.

Technically speaking, polygamy and polygyny are illegal in America, but due to the separation of church and state, the legalities of such a union can be circumvented in the space of the mosque. As reported by Majeed and supported by my conversations with various imams, the issue finds many interpretations and enactments in praxis. For many imams the issue is of a private nature that does not require the involvement of the government; hence the imams are willing to perform a *nikah*, as per Islamic law. In such cases the marriage is validated by the imam and the community who bear witness to such unions. Elinor points out the weaknesses in such unions, which can leave the woman in a vulnerable position. She states: "if you're a second wife you have no legal rights, you have no rights to inheritance, [and] you have nothing. Your husband's sick and you're a second wife you can't even go to the hospital." Imams and community leaders who agree with Elinor's positioning and view the praxis as disempowering for women *can and do*

circumvent such unions by requiring a marriage license. Such requisites serve to protect the women and afford her and any offspring the legal rights of family.

The practice of polygyny is understood by some of the women as a component of their "African heritage." There are also other factors that contribute to its acceptance, as Elinor from the first-generation cohort points out: "you should know that some of the NOI elder women were not pleased that Imam W. D. M[uhammad] had multiple wives including his last wife who was about 19 years old when he married her and he was a grandfather at the time. They [the community] attribute some of the polygyny in the community to his example." Elinor, like many of the women, does not believe it to be conducive to empowering women. McCloud observes: "In any community, when the leadership becomes involved in polygynous relationships, the practice becomes viewed as a viable alternative for a time in that community."[261] In the context of African-American Muslim family life, the backdrop of the Prophet's life and several verses from the Quran are most often utilized to read polygyny as an allowable Islamic act. Polygyny is an acceptable practice within the Quran; however, there are certain conditions that must be met. Diya tells me her understanding of these requisites: "The Quran says – it says you have to be able to afford the woman. You have to be able to treat the wives equal. And it also says, 'And if but only you knew, you would have but one.' So, that says it's not no easy road." Often such marriages are also cited as a pragmatic solution to a problem which faces many African-American women, who tend to find themselves in single-parent households. Majeed, in her seminal ethnography *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands,* presents the perspectives of African-American Muslim women based on their lived experiences in polygyny.

[261] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 101.

Majeed builds on Rouse's assertions "that to best understand polygyny, one must approach the phenomenon mindful of its multidimensional context."[262] Majeed goes on to posit that many "who practice polygyny, do so because they believe they are following the teaching of Islam."[263] She reports that that one of the salient reasons behind such marriages as perceived by the women is that the "lack of marriageable (single, heterosexual and available) men, and/or the high number of female-led households, and the continued economic disparity experienced by mothers and their children make the practice of polygyny both mandated and permissible."[264] She categorizes multiple-wife marriages into three categories: polygyny of liberation, polygyny of choice, and polygyny of coercion. I will use her categorization to locate my informants' experiences and would like to stress that the narratives presented here are not representative of all of the women I encountered nor are they emblematic of indigenous Muslimas in general, as the women are not a monolithic group. McCloud also highlights the need to avoid approaching polygyny as a norm across the various Black Muslim communities of America,"[265] and this assessment holds true for the sample of women I interviewed.

For many of the women interviewed, the lack of educated, financially secure, eligible indigenous Muslim men, as described by Majeed, is part of their lived experiences; however, the actuation of the practice of polygyny, many women believe, leaves the women in a power disparity. My informants, those who practice[d] and those

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[262] Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*, 25.

[263] Ibid. 25.

[264] Ibid. 26.

[265] McCloud, *African American Islam*, 101.

who do not, all sympathize with Majeed's thesis, but do not always approach polygyny as an mandate or indeed even permissible within Islam. Furthermore, many of my informants pointed to polygyny being used in a patriarchal mode to attempt to control women's bodies and finances. Beverly tells me her thoughts: "I would see a lot of the Muslims—the men were like, just getting with the women because the women had the welfare check." Such sentiments were echoed by others as well. Diya points out:

> Sister, I'm going [to] be honest with you. I don't know many African-American men that can totally support a woman in this economy. Now, the men might tell you something else, because my husband and I – we had this philosophical discussion about this just the other day, because the other brother brought it up, the polygyny, and they know about this new book.[266] And I [thought], "Oh, here we go!"

In this section, I will analyze the women's narratives on the topic and explore how it intersects with their mosque communities.

According to the Prophet, "Marriage is half of faith," and all of the women interviewed take this decree very seriously. Islamic outlook places great significance on family, and sex, as Esposito states, is approached as a "gift from God to be enjoyed within the bonds of marriage."[267] Marriage and family are part of the faith and must be negotiated in an Islamic framework. Therefore, as Wadud points out, "Engaged surrender goes on all the times, at all places and for all circumstances. So we should think of our marriages and family lives as engaged surrender."[268] Islam also provides women the right to divorce and retain their inheritance, which at times may come in the form of a

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[266] Diya is referring to Majeed's book.

[267] Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, 17.

[268] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 160.

dowry which may be negotiated as part of the marital contract.[269] With the exception of Zunida, a third-generation Muslima who will be discussed in the conclusion, all of my informants have been or are currently married, and most have also exercised their right to a divorce.

Yasmeen, a newly converted woman who has been married less than one year, is still learning her *deen*. Of her *nikah*, marriage contract, she explains: "When we got married at the *masjid* on Ming, they [the imam] asked me what I want for my dowry, and I said, 'I don't want any money.' Because I didn't come here for money. I just came because I loved him. So I said I didn't want any money, just *hijabs* and some *abayas*, just so that I could be properly dressed. And so, he fulfilled that for me." Without this legal contract, an Islamic marriage is not valid. Yasmeen's statement and choice of dowry—clothing—at first glance may seem to be geared toward pleasing her husband (who was present during our interview)[270] and may be regarded by some as a disempowering act with which Yasmeen denies herself agency. However, upon closer examination, it must be noted that the expectation of her marital contract *requires* her husband to "fulfill" her request. Polygyny too is an issue that Yasmeen could have chosen to address in her marital contract, for example preventing her husband from seeking such a union while being married to her. Had Yasmeen asked for a sum of money, this too would have been guaranteed to her and she would retain it upon divorce. For Yasmeen and the other women, such guidelines guarantee a certain empowerment within the framework of

[269] Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, 94 to 96; Aslan, *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, 62.

[270] This was the only interview that was not conducted privately, all others were a one on one interview.

Islam. Islam as interpreted by the women makes clear and guarantees distinct rights which they embrace as being agentive.

Islam everywhere is a dynamic religion which allows a multitude of interpretations and praxis as related to family life and marriage. Haseena, who was introduced in the opening of this chapter, has found polygyny to be an avenue of liberation within which she can fulfill half of her faith: "I get freedom from it. I never thought I could be married and be free at the same time. It's wonderful, it's liberating, I'm telling you!" The mosque for her has facilitated such liberation, as she tells me that the *nikah* was performed at the *masjid* and thus was sanctioned by Islam and her community. Haseena's narrative reveals a very positive approach to the practice of polygyny which acknowledges the responsibility and possible "repercussions" associated with it. She is a woman who has purposefully sought out a polygynous matrimony, twice, as she feels she would like to be a wife only part-time. For Haseena, entering a polygynous marriage is an act which requires one to be "very unselfish" and which has to be done out of "love" for Allah—an act of piety. In Haseena's view, it is something which requires one to "study polygamy and how to be a Muslim and what to do and what not to do. Proper etiquette. All this stuff that combines you into being somewhat of a good person. Or even a better one." It is an act that can increase her piety as ordained by Allah.

For Haseena, a woman who converted after being released from prison in 1999, the mosque and the community of believers affiliated with it are "family," which is what she says she needed. Haseena's co-wife from her first marriage was aware of the union, "but she was a little upset that he didn't pick the person *she* wanted him to be with. He

went out and found his own person that he wanted to be with. And plus she wanted him to marry older and I was her age." Though not the case for Haseena's co-wife, it is not uncommon for a Muslima to seek out a potential co-wife for her husband. As Majeed reports, it is a mode through which a wife has the ability to establish some control or influence over her husband's matrimony.[271] For Haseena and her co-wife, the optimum choice was to organize separate households and keep contact with each other to the minimum. Despite such autonomy, the two women found themselves sharing the space of the mosque and when relaying stories of herself, her husband and her co-wife, Haseena used the words "my whole family" to describe their circumstances and interactions within the mosque. For Haseena the mosque and its affiliated community, including her co-wife, all belong to the *ummah* and hence are her family.

In Haseena's second marriage, her co-wife knew about Haseena, but "she did not *like* the marriage and I never met her face-to-face. Ever." Hence, the marriage which Haseena pronounces as liberating was apparently not emancipating for her co-wife. Of her second husband, she tells me: "The second time, I was married for five years. And, this is a man who prayed every prayer. Prayer is very important because if your husband don't pray then you know your marriage is not going to work because he has to have that connection with Allah in order for things to work." Both of Haseena's marriages were predicated on her and her husbands' connection to Allah, through prayer and their shared spirituality. She tells me that for her the religion of Islam is what "constructs" her whole life. "Now, almost sixteen years later," she feels that the empty vessel of her body has

[271] Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*, 26.

been filled with the knowledge of Islam. She proclaims: "I could die tomorrow. Hopefully I'll die on my forehead"—meaning in prayer prostration.

For Haseena, Islam is a complete way of life, including marriage. She tells me, "So the next time I get married, I would like to marry into polygamy so that I could still have my freedom and be married at the same time." Haseena's tendency to seek out men who are already married does not reveal any reservations about the practice—an approach that Majeed categorizes as a "choice" marriage. The married women in this category, the wives, who are already married "decide to retain their husband even if the men choose to take additional wives."[272] Such decisions, according to Majeed, are made by the women by taking into account the Quran's discourse on the "the permissibility of multiple-wife marriages but without explicit conditions."[273] For Haseena, the mosque and the community have made possible a family and marriage by providing such conditions. Thus, "unity in Islam" of brotherhood and sisterhood, *ummah*, are central to her Islamic worldview.

In the framework of Islam, polygyny is permissible but does not give free rein to men. The rules, regulations, and responsibility which come with such unions are meant to curb the practice. The Quran allows men to marry up to four wives, *if* he is able to provide equity to them both in finances and in emotional support. The Quran states, "If you are afraid you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you shall not be able to deal justly [with them] only

[272] Majeed, *Polygyny: What it Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*, 38 -39.

[273] Ibid.

one."[274] Therefore, as noted by Rouse, monogamy is preferred.[275] As described by Esposito, equal support includes "separate housing, (depending on finances, a room, an apartment, or a house) and a maintenance."[276] Haseena, a woman who has studied the dictates of polygyny, interprets the Quran's statement to mean that polygyny is not for everyone: "And it is said [the Quran] that it is for some people, and not for others." She as a second wife finds the practice to be suitable for her needs, as she likes the freedom of being a part-time wife who also benefits from the title—which amongst Muslims, and particularly amongst African Americans as reported by Majeed, is one of respect and honor.[277] Thus for Haseena, polygyny makes available an opportunity to practice a major component of her faith (at least half her faith) and gain respect amongst a community which places great emphasis on marriage and family. However, as we will see in the next example, Rashida did not find polygyny appropriate for her needs.

In contrast, Rashida, a woman from the second-generation cohort, shares that her experience with polygyny was one of coercion, as her husband secretly planned to engage in polygyny and forced her to become part of such a union. The category of "coercion," as described by Majeed, covers cases in which the wives do not believe their husbands can "financially, emotionally or spiritually maintain multiple-wife households," and

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[274] Qtd. in Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, 95.

[275] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 66.

[276] Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, 95.

[277] Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands,* 45.

"have few if any options to leave unhealthful situations."[278] Rashida tells me that she found herself in such a union during her pregnancy and "hated the whole thing from the beginning":

> He asked me, [her husband] but I told him it wouldn't work. I told him not to do it. He did it anyway. He didn't have my blessing, so to speak. So I was upset about it and I was pregnant at the time so I really was very emotional. And I didn't like it and my baby passed, so I was very distraught and unhappy. [crying] And you know, I just—I thought I—I blamed her for a while. Because I just felt like I couldn't blame nobody else. You know? …Because if she hadn't come into the situation then maybe I wouldn't have—you know, it was just a lot of stuff.

Rashida's narrative conveys that her circumstances curtailed her ability and opportunity to contest her husband's decision to engage in a polygynous marriage. As an eight-months pregnant woman who was financially dependent on her husband, Rashida had little power to stand up to his abusive handling of the situation. She highlights why the marriage failed: "because we were living *together* in the *same house*." From Rashida's perspective, the error on her husband's part lay in his inability to provide two separate and equal households for her and her co-wife, as she was forced to live with the woman who she initially blamed for the loss of her unborn child.

Rashida's experience of coerced polygyny was a marriage of acceptance, not because of her preference for polygyny but because her circumstances pressured her to stay. However, a deeper analysis of Rashida's narrative reveals that although in a limited way, she *did* have the ability to exercise some components of her agency which are afforded by the dictates of Islam. Rashida tells me about her understanding of the practice: "whatever you do for one [wife], you have to do have to do for the other one";

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[278] Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*, 39.

as highlighted above, she also expected her husband to gain her permission or "blessing." Such empowerment for Rashida, and the other informants, comes from their religious authority, meaning their ability to read Islam for themselves and discern its implementation. Furthermore, such knowledge informs the women about their marital options and how they affect their piety. In other words, though it may be limiting, polygyny does not fully erase the agency of the women.

Notwithstanding her own negative and painful experience with polygyny, I notice that Rashida does not criticize Islam or the practice that she and her community have judged to be permissible. Instead, Rashida quickly points out other marriages where polygyny was a success, which she attributes to strong financial circumstances for the family involved who could afford to maintain dual and *equal* residences, a model which has normalized the practice. She shares about two of her friends married to the same brother: "They each have their own house, their own car, their own this—they have their—one works, one has their own business. They both have master's degrees. You know, they're educated women. And I like both of them for who they are." Rashida points to a friendship existing between the two co-wives who share the same spiritual space when attending the mosque and its affiliated events. She jovially describes the co-wives' relationship: "you know both of them get along very well. They communicate. They go places together, you know they even sometimes gang up on the husband." Rashida interprets polygyny as offering the possibility of agency and in the case of her friends, even empowerment—by ganging up on their husband. Thus, she reiterates the tension between, on the one hand, seeing polygyny as a pragmatic means by which African-America women may improve their circumstances while being true to their faith,

and on the other hand, acknowledging that those affected negatively by what Majeed would refer to as "marriages of coercion" find polygyny to be limiting and oppressive.

Another thought-provoking perspective on polygyny is that of the children who grow up in such households. Though Sister Leila did not fully disclose the situation firsthand during our interview, my conversation with her daughter, Aisha, provides insight from the perspective of a daughter of a woman living in polygyny. It must be noted that Leila's marital situation is not a secret, as all of her co-workers at the Islamic Academy where she teaches, one of whom I interviewed, are well aware of her circumstances. I also got the sense that such a marriage is not looked upon by her co-workers and community in an undesirable light—rather it is understood more as a nuisance that was forced upon Leila by her husband. Aisha, despite her condemnation of polygyny, does not seem to feel ashamed of the marital choices her mother and step-father have made. However, Aisha's firsthand account of a young woman growing up in a polygynous household assesses polygyny as harmful for all those involved. She tells me:

> It is common and my mother is in a—I guess, a polygamous marriage. My mother just has one co-wife. It is—in my opinion, I'm not a big fan of it because I feel like some people don't give each of the wives equal—I don't know how to say it. I guess just say, 'equality' or whatever. Some may favor one wife more than the other and there's no common 'equal-ness'. That's just me but lots of people prefer it. But like I said my mother is in one [polygynous marriage] with my step-father so he has two wives.

Growing up in and around her mother's turbulent marriage has left a bad taste in Aisha's mouth. This young woman seems well-versed on the issue beyond her mother's marriage as she also has friends who have been part of polygynous marriages. Her overall assessment of such unions is based on what she perceives to be unequal treatment,

physically and emotionally, of the co-wives. As a child, Aisha observed the favoritism her step-father showed toward her mother's younger co-wife and often found herself involved in their many disputes. For Aisha, there is no realistic or pragmatic way for a man to be able treat two women as equals in the context of polygyny.

Aisha reveals that initially, Leila's co-wife resided in Egypt and she felt the situation was fair and equitable. The trouble started once Leila's co-wife moved to the States, as the two women were forced to cohabitate for a period of time. Aisha is familiar with circumstances under which polygyny is allowed and the rights that must be extended to all those involved. Aisha reads the situation as such: "Just from things I see it feels like it would be—it's more of a hardship because you have to—it's recommended that if you take more than one wife each wife should have their own place. Each wife should have this and I feel like it would cause more financial struggle. Especially on the husband." For Aisha, the "hardship" started only when her mother and her co-wife were forced to live together. As Aisha makes clear, the issue in such an arrangement is that of finances and could be resolved if each of the women had their own residences, which they now do. Aisha tells me that she herself was married in her early twenties and is now divorced without any children, and finds herself living back at home with her mother and step-father. When asked if she would consider polygyny, Aisha was firm in her stance against it. For Aisha, the praxis of this particular component of her Islam is not conducive to her Islamic framework.

The story of Aisha and Leila highlights the profound influence the mosque and its affiliated communities can have on the formation of the Muslimas' religious framework and in turn their influence on their agency, as the mosque serves to validate *their*

interpretation of Islam. In the case of Leila and Haseena, the mosque community recognizes polygyny as a valid form of the actuation of their *deen*, and therefore makes available a pragmatic solution for these Muslimas' circumstances. In the case of Rashida, who was coerced into such a union, the mosque and the *deen* serve to empower her with the right "content" and "context" —thus providing a framework within which she can fight for her right to equity. For Rashida, besides the Quranic verses that make clear the rights afforded to her, the model as set by her community, the other women in polygynous marriages, defines the context in which polygyny is acceptable: in a two-household setup.

For the women who chose to embrace Islam, the mosque and those who practice the faith play a profound role in facilitating their transformation. For these Muslimas, the mosque is not merely a venue for the praxis of their individualized Islam—rather it is a living model that contributes greatly to their Islamic worldview. The mosque serves as a focal point of their religiosity; it is a point of convergence where each Muslima's Islamic permutation can be validated and actuated, thus giving them agency. For the Muslimas, such permutations have a profound effect on how they encounter the new worldview of Islam. For example, the embodiment of family life in Islam gives credence to the gender roles provided by the Quran and as modeled by the Prophet and his wives.[279] Such dictates, according to Rouse, are read by African-American women as:

> Extremely pragmatic about gender roles. If a woman needs to divorce, earn an income, protect her family and community, she simply does so. It is within this realm of pragmatism that Islamic gender roles make sense. Many converts want freedom from having to "do it all." They want relief from having to bring in an income and manage all domestic affairs. Many women

[279] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 57.

> would like men to have comparable desire for family stability, and if performing gender is the method to achieve that goal, so be it.[280]

For the women in this cohort as well as those in others, the pragmatism of Islam as it is spelled out in the Quran *and* as modeled by the Muslims vis-à-vis the mosque serves to empower them. Stepping into the new worldview of Islam compels them to negotiate an identity which validates their gender in the context of their religious framework. These permutations range from issues of gender segregation, to *hijab*, to polygyny—all gendered issues that must be negotiated by the indigenous Muslimas.

[280] Rouse, *Engendered Surrender*, 51.

Chapter VII

Interlude: Alternative Spaces and Sisterhood

The tapping on my car window in any other part of downtown Los Angles would have been cause enough to drive away fast as possible, except in this case it was my self-described "dervish-Sufi" friend Beverly who grinned as I got ready in my car for the *jummah* services at The Women's Mosque of America. To my astonishment, Beverly, behind her long red curls and flowing headscarf, was the second after me to arrive in the parking lot of the Pico-Project where the pop-up mosque would be holding its *jummah* on this very hot October day. "*Salam* Freeha!" she yelled. "*Salam*" I exclaimed back—whilst wondering to myself: how did the one woman who seemed the most skeptical about this new endeavor on the landscape of American Islam end up here? Just about two weeks earlier, Beverly had explained her reasoning for not wanting to pray in such a venue, laced with a bit of suspicion about the mosque:

> I [am] just not ready yet…I want to know why it was started before I start going. Whose idea was it? Why did the women have to go to that space? ...I just am old fashioned or traditional in that way, where I really believe a man should lead the *khutba*. From what I know, I don't think it's real—a real *jummah.* But, you know, I'm not God, and I don't know. But I like men. I like seeing men. I always have.

Beverly's suspicions and uncertainty were echoed by a few other women who had yet to get fully onboard with this new movement to provide an "alternative" space of worship for the many women feeling disillusioned and disenfranchised from their mosque and mosque communities.

Beverly waited for me to disembark from my car and gave me a big hug and a double kiss as she inquired how my trip and research were progressing—such warmth and welcome were something I was still learning to embrace as often I held myself so as not to seem "unprofessional." Beverly felt my hesitancy and chided me, reminding me that I should consider myself part of the community and should expect many more welcoming hugs. After a few minutes of chatting, we were met by another sister from the *masjid* who urged us to hurry on in. We checked in with the two female security guards and made our way into the historic building, which appears to be a former church or synagogue and is now a multi-faith cultural arts center. Tucked away on a tiny side street lined with lush avocado trees, west of the 110 freeway, it is a jewel of a building that had morphed into an Islamic oasis for the day. The concrete stairs leading up to the building led a mezzanine area where we removed our shoes; beyond it lay the prayer hall.

Having arrived early, I was hoping to catch a glimpse of what is required to set up the Women's Mosque of America, which had begun this monthly *jummah* service for women by women in the beginning of 2015. Upon entering the building, Beverly and I were greeted by a slew of signs indicating that photography and recording were prohibited. The visible presence of security, coupled with the signs, was a subtle reminder of the controversy and a few condemnations the endeavor had received upon its launch. I recalled reading various news articles on the praise and condemnation that the Women's mosque had received, with many questioning the validity of such an endeavor. After taking our shoes off, we walked into the main hall where a female crew was setting up the audio and recording of the *khutba*, which are made available on the project's website. Most amusing for me were the men's restroom doors which had been plastered

with a sign stating the obvious—"women also"—as this was a women's only event. As per the guidelines set up by the founders of this project, no men were on the premises; even the security was carried out by uniformed women.

As first-timers, Beverly and I with trepidation entered the deep, dark and cool prayer hall area, where we were met by several volunteers with a table full of Islamic literature, programming information and Halloween candy, along with a jack-o-lantern in a *hijab*. At the front of the room, the prayer area was framed with two-story-high vertical banners with Arabic calligraphy that hung from the ceiling to the floor. The deep maroon carpet was overlaid rows of beige cloth would serve as prayer rugs. Beverly coaxed me to join the prayer circle in the middle of the expansive prayer hall, where a group of women was already deep in recitation. I obliged and joined the ring of women, who were seated on the ground and reading passages from the Quran as they passed the holy text around. To my surprise, I found Dolores and exchanged *salams* with her as she submerged back deep into prayer.

After nearly half an hour of listening to the women's recitation of the Quran, I made my way toward the back of the hall where a crowd of women had gathered to greet each other. Here, I found Elinor, Henna, Amira and Fatima deliberating about the upcoming *khutba* by Najeeba, whose interfaith work had recently been featured on Oprah's network. In the corner I saw Tahzeeb sitting next to Henna's mother, Sister Zubeida, along with several other familiar faces from *Masjid Al-Noor*. This truly was astonishing, I thought, as the women's mosque was the one place where all the women of all the cohorts could come together with women of many other ethnicities, races and even

religions.[281] After more greetings and hugs, Henna and Amira introduced me to several other Black Muslimas, one of whom had driven up all the way from San Diego for this monthly gathering of spiritual seekers. The excitement and the energy, which permeated the room, reminded me of the Eid celebrations I had attended growing up. All of the women were simply joyous and excited to be here, which pleased me as well.

As the time approached for the *jummah* prayers to begin, I chose to melt away into one of the pews which had been pushed to the far left corner, while the women formed straight lines as they prepared to commence prayers. From my vantage point, I watched the space of this beautiful pop-up mosque fill up with women of all races, ethnicities, and ages. More striking than the women were the beautiful expressions of their cultures and permutations of Islam as expressed in their clothing, jewelry and head scarves, or the lack of the latter. An announcement was made by the organizers outlining the rules of this worship service. What struck me was their call for a non-dress code: the policy of this all-women's mosque requests the Muslimas to come as they are.[282] In awe of such a radically inclusive approach to Islam, I was compelled to move closer into the congregation, as I felt giddy and fascinated to be a part of this sweeping *jummah* service. The crescendo of activity was suddenly halted by the deep, soul-piercing call of the

[281] After the *jummah*, a woman introduced herself a Jew who wished to be part of the prayer and support the efforts of all of the women present. Given the openness of the mosque, such visitors are not uncommon; for example, I also met a female rabbi at a *jummah* service at BIC.

[282] The website states: "The Women's Mosque of America seeks to create a safe space for all women. We encourage all women to enter the mosque in the type and style of clothing in which they feel comfortable. Because we seek to create a welcoming and supportive environment, we ask that all of our congregants respect the decisions made by their sisters in Islam." The Women's Mosque of America Website, FAQ: <http://womensmosque.com/faq/>

adhan,[283] as a female voice called all to come and submit to Allah. It was Amira. Serving as the *muezzin*, prayer-caller, Amira stood in front of the congregation of over a hundred women and called out the *adhan*. I was struck by the splendor and distinctiveness of the moment—for me, it the first time I had ever heard the *adhan* in a female voice. I could not help but make a parallel between Amira, a Black Muslima and my first female *muezzin*, to Bilal ibn Rabah, an African companion of the Prophet who was the first *muezzin* of Islam, chosen by the prophet Mohammad himself to deliver the first ever *adhan*.[284] This profound and transcendent moment has stayed with me many months later, as I often contemplate its impact on *my primordial* connection to Islam.

After the *adhan*, Najeeba, the *khatibah* for the day, took the pulpit to deliver a moving and passionate *khutba* which highlighted the need for forgiveness, love and most importantly compassion. She began by sharing with the congregation that despite having spoken at numerous interfaith events, churches, synagogues, temples, and various other houses of worship, "This is the first time I have come home to speak!" Holding back her tears, she let out a cry full of joy, love and happiness before she continued: "This is the first I have spoken from the pulpit to my community!" Her exhilaration was met by the women in the audience with many *mashallah's*[285] and smiles. Najeeba then dove into her *khutba* by defining the "*ruh,*" the spirit. Najeeba explained that the *ruh* is encased in the

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[283] Call to prayer, called out by a muezzin or *muadhadhin*—a prayer-caller.

[284] Bilal, is an honored companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who threw off the shackles of slavery after hearing the message of Islam. He is one of the most significant figures and a close companions of the Prophet Muhammad. He is often identified and or appropriated by indigenous Muslims as an ancestor, who according to Curtis, is "an exemplary model for African-American identity." For more on Bilal and his impact of African-American heritage, see Curtis, Islam in Black America, pg 119 to 220.

[285] A phrase that conveys appreciation, joy, and praise of an event of that was just mentioned.

spirit of God when one is the mother's womb. She married this notion to the need for justice by stating: "We deserve to be in a life that is beautiful…we deserve to be in a country where BLACK LIVES MATTER!"[286] She asked:[287] "How do I restore and how do I view my body and your body as sacred…how do we work toward a society where women's BODIES are not an interruption to society, where woman's bodies are not policed, where women's bodies in their homes should be safest…when we know that the most unsafe of a woman's body is often in her own home…what does that say about our remembrance of the sacred?"

She went on to ask the audience to contemplate "restorative love" and the Prophet's definition of "strength" as lying in self-control rather than in controlling other human bodies. She finished the first part of her *khutba* by sharing about the dissolution of her marriage. Najeeba choked up as she described how she and her husband came together to dissolve their seventeen-year marriage by using restorative mediation and love. She told the audience that they too will face difficult decisions, and they will require mercy and love. At that moment, I noticed nearly all of the women crying along with Najeeba. A layer of silence overtook the room as everyone took a moment to let Najeeba catch her breath while contemplating their own pain and struggles. I found myself wiping away tears as the holy sisterhood overtook the space of the makeshift prayer hall. At that moment, I sat among the American *ummah* profoundly moved by and in awe of the sisterhood of these women, who had not only invited me in but had wholeheartedly welcomed me into their hearts and houses of spirituality.

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[286] For a full audio of Najeeba's *khutba*, I invite you to listen on iTunes.

[287] Paraphrase and direct quotes from the audio of her khutba.

After the conclusion of the most profound, vibrant and riveting *khutba* that I have ever experienced, the audience met Najeeba with a standing ovation, as she shouted *Takbeer!*[288] *Takbeer!* With great joy and strength, the women roared back, *Takbeer! Takbeer!* The congregation of women then lined up side by side to make their *jummah* prayer. Amira once again approached the microphone and called the *adhan*, asking all to come and submit to Allah. In the quiet space of this little forgotten corner of downtown Los Angeles, over a hundred women made their *jummah* prayers according to all the appropriate prescriptions of Islam. Afterwards, the women hugged, kissed and rejoiced over the achievement of this distinctive occasion.

While mosque hopping across Southern California for nearly a month, I had become aware of the importance of the Women's Mosque to my informants. Though I had heard of the project via social media and other news outlets, I had not anticipated that this particular venue would be such a dynamic and salient theme in the spiritual lives of my informants of Southern California. In almost all of my interviews, the women recommended that I attend *jummah* at the Women's Mosque of America. It was, as my informants described it, an "alternative" space that had been carved out nearly a year earlier by two young immigrant Muslimas and which solely accommodated women. The aim of the mosque, as described by the women, was to uplift women facing disenfranchisement from their mosques. It is a mosque for women by women that congregates once a month to quench Muslimas' thirst for a spiritual connection with their God, a connection which is often compromised by the usual tensions surrounding gender and race in most mainstream American mosque spaces.

[288] "God is great," or "God is the greatest." It is a common Islamic Arabic expression, which in the context of formal prayer is used for the call to prayer.

For all of my informants, this alternative space of worship affords them equity in their pursuit of religious piety. This equity at times means something simple as having the right to enter through the same entrance as men and pray side by side to the same Allah, and most importantly it means having equal access to their imam—a word that technically means "in front of," not "leader." The Women's Mosque of America, along with other similar alternative spaces, seem to take an intersectional approach in an effort to include all marginalized groups within the traditional patriarchal structure of the mosque. For my informants who attended this *jummah* service, the mosque provides a way they can come together as Muslim sisters within the *ummah* and transgress the boundaries of an ethnocentric Islam which has alienated many of the indigenous Muslimas and has disempowered the Muslimas at large. In my observations, in the space of the Women's Mosque of America, all of the women came to the altar of equality to seek out gender justice. It is a space safe from patriarchy, gender discrimination, and their related battles—all of which the women could leave behind as they congregated in this newfound sacred space. A trend toward such female-friendly, alternative spaces is slowly emerging on the Western Islamic landscape.[289] The need for these spaces, as discussed in the previous chapters, highlights the empowerment and agency African-American women have found in their mosques.

Some of the crucial contributing factors are highlighted in the documentary "Unmosqued," which also addresses the issue of women and the younger generations of Muslims feeling disillusioned with and disenfranchised from their mosque and mosque communities. Some of the reasons for the alienation as cited by the film parallel my

[289] A women-led mosque opened in Denmark in the beginning of January 2016. There are also plans for such a venture in the UK as well as discourse on the issue in most Western nations.

informants' concerns about lack of gender parity, racism, and lack of friendliness—all of which serve to hinder their engagement and in turn their spiritual growth.

During our interview, Dolores opined on the appeal of the Women's Mosque for immigrant Muslimas in particular: "That's an empowerment thing. I think that the immigrant women who go, it's refreshing to them because they don't have the kind of engagement in the religious life of their communities so much because it's the men who run them and their lives. So they feel good going there." In regards to the indigenous Muslima, Dolores highlighted the variegated reaction that the Women's Mosque had garnered at her mosque, *Masjid Al-Noor*: "They're kind of split. Some will say, 'Well, why do we need to go there? We have a place to pray. We have a *masjid*.' Some will say, 'We want to have some kind of solidarity with the women who are doing this.'" Based on Dolores's description of the Women's Mosque, I understood it to be seminal, formidable, pluralistic, vibrant, empowering, refreshing, engaging, freeing, harmonious, cohesive, divinatory, prophetic and, most importantly, divinely inspiring. At the *jummah* service on October 30, 2015 at the Women's Mosque, I perceived all these qualities. Dolores' support of this new, dynamic mosque adds to her *dawa* efforts along with enhancing her piety. In addition, it is a way for her to endow another generation of Muslimas with religious agency in the space of the mosque.

Elinor tells me that she was "very ambivalent about the new endeavor at first," as she believes that "men need to hear what women have to say." However, after attending a service, she became a supporter. Supporting the mosque came to seem a natural path, an approach that I find to be reflective of that of her cohort:

> My generation of women, I mean we, we have our own issues, especially African-American, we're more…assertive. But we've had a bigger role in our communities, too. Big difference! Much

> bigger role than immigrant women have. So when this happened I was like, "Oh, I kind of get it, I know that—they're [the two young immigrant women who founded the mosque] just fed up and they don't see any progress coming in their lifetime and they're young, so they should do it." So I went. And I was very impressed because they were talking about issues that [relate to]—sexual abuse, domestic violence and stuff like that—which were more appropriate in an all-women's setting.

As a mother of two daughters and as a role model for the community, Elinor acknowledges the value in such an alternative, safe space, where women can gather, be empowered, and find emancipation within pure Islamic knowledge—just as she and others from her cohort have been able to do via their own spiritual trajectory. Furthermore, for Elinor *and* Dolores, the determination to serve as bridges to a younger generation of Muslimas—both indigenous and immigrant—is a testament to their desire for the uplift of their sisters of the *ummah,* an *ummah* they have worked hard to help create.

In an example of contributing to the *ummah*, Elinor tells me that she herself served as a *khatibah* at the Women's Mosque, in August of 2015. She shared with me her written *khutba*, entitled "The Legacy of the Wives of the Prophet." Elinor describes it as being "about re-evaluating the wives of the prophet," which she believes will lead to a better understanding of "the heart of women's role in Islam."[290] She makes clear in her presentation that the *khutba* is "not about polygamy."[291] For Elinor, the wives of the Prophet serve as empowering role models for all women to "go out into the world and speak up, to a world that desperately needs our voices."[292] In preparation for the *khutba*, Elinor spent many sleepless nights evaluating and re-evaluating the sources—she tells

[290] See Appendix for a full text of Elinor's khutba, published with her permission.

[291] Ibid.

[292] Ibid.

me, "my mind was just on fire!" For Elinor, the trial and tribulation required to deliver such a profound and dynamic *khutba* for the Women's Mosque yet again served to engage her *nafs* and in turn enhance her Islam, and re-educated her about her *deen.*

In an effort similar to those of Dolores and Elinor, Sister Joyce from Bakersfield runs a non-profit, Muslim Women's Association that she hopes will provide an alternative to the immigrant-controlled patriarchal mosques of Bakersfield. During our interview, she explained that her aim is to provide a safe and nurturing space for girls and women. While she was describing her non-profit, I could not help but conjure up images of the various Sister Clara Mohammad Schools and Muslim Girls Training (MGT) schools I had studied and heard of throughout my many conversations, as they also seemed to be spaces dedicated to women's empowerment. When probed, Sister Joyce affirmed that these schools are exactly what she had sought to parallel:

> It was parallel to that [MGT]. It was all of my experience that I had in those other *masjids* that I brought to that organization, to keep it going, to get Islam to our children and our families and to have a place for Muslim women, who are *so oppressed* here, to go and to be, you know. You know what I didn't realize is that there is a lot of domestic violence in the immigrant Muslim community. It's a lot of domestic violence going on, you know, women actually didn't have places to go to talk about things that were happening to them and, you know, a lot of the Muslim women despised the fact that their, their husbands were selling…alcohol and pork, but they were living in mansions as a result of it. I asked one woman…"Why are you praying so [hard]?" She says, "You know, I want Allah to forgive me for accepting the money that my husband makes."

For Sister Joyce, the need to educate all Muslim women is her *dawa*. She shares an African proverb with me: "from our African ancestry, it says 'the hand that rocks the cradle rules the nation.'" Sister Joyce explains the meaning of this proverb as giving importance to the education of women as mothers; as they are the one's raising the future

leaders of a community and a nation. Based on this need for women's education, Sister Joyce supports alternative spaces for the Islamic enrichment of all Muslimas, and she also believes that the perception of this need drives the higher-than-usual engagement of African-American women within the mosque.[293]

Sisterhood

Accentuating the discourse on alternative spaces such as the Women's Mosque of America, I posit that the success of such a visionary endeavor is predicated on the *ummah* sisterhood. In other words, I have found that like the gender *jihad* and gender justice movements, as discussed by Karim and Wadud, the *ummah* sisterhood has as a central component the African-American Muslimas' primordial inclinations toward Islam. I surmise that it is within this *ummah* sisterhood that the women find strength—a conduit of which at times are the mosque and its affiliated communities. In addition, I have noted that this sisterhood is more than a form of "holy protest," a fight against patriarchy, racialized hegemony, and other injustices—rather it is about notions of Black consciousness and a need for the women to actuate their Islam, as they interpret it, in a feminine encounter. It is, as Wadud argues in *Gender Jihad*, a feminine approach to Islam. For the indigenous Muslima, it is not a binary opposite of the male reading of Islam; rather it is an alternative which seeks to complement what is already in existence. It is a method in which discursive avenues can lead to a better understanding of not only

[293] In the middle of February, I was saddened to learn that Sister Joyce returned to the ancestors a few weeks before the finalization of this project, which she was the first to support. Despite this loss, based on my communications with several of the Muslimas in Bakersfield, I have hope that Sister Joyce's vision for a more inclusive and just space for *all* Muslima will come to fruition.

a gendered reading of Islam but, I argue, shed light as well on a racialized Islam that for far too long has been monopolized and dominated by the immigrants of various nations.

The American mosque is a space for the vulnerable and the empowered. It is a space where the younger generation seeks to be validated with an American identity that is just as authentic as their Islamic identity. For the second and third generations of indigenous Muslimas, their Islamic worldview is that of the American diaspora. Their approach to every aspect in life, including their Islam, finds its genesis in notions of equity. Miss Sana, for example, the founder of the Women's Mosque of America, is not seeking to butt heads against the patriarchy or fight against male-dominated mosques; she is simply using her religious education and rights to the best of her ability to fill the gap after she and her sisters of the *ummah* have been robbed of their basic rights to Islamic enlightenment. From my point of view, it is a *jihad* that the indigenous Muslimas have long been part of—begun the moment they encountered immigrant Muslims or perhaps surrendered to Islam.

The women's narratives reveal their strength and sisterhood, which go beyond alternative venues such as the Women's Mosque. In the case of Tahzeeb, it is a sisterhood among whom she found allies and supporters who helped bury her son after the mosque denied him a Muslim burial, or *jinazah,* because no man was willing to pray over the body of a son who had committed suicide. Tahzeeb tells me: "When my son died, people moved away from me in droves. Well, my friends didn't." After her friends found a way to bury Tahzeeb's son, the mosque community saw the actions, according to Tahzeeb, as "these pushy women usurping the roles of men!" At one of the most crucial moments of her life, her sisters of the *ummah* came together, stood with her in the face of

the male-dominated leadership who refused to acknowledge a mother's need to bury her son, and carried her pain.

The sisterhood of the *ummah* is also an alternative to the hegemonic control of the immigrant *and* indigenous Muslim men, who fail to recognize the need for women to be just as enlightened about their *deen* as their male counterparts. For African-American women, operating in a context within which they are fully imbued with agency is a norm and hence not a right which they are willing to leave at the entrance of the mosque. Where men deny women agency by conflating the "meanings" of the sources with cultural norms, the sisterhood responds by arming women with knowledge. As the women have told me, *they know their Islam*—they have a pure knowledge of their *deen* which is not conflated with any cultural baggage. It is a form of worship which is directly linked to the Quran and other sources.

For the indigenous Muslima in America, the notion of succumbing to the culture of others' Islam is simply not an option. When Tahzeeb was denied a Muslim burial for her son, she asked, "Show it to me in the Quran" that women cannot go to a burial. Until Tahzeeb asked me to show her where the Quran barred women from funerals, I had never even questioned the custom of excluding them. For me it was an accepted fact that this exclusion was a religious prohibition. This is a primary example of how culture is often conflated with religion and can become toxic instead of an elixir.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion: Third Generation

Most African-American women tell me that the reason African-American women are more engaged in the mosque has something to do with their history of being involved in the church—this is their culture and heritage. However, my research has shown that in contrast to this "culture," there is a counter-movement, for lack of a better word. The women do not belong to a mosque; they do not go to just one space of worship. They mosque hop, rotate, and absorb many cultures and contribute to the cultures of those mosques. In Boston, BIC, the large mega-mosque, is the anchor of the Muslim community; however, the indigenous Muslims are most likely to be affiliated with one of the small mainstay Black mosques. In the case of *Masjid* Bilal, it is a former NOI temple which follows the teachings of W. D. Muhammad and is a female-friendly space. It is accommodating to all but is mostly an indigenous space where I observed an influx of immigrants, both African and South Asian, becoming more prevalent. For most major events, like Eid, even many who have even grown up in such communities find themselves wanting to be at BIC, so as to be amongst a bigger community. Rashida grew up in Atlanta in a large mosque community; for her BIC best reflects that background. Jamillah grew up going to Mecca of America in Detroit and "belongs" to *Masjid* Bilal but for bigger holidays, she and her children go to BIC.

Haseena, who is now seeking out a third polygynous marriage, will mostly likely rotate through various mosques and consult imams who will facilitate such a union. She

may end up attaching to that mosque for a while; however, she does and will probably continue to mosque hop. For Sister Leila, who lives an equal distance from BIC, *Masjid Al-Islam* and a small *Masallah*, there is no shortage of mosques. She is a first-generation Muslima who knows the community well. She and her mother and daughter are the bedrock of all of the above-mentioned mosques. Sister Leila teaches at BIC and spends most of her time there, for both work and prayer. She shared that she has buried two sons in the last five years and is more active in her faith than ever before. For her, the mosque is her support system. It augments her family and provides her the social nexus needed for a women deeply entrenched in the *salafi* permutation of Islam. For Zoe, the journey into Islam has just begun, and it was launched at BIC. She is expecting her first child as her husband is finishing up graduate school at MIT. For the women who convert to Islam, the mosque plays a functional role which roots them in the *ummah*.

For the women of the first generation, those who embraced Islam via the NOI, the initial attraction to embrace Islam lay in notions of identity and social justice. By protesting against mainstream society, the women found access to an identity that "was more dignified than being a 'Negro' in America."[294] Or as Beverly so vividly and painfully narrates for me:

> And when I grew up—we were living in an all-white neighborhood, the African-American family—and even though my father was a medical professor, I was—I felt inferior. I was called nigger and lots of other names, and I wasn't quite sure how to fight back, even though my mom would say, "sticks and stones break your bones and names can't hurt me," they still did!

Islam empowered Beverly and the women of the first generation to fight back and transform themselves in the eyes of Allah and society at large. It was an avenue

[294] Elinor.

into an *ummah*, a community of believers, whose tenets they believed to be divinely predicated on racial and gender equality.

For the first generation, the mosque and its affiliated community provided a novel and functional space which they fashioned in their own image and understanding of orthodox Islam. Guided by W. D. Muhammad, the women of the first generation transitioned to orthodox Islam and found the space of the *masjid* to not only be a profoundly spiritual but also a nurturing conduit which empowered the women toward a deeper understanding of their *deen*. This in turn afforded the women agency to read their Islam in the manner they deemed most fit—an endeavor which they to this day strive to perfect.

However, as the women tell me, their surrender to Islam was not predicated on a shedding of their heritage, which for all of the women is a source of pride. All of the women speak about the role they as African-American women have played in the creation of this country. Thus, for these African-American women, becoming Muslim did not alter who they fundamentally were. They belong to a history of women who had stood side by side and picked cotton in the fields, worked harder than any man, marched with the men, built the church, built the Nation and now will not be stopped from building the *masjid*—or barred from practicing their faith within it.

The women of the first cohort tell me that they came into Islam with "rose-colored glasses"[295] hoping to find the equity that American society denied them amongst their Muslim brethren. However, the promise of the ideals of the *ummah* as laid out in the Quran, *hadiths* and the Prophet's last sermon, which they

[295] Elinor.

imagined to be universal, were not. Their encounter with immigrant Muslims exposed them to yet another force of racism, sexism and classism. What for the indigenous Muslimas was meant to be an "answer" to their issue of identity—Islam—was already an established and perfunctory component of the immigrant Muslim identity. This clash in approaches to Islam contributed to the alienation and disillusionment of the indigenous Muslimas, who found themselves gravitating toward mosques which were predominantly Black—those under the guidance of W. D. Muhammad—and more women-friendly.

Whereas the first generation had to build their *deen* and mosques from the ground up, the second generation found within these mosques a true Islamic home. The second-generation Muslimas are the first cohort of African Americans to grow up saturated in the tenets of orthodox Islam in the diaspora of America—an *ummah* that is distinctively their very own and serves to authenticate their Muslim identity. This identity, I propose, is predicated on and a function of the mosque and its affiliated community, which have endowed the second generation Muslima with Islamic authority. The *masjid* for the second generation is the nucleus of their Islam and praxis within it, the backbone of their identity. The narratives of the second-generation Muslimas point to the mosque as an agentive space where they are liberated to practice *their* Islam in the way they deem most virtuous. It is a space where the intersectionality of being a woman, Black and Muslim in the context of America can be negotiated with agency.

For the women who choose to surrender to Islam, the third cohort, the mosque plays an imperative and concentric role in their religious trajectory—most

often it is where their journey into Islam begins. For the women of this cohort, stepping into the "worldview" of Islam is often a time filled with anxiety and confusion; hence the mosque and its affiliated communities emerge as a vital conduit through which the Muslima can negotiate an agentive identity. As the women tell me, the mosque and those who practice the faith play a profound role in facilitating their transformation. For these Muslimas, the mosque is not merely a venue for the praxis of their individualized Islam—rather it is a living model which contributes immensely to their Islamic worldview. The mosque serves as a point of convergence where a Muslima can convene a framework that merges her newfound *deen* and its actuation into a permutation that has a profound effect on how she encounters the new worldview of Islam.

For the women in this cohort as well as those in others, the pragmatism of Islam as it is spelled out in the Quran *and* as modeled by the Muslims in the mosque serves to empower them. Stepping into the new worldview of Islam compels them to negotiate an identity that validates their gender in the context of their religious framework. These permutations range from issues of gender segregation, to *hijab*, to polygyny—all gendered issues that must be negotiated by the indigenous Muslimas.

How a Muslima of the third generation encounters the mosque and the *ummah* of America stands in stark difference to the experiences of any of the other cohorts. Zunida, an eighteen-year-old Muslima who was born and raised in my hometown of Bakersfield, reveals to me that her relationship with the mosque was less complicated than that of most of the other women I interviewed. She tells me that the mosque has "had a pretty positive impact on [her] view of Islam."

After leaving the Women's Mosque of America in downtown Los Angeles, I drove a hundred miles north to Bakersfield to pick up Zunida so she could illuminate for me over dinner her understanding of and approach to Islam and the *masjid*. Mona, Zunida's mother, whom I had interviewed earlier, had already provided me with great insight into the history of her family and of the evolution of the mosque communities of Bakersfield. However, I was eager to learn from Zunida, who is Harvard-bound, about her experiences of growing up in the very dense and diverse Islamic community of Bakersfield.

Zunida's holistic approach to Islam suggests that the essence of her relationship with the mosque and its affiliated community lies in the ideals of the *ummah*. She tells me that her Islam is not attached to any cultural baggage, and hence is "pure in its natural state." Zunida's strong sense of her Islamic identity, she tells me, is predicated on her upbringing in orthodox Islam which she explains as: "basically, [we] prescribed everything that's in the Quran, and that's how we try to implement those ideals into our lifestyle…we don't like prescribe to any sect or anything like that, we're just Muslims." She goes on to say that "technically, we'd say we're Sunni, but that's just technical."

When asked to describe why she goes to the mosque, Zunida tells me that for her the *masjid* is more than "a place of worship"—rather it is "an extension of God and... it's like his home." Furthermore, it is a place where she feels the "abundance" of God's "ambiance and aura," which is full of "love and tranquility." It is a space where she can "seek counsel from Allah," and "stepping

into the *masjid* automatically just makes [her] feel better," as it is where she can find "peace." Zunida clarifies that though God is everywhere, in the *masjid*:

> it just seems like his presence is so strong but I think because we're—because we practice so much there, like Islam, whereas Islam isn't practiced that much outside maybe of the *masjid*. Like just the Islamic presence and like environment is strong in the *masjid* so that, I don't know, when I go there I just seek, I seek like this sense of family and this—and just worship and peace and happiness. So that's what I try to get from there.

The mosque as experienced by Zunida is a very different locus than it is for any of her predecessors, including her mother, Mona. For Zunida, it is less complicated. Her upbringing in the mosque has produced an identity and experience that are not only assured but also reflective of the global *ummah*, which can be found in her mosque. For Zunida, being around Muslims does not limit her to any particular race or ethnicity. Given the very diverse nature of Bakersfield's Muslim community, Zunida has always grown up around the Muslims of the world and feels just as at home amongst the immigrant Muslim community as she does amongst African Americans.

Furthermore, for Zunida, who has chosen to wear the *hijab*, the dictates of Islam are not restrictive or inequitable. Rather, from Zunida's vantage point, Islam is a universal faith, as most of her friends are immigrant Muslims. Unlike her mother, Zunida has found the mosque to be a peaceful and friendly space:

> But ultimately, I'm still an African-American woman…. I think, one of the things that is really impactful—as to why, African Americans are so, active in their community—I think it's because for most African Americans, unless their parents are African, they have some kind of culture attached to that, ours is learning Islam from, from scratch. There's no like, culture that's mixed in, it's Islam pure in its natural state. So there's nothing, there's no fight between culture and Islam. It's just Islam…I guess—hopefully, ideal—ideally, in its purest form. And I think

> that that's why people are like *deen* and the *iman* and the religion is strong, and that zeal and that zest to do right by God. You know? It's not just like—some people—religion is, is just like their *culture*. It's not something that they practice but, it's just been passed down. But to—Islam to them, it's a way of life. And so I think that's the biggest difference and I think that's the most impacting thing and the biggest difference between American Muslims—specifically African-Americans—and people that have—the religion is like embedded in their culture and that's all it is to them.

Zunida's articulation of what her Islam means to her and her community are an impeccable assessment, in my opinion, of the approach that is taken by African-American Muslimas. Islam for the women, just like Zunida, is not a given part of their identity—it is something they have consciously chosen to embrace. As Zunida narrates, Islam for her, in its purest form is a source of happiness, strength, identity, enlightenment, confidence and as an "ultimate minority," it is her *deen* that gives her strength and uplift against her daily struggles.

Echoing, Zunida's, narrative, I pose that Islam and its praxis are not a compartmentalized faith in the context of America. I can anecdotally state that in a country such as Pakistan, where I am from and lived for a part of my life and often visit, Islam is for many an ignored yet constant part of the daily routine. In Pakistan, the praxis of Islam is just that—perfunctory acts. In America, though, Islamic actuation or praxis is the result of a conscious effort which requires the practitioner to "go all in." This is how the indigenous Muslimas surrender to Islam: with a fully conscious submission. As the women tell me, it is a daily breath to breath part of their lives.

Appendices

Appendix A: Mosque Profiles

New England

In the New England area, where I have been residing for the past 7 years, the chain of referrals led me to concentrate on three particular mosques. Besides the mosques listed below, I did attend sporadic jummah services in other locations, however all of my participants were concentrated in the following houses of worship.

1) ***Masjid Al-Noor*** is predominantly an African-American mosque, with a congregation of nearly 200 Sunni Muslims who are led by Imam Talib. It was founded in the 1930's as Nation of Islam Temple 11 and moved to its current day location of Dorchester in 1958. Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan have both been known to have taught at this temple. Starting in 1975, under the guidance W. D. Muhammad, the community transitioned into Sunni Islam and follow the teachings of the Quran. Today the mosque has no ties to NOI. The main prayer hall faces mecca with men in the front and women in the back, there is no partition between the genders and weekly Jummah prayers along with activities are held on a regular basis.
2) ***Masjid Al-Islam***, a predominantly African-American mosque which is currently led by Imam Abdullah. The Society for Islamic Brotherhood (S.I.B.), the organization that sponsors the Mosque of *Al-Islam*, was formed in the 1950s. It is one of the oldest continuously operating mosques in Boston. From 1980-1983 the mosque supported a full-time Islamic primary school (*Al-Azhar*). The mosque has 3 floors and the genders are segregated, with the

women on the second floor and the men on the third. The imam leads the services on the third floor and a live feed of his khutba are shown on a flat screen in the women's section of the mosque.

3) ***Boston Islamic Center***, BIC, is a diverse mosque that I will categorize as an "immigrant mosque," despite being in the historically African-American area of Roxbury. It is situated on Malcolm X Boulevard and is the largest mosque in the New England area and the second largest in the East Coast. Currently Shaykh Yasir Fahmy leads the congregation, however in the past, other prominent national figures such as Imam Shuab Webb have served the spiritual needs of BIC. The mosque's expansive prayer hall can accommodate 1200 men and 400 women. There is no partition between the genders, however due to the size of the congregation and expansiveness of the prayer hall, it is a bit difficult for the women to feel intimate or have access to the imam. Besides offering prayer services, this Islamic Center offers primary education in its Malik Academy, housed in it upper floors, along with many other social and community services.

Southern California

California is the most populace state in union with no one racial or ethnic group being represented as the majority, thus it is often referred to as a majority-minority state. As a native of Southern California, I utilized existing, social and professional networks to recruit informants and potential participants. These efforts led me as far north as Bakersfield, my hometown, and as far south as San Diego, where I attended

undergraduate school. Listed are just a few of the mosques where most of my informants chose to engage themselves.

1) ***Masjid Al-Noor****, was founded nearly thirty years ago by an assemblage of* African-American Muslim families who envisioned a mosque to serve all Muslims in the community. Initially founded for and by a group of core African-American families, who broke off from *Masjid Daud* due to geographical needs, the *masjid* now serves people of all walks of life. Situated north of Pasadena, and east of Los Angeles, the mosque serves all Muslims from the surrounding area. One of the founding members of the *masjid* now defines the mosque as being a "traveler's mosque,"—this engenders the mosque to host a large *jummah* congregation of mostly immigrant muslim men who work in the surrounding areas, while housing the "core founding members" and their offspring as the consistent residential congregants. Overall, this mosque can be categorized as an African-American mosque, however there seems to be steady flow of immigrants whose families have slowly incorporated themselves into this muslim community.

2) ***The Women's Mosque of America,*** is what I will refer to as a pop up mosque, which is serves female congregants of all races. This mosque has no permanent location and holds jummah prayers once a month in various rented locations. The mosque's website describes the following description:

> The Women's Mosque of America seeks to uplift the Muslim community by empowering women and girls through more direct access to Islamic scholarship and leadership opportunities. The

> Women's Mosque of America provides a safe space for women to feel welcome, respected, and actively engaged within the Muslim Ummah. It complements existing mosques, offering opportunities for women to grow, learn, and gain inspiration to spread throughout their respective communities.
>
> The Women's Mosque of America provides women-led Friday jumma'a services for women and children (including boys 12 and under) once a month in Southern California. In addition, the Women's Mosque of America provides programming, events, and classes open to both men and women that aim to increase community access to female Muslim scholars and female perspectives on Islamic knowledge and spirituality.

3) ***Islamic Center,*** is also known as the "Ming mosque," as it is situated on Ming Avenue in Bakersfield, California.

4) ***Al Farooq Islamic Center,*** also known as the Kentucky mosque, is situated on Kentucky Boulevard in Bakersfield, California. Originally built as a bank in the late 1940s or early 1950s, the local Muslim community bought the space from Bank of America in the mid-1990s.

Appendix B: *Khutba* by Elinor

Khutbah: **"The Legacy of the Wives of the Prophet"**
Khateebah: Gail Kennard
Women's Mosque of America, August 28, 2015

As-Salaam-Alaikum

Adhan

Bismillah nir Rahman nir Raheem

Al-hamdu lillah, ahmaduhu wa asta'eenuhu wa astah deehi, wa astaghfiruhu

Wa ash hadu allaa ilaaha illaah wah dahuu laa shareeka lahuu

Wa ash hadu anna Muhammadan Abduhu wa rasuuluh

ALL PRAISE IS DUE TO ALLAH

I PRAISE ALLAH. I SEEK THE ASSISTANCE OF ALLAH. I ASK FOR ALLAH'S FORGIVENESS.

I BEAR WITNESS THAT THERE IS NO DEITY BUT ALLAH THE ONE, ALLAH HAS NO ASSOCIATES

AND I BEAR WITNESS THAT MUHAMMAD IS THE SERVANT AND MESSENGER OF ALLAH

What a blessing to be here in this place in this time! Alhamdulillah. I feel the love in this room and I am truly humbled and grateful. So I will begin---

I want to talk about a topic that I was uncomfortable thinking about and that I avoided for a very long time --- the wives of the Prophet (SAW). I was uncomfortable because when you talk about the wives of the Prophet you have to confront the issue of polygamy.

Maybe some of you are like me. I could relate to the story of the Prophet's wife, Khadijah, Lady Khadijah, as she is called. It's a great story, especially for women. Khadijah is a wealthy woman who has a prosperous trading business. She is independent, previously married with children, no current husband. She hires Muhammad ibn Abdullah to work in her business. She admires his character, turns down marriage proposals from other men with more wealth than the young Muhammad, and she asks Muhammad who is 15 years younger, to marry her. She is about 40 years old. How empowering is that! We know that story, and we can embrace it. We love that story. Muhammad and Khadijah are married for 15 years, have six children, and then the Prophet receives the first revelation. When the Prophet comes down from Mount Hira after his encounter with the Angel Jibril, he first went home to his wife, Khadijah. He is shaking, and she wraps him in a blanket. She comforts him. He doubts himself and what has happened to him, but she is the one who believes in him. She becomes the first person to bear witness to the Message and become Muslim.

But then several years later Khadijah dies. The Prophet and the early Muslims are under enormous threat from the Meccans. The Prophet has been publicly spreading the Message, and the Quraish, the main tribe in Mecca, are not happy. Things get really tough.

But then the Prophet proceeds to marry one woman after another. He marries the first two wives in the same month! This is where I would quickly skip over those ayats in the Qur'an that talked about those other women. How could this happen? How could this man who I saw as the most generous, supportive husband, all of the sudden in my mind morph into this man with an entire harem of women. That did not make sense to me.

Perhaps some of you felt the same way. Polygamy is a concept that is foreign to my upbringing. Isn't it so totally oppressive to women? And the Prophet, our dear, gentle Prophet takes multiple wives? The concept just did not match my perception of the Prophet's character as I saw it.

I heard the arguments that the Prophet took these wives to forge political alliances. That made sense. He was building the Ummah, the Muslim community, in a hostile world, he needed help. But what about these women? Were their lives sacrificed for this greater good? How unfair to them, I thought.

Then I decided I needed to go to the text, I needed to go to the Qur'an itself. Surely there is an answer for this whole question about polygamy. Right? Doesn't Allah tell us in the 2nd Surah, Suratul Baqara

Thal likal kitabul la rayba feehi hudan lilmutaqeen [Surah 2:2]

This is the Book in it is guidance sure, without doubt, for those who fear Allah (those who are God conscious)

Surely, the text could provide answers to this discomfort I was feeling. I needed guidance.

So I went to Surah Al-Azhab, Surah 33, which talks about and to the Prophet's wives. What I found is what I will share with you today. You can decide if what I am about to say makes sense to you or not. And I pray that Allah will excuse me for any of my errors and protect us all from anything that I might say that is incorrect. My hope is that it will promote dialogue about the wives of the Prophet. One caveat, one alert at the outset---what I will share is not about polygamy. As I learned more, it became clear to

me there is a message here that goes way beyond the issue of polygamy, way beyond. It goes to the heart of women's role in Islam.

So let's start with the historical record. I knew from the history that none of the women who married the Prophet after Khadijah bore him children. We know that many of these women had children from previous marriages. They were widows because their husbands had been martyred in the battles or they had been divorced, sometimes because they or their families accepted Islam and their husbands did not. We know that they were capable of having children. And as I said, the Prophet had six children with his first wife, Khadijah, so we know he was fertile. But only one wife after Khadijah, Maryam, had children with the Prophet, and their son, Ibrahim, died as an infant. So none of the other wives after Khadijah had biological children by the Prophet who survived infancy.

We know from Qur'an that the Prophet had intimate relations with these wives, and that he was encouraged to keep them satisfied [33:51]. But no children were born. Doesn't that seem a little odd? No children. All these women and none had children?

That's what we know historically. So perhaps Allah is calling these women to do something different. They are not to be the mothers of the biological children of the Prophet. That was not the purpose of the marriages. So now we turn to what the Qur'an has to say. In Qu'ran, they are called the "Mothers of the Believers" [33:6].

OK. So no children. But what does being a "Mother of the Believers" mean?

Here is the very interesting part. Qur'an says to these women in Surah 33: 32

And Allah speaks to them directly:

Ya nisaa alnnabyyi lastunna kaahadin minalnisaa

O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any of the other women. This is clear: The wives of the Prophet are not like any other women. The verse continues, in English translation:

If you do fear Allah, be not too complaisant, soft, of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire. But speak a speech that is just. [33:32]

Allah is telling them not only to speak, but when they speak, to not speak softly, to speak up!

But what are they supposed to speak up about?

Well, then the Qur'an says that the wives are to stay quietly in their homes and not make a display of themselves, not to flaunt their beauty or status, so to speak. Again in the English translation, "*like that of the former Times of Ignorance; and establish regular prayer, give regular charity, and obey Allah and his Messenger. And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.* [33:33]

THEN if you read the next ayat [33:34] it says to them, the wives---Allah is still speaking directly to them. We know this because Qur'an uses the female gender---it says to *recite what is rehearsed to you in your Homes of the Signs of God and His Wisdom for Allah understands the finest mysteries and is well-acquainted with them.* It is telling the women to recite. So the implication is that these women, these wives, are to get the wisdom from the Signs of God, Allah's Wisdom.

Who is relating the Signs of God and His Wisdom? The Prophet is receiving revelation.

Where is the Prophet? In their homes!

The wives are learning the wisdom from the Prophet and they are told by Allah to recite that wisdom. Let me repeat that--- **The wives are learning the wisdom from the Prophet and they are told by Allah to recite that wisdom.**

OK. Are you with me?

In the 7th year of Hijra, the Muslims have fled to Medina, and the revelation comes to the Prophet that after that time, he is not to marry any other wives, nor is he to change any of the wives he has married [33:52]. So at this point he has married 12 wives. 12 wives.

What is the significance of the number 12?

How many disciples did Jesus have? 12

How many sons did Jacob have? 12

What were the disciples of Jesus supposed to do? Spread the word of Jesus

What did Jacob ask his sons to do after his death? Believe in Allah and practice the deen, the religion of one god.

What were the wives of the Prophet told to do by Allah? They were to recite the Signs of God and His Wisdom.

PAUSE

How did they spread the message of the Qur'an? We know that 4 of the wives were Hafiz, they had memorized the entire text. The wife, Hafsa, set down the text in the order it is today. 7 of the wives gave legal decisions and were judges and scholars, not just to women, but to the Ummah. There is one quote from a sahabah or companion after the Prophet's death who reportedly said: "When the wives of the Prophet are among us, why should we enquire from anyone else."

I already mentioned the ayat that says these women are not like other women. There is other confirmation in Qur'an that they are special. They are told specifically by Allah that if they want the life of this world, if they don't want to sign on to the responsibility of being a wife of the Prophet, it's OK. They were given a choice.

So what Allah asked of these women was huge. In my mind, clearly these women were selected for a special role.

Perhaps what Allah is telling us is that the 12 wives of the Prophet were sent with the special role that in the past had been delegated to men --- the sons of Jacob, the disciples of Jesus, all men. But for this new religion, it was women who were sent in that role. They were sent as the people closest to the Prophet. They were sent as the wives! From the first wife, Khadijah, who is the first Muslim to the last of the 12 wives.

Think about it. If you wanted to assign the task of carrying out the Message that the Prophet was given, and you wanted women to do it, what other way could there be accept as wives? The Prophet could not have had access to these women except in marriage. It would have been improper for him to be in their company for the time it would take to convey the teaching if he did not have the unlimited access and protection that marriage gave them. They were also protected. They were protected because they were the Prophet's wives. And even after his death, they were protected by that status. The Qur'an instructs that no men were allowed to marry them after the Prophet's death. They were freed to continue to spread the message. They were indeed "not like any other women!"

PAUSE

I SAY WHAT I HAVE SAID. MAY ALLAH FORGIVE ALL OF US

2ND PART

Alhamdulilah

These are the names of the wives of the Prophet (May Allah be pleased with them) in the order of their marriage. Some of the names you may recognize:

Khadijah --- first wife, first Muslim, a woman!

Saudah - first wife after Khadijah is a common woman; widow of a martyr, emigrated to Abyssinia, Africa; Prophet was showing by example that the community should take care of the widows; hard worker, tanning skins was her trade; her nose would bleed in ruku; Prophet wanted to divorce her, but she begged the Prophet not to divorce her

Aishah – married the same month as Saudah, daughter of Abu Bakr; narrated 2,210 Hadith

Marriages after Hijrah----

Hafsah – daughter of Umar, widow of a martyr; feisty; Prophet wanted to divorce her but the angel Jibril told him that she prays and fasts so keep her.

Zainab bint Khusaimah – Prophet was her 4th husband, one divorced her, 2 were martyred; lived only 8 month after marriage to Prophet; spent liberally on the poor

Umm Salamah --- married after the death of Zainab; wavered in deciding to marry the Prophet; famous for her beauty; gave legal decisions; counseled the Prophet during the Treaty of Hudaybiyah

Zainab bint Jahsh --- cousin of the Prophet who had married Zayid; ayats revealed giving her permission to marry the Prophet after her marriage to the adopted son, Zayid

Juwairiah bint ul Haris --- 20 years old; was from another tribe, captured in a battle; a Muslim offered to free her for ransom, but she did not have the money; so she asked the Prophet to ransom her; Prophet married her and freed 100 families of her tribe; gave legal decisions

Umm Habibah --- daughter of Abu Sufyan who was one of the fiercest opponents; migrated to Abyssinia with her husband but he became Christian, so she left him. Prophet sent marriage offer to King Negus who stood for him in the ceremony; gave legal decisions

Safiyyah --- Daughter of a descendant of Harun, brother of Moses; Jewish, captured in a battle and Prophet paid her ransom. Prophet offered to free her or to marry her—she choose marriage

Maimoonah --- most pious, kind to family

Mary --- given to the Prophet as a gift from the Copts of Egypt

These wives were a diverse group of women --- some poor, some wealthy, young, old. Before they accepted Islam, they were polytheists, Christian, and Jewish. Some were physically beautiful and some not so physically beautiful. Some had brilliant intellects, others did not. They were a mirror of the Ummah of Islam that received the Message that the Prophet was sent to deliver. Each had a unique role to play in the history of Islam. Each were chosen and accepted this role.

They were called upon to spread a new religion to a society that not only was polytheist, but also did not value women. Remember, it was a common practice to bury the female infants alive. They faced a world of challenges that we cannot even imagine. But because of them, Islam spread.

So in conclusion, I will say that we need more scholarship about the role that these women played. While two of the wives died before the death of the Prophet, the youngest wife, Aishah, lived for five decades after his death. There is much we do not know about those years immediately following the passing of the Prophet.

SO I remind myself and you, let us not forget the legacy of these women. Let us embrace all of them, not just Khadijah. Their spirit is reaching across the centuries to remind us that we can do more than we think possible. If they could do what they did in their time, why not us now?

And finally, a message to the Muslim brothers who told me they wanted to hear this khutbah, too. ISA they will listen to the audio at a later date. They and all men need to hear what women have to say. And ISA there will come a day when the voices of Muslim women will be heard more freely in the same way that the wives of Prophet were able to raise their voices as Allah had commanded them to do. And our day is coming. I am thankful for the leadership of Women's Mosque of America---Hasna Maznavi, and Edina Lekovic, and [redacted], [redacted] was the first person to ask me to do a khutbah---Thank you. And I thank all those who work to make the Women's Mosque of America possible. This is an historic effort. So let us embrace this time and this space that Hasna and the others have created for us. This space will allow us to grow stronger for the days ahead. For the Pleasure of Allah. Fee sabilillah.

Let us make du'a

Ya Allah

We thank You for giving us the example of the wives of the Prophet (SAW). Give us the strength like the strength that You gave to them. Help us to overcome our shortcomings. Empower us to go out, go out into the world and speak up, to a world that desperately needs our voices. Help us to use the talents, skills and wisdom that You have given us to do what You want us to do. Give us the courage to overcome the obstacles in our path. Give us the courage to face down our fears. Grant us what will make us worthy of Your mercy.

Inna Allaha wamalaa-ikatuhu yusalloona AAalayhi al nabiyy Ya Yyuhaa Lallatheena amanoo salloo Aalayhi wassallimoo tasleeman

Indeed Allah and His Angels send blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Send blessings on him and salute him with all respect

Wa aqimna as salah

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