Generation Next
Young Muslim Americans Narrating Self While Debating Faith, Community, and Country

By
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ABSTRACT

“Culture talk” figures prominently in the discussions of and about Muslims, both locally and globally. Culture, in these discussions, is considered to be the underlying cause of gender and generational divides giving rise to an alleged “identity crisis.” Culture also presumably conceals and contaminates “pure/true Islam.” Culture serves as the scaffold on which all that divides Muslim American immigrants and converts is built; furthermore, the fear of a Muslim cultural takeover underpins the “Islamization of America” narrative. This dissertation engages these generational and “immigrant”-“indigenous” fissures and the current narratives that dominate Muslim and public spheres. It does so through the perspectives of the offspring of converts and immigrants. As the children and grandchildren of immigrants and converts come of age, and distant as they are from historical processes and experiences that shaped the parents’ generations while having shared a socialization process as both Muslim and American, what role do they play in the current chapter of Islam in post-9/11 America? Will the younger generation be able to cross the divides, mend the fissures, and play a pivotal role in an “American Muslim community”? Examining how younger generations of both backgrounds view each other and their respective roles in forging an American Muslim belonging, agenda and discourse is a timely and much needed inquiry.

This project aims to contribute by shedding more light on the identities, perspectives and roles of these younger generations through the four dominant narratives of identity crisis, pure/true Islam vs. Cultural Islam, the Islamization of America, and creation of an American Muslim community/identity/culture. These narratives are both part of public discourse and themes generated from interviews, a questionnaire/survey, and personal observation. This ethnographic study examines how American born and/or raised offspring of both converts to Islam and immigrant
Muslims in the Phoenix and Chicago metropolitan areas define self and community, how they negotiate fissures and fault lines (ethnicity, race, class, gender, and religious interpretation) within their communities, and how their faith informs daily life and envisions a future. I utilize participant observation, interviews, and surveys and examine digital, visual and published media to answer these questions.
DEDICATION

To all my teachers who walked with me on the path to knowledge and let me venture out,

to my family and friends whose support and faith in me sustain me,

to the young Muslims of America who give me hope,

I dedicate this dissertation to you.
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This project would not be were it not for the many participants who took time and interest in it. Their collaboration, insights, wisdom, honesty, and generosity are the substance of this dissertation. I only hope that I do justice in representing your insights in my writing. Thank you for everything.

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On a cold damp Philadelphia day, the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) held its inaugural conference on the first weekend of November 2007. According to its website, MANA defines itself as an organization that is “committed to Muslim issues and concerns that especially impact indigenous Muslims” (MANA 2012). The conference’s title was “The State of the Blackamerican Muslim Community.” As the speakers assessed the state of their community, there was a recurring theme. One of the speakers summed up their sentiment and the theme; he stated that “immigrants, who did not come to the US for Islam but to make money, took on the leadership role in the community without consulting or incorporating people of the land.” These “foreign Muslims,” he noted, have become the face of Islam in the larger society. In Black America, he pointed out, the face of Islam used to be the Nation of Islam (NOI), which engaged the problems of their communities; that was an Islam that is “grounded in the American soil”. He acknowledged that this “Islam” and the NOI no longer wield the same influence they once did in Black America. Immigrant Muslims and their institutions have over time gained greater visibility, assumed community leadership, and have come to define the face of Islam. Nevertheless, to most Black Americans, Islam is not a foreign religion because many have a brother, a cousin, an aunt, or a friend who is a Muslim. Another speaker proposed “engineering a paradigm shift” because a person cannot be practicing an Islam “based on someone else’s reality,” one that is not local, not personal. In every session, there were repeated calls for asserting the role of “indigenous” Muslims in
defining the face of and the agenda for Islam (community issues and priorities) in America. The second conference in 2008 at the same venue picked up where the 2007 one left off as reflected in its theme: “Forging an American Muslim Agenda”.

Vignette II

In 2008, Robert Spencer, an influential American author and blogger, published his book *Stealth Jihad*. The thesis of the book is that “America could be conquered and Islamized through a slow and steady process of ‘absorption’—a kind of reverse assimilation in which Muslim immigrants and converts in the United States gradually impose their values, and ultimately, their laws upon the larger population” (2008, 19). This conquest will not be through violent jihad exercised by fringe extremist groups but by Muslims engaging in “Stealth Jihad.” They will demand religious accommodation under the cover of multiculturalism and pretext of civil rights, use the American’s national wound of racism to fight what they claim is “bigotry” to silence criticism, create political, financial, cultural and social institutions and publications and media outlets. He is careful to distinguish “moderate Muslims” from those engaged in this radical project of conquest and subjugation. These moderates accept full assimilation, shun the belief and practice of jihad and “Islamic supremacy”, and make no demands for accommodations. Spencer’s moderates would essentially have to discard much of Islam since Islam, as he sees it, has no “core teachings [that are] essentially peaceful” (2008:5). Rather than those who think Islam is corrupted by radicals, Spencer has long argued that “Islam is unique among the major world religions in having a developed doctrine, theology, and legal system mandating warfare against and the subjugation of unbelievers. There is no orthodox sect or school of Islam that teaches that Muslims must coexist peacefully as equals with non-Muslims on an indefinite basis” (2008:5). He
warns that the “large pool of Muslims raised on a pedagogy that resists assimilation and instead emphasizes the need for societal ‘accommodation’ to Islam” is “a promising group of future activists for the cause of Islamic supremacy” (Spencer 2008:217).

Spencer might be dismissed as a marginal figure and conspiracy theorist were it not for the significant following he commands among members of the Tea Party and conservative groups and the wide readership of his books that elevated him to the New York Times bestseller list. Together with Pamela Geller, Spencer founded *Stop the Islamization of America* (SIOA) which has played a central role in the 2010 “Ground Zero Mosque” affair—a project which, they argued, exemplified this Stealth Jihad and which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Vignette III

In the fall of 2009, the first *ThinkDot* event was held at the west campus of Arizona State University. It was built up to be the first of its kind and framed as “not the same old stuff” but something “for the youth, about the youth, and by the youth.” This breaking away from the “same old stuff” started with publicity methods which included a glossy colored post-card, Facebook and text messaging. Tickets were sold exclusively online and sold out. With an audience of 335, it was an exceptionally well attended gathering for a Muslim event in Arizona. On its website, rather than the typical text-based method to explain “about” the group, *ThinkDot* founders use graphic arts and short sentences to explain the birth of an idea. The poster explains how the founders, two twenty-something Chinese brothers, children of a very active and artistic Muslim immigrant family, concluded that:

Muslim events SUCK! Okay, so maybe not in those exact words. But who could deny that at Muslim events and presentations are dull, repetitive,
and too long... But what is worse, all the adults are asleep, or about to be anyway. And all the youth have migrated outside, playing on the elevators, chatting, eating, flirting, you name it. Can you blame them? Funny thing, these events were supposed to be FOR THE YOUTH. It is hard for the last generation to communicate across such a large disconnect [the caption next to world map and arrow originating in Asia and ending in US]. All those back-home methods of hammering ideas into our heads with incessant shouting HARAM! HARAM! HARAM [illicit]! aren’t working ‘cause, when you get right down to it, we are more AMERICAN THAN WE ARE Bosnian, Somali, Palestinian, Syrian, Indian, Egyptian, Yamani, Malaysian or whatever, no matter how fiercely you or your parents would like to maintain the contrary... (see appendix D)

In this passage, “the youth” are bored by irrelevant and “unprofessional” lectures and with the ever present fundraising segment, and are talking back to the “aunties and uncles” (parents’ generation) as much as they are to their cohort. Critiquing their community’s methods and styles, the youth define “being Muslim” by what it is not: not mediocre, not embarrassing, not unprofessional. Grounding their belonging in/to America and not their parents’ country of origin, while careful to demonstrate deference and humility by conceding they are not “Islamic experts,” the youth assert their authority as “cultural experts” and demonstrate their standards of excellence. They say, they are not just putting a presentation together, they are planning to improve their community and call the youth to Think and Act: from disengagement and hanging out in the hallway to critical Think[ing] and transformative Act[ion]. The event was indeed an all-out performance complete with months of rehearsal, music, lights, cameras, and action!

These three seemingly unrelated occasions represent three interwoven threads that are embedded within multiple narratives which are themselves parts of the larger narrative of Islam in/of America: a narrative about being and belonging, and about the politics of identity in a globalizing world where grand narratives of secularism, national and civilizational histories, and global wars are summoned. The first and third occasions demonstrate two primary fissures that run across generational and ethno-racial lines among the Muslims of America. These fissures are frequently framed in homogenizing
terms of immigrant/indigenous groups and youth/parents and uncles’ generations. A frustrated discontent, long reserved for intimate circles, has in the past decade broken the surface erupting into assertive critical examination of Muslim America by those who for too long felt marginalized within the community. These events represent story threads within three larger narratives about younger Muslims ostensibly suffering from “identity crisis”. This crisis purportedly leads them to espouse an intolerant cultureless “real/pure/true Islam” which is a path to radicalization. The related narrative is one about the necessity of intervention by creating an “American Muslim identity and culture.” Here, then, are three of the four larger narratives that this dissertation aims to engage: identity crisis among younger Muslims, a pure/true Islam vs. a cultural Islam, and the imperative of creating an American Muslim identity and culture.

The second occasion represents the larger narrative of the “Muslim problem” that has made America’s followers of Islam into America’s latest “problem people”, which is the fourth narrative this dissertation will engage. This narrative has transatlantic links and deep American roots but it has intensified and gained greater public traction in “post-9/11” America. It also makes up the backdrop of the aforementioned three narratives. All of these narratives shape and are shaped by Muslim individual and collective identities and their sense of belonging. Additionally, they also (re)construct and (re)define America and Islam. These narratives and this dynamic and dialectical process of identity construction serve as the focal point for this dissertation project which aims to explore these topics from the perspectives of younger Muslim Americans.
Background

Outside of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the United States stands out singularly as a place where the diversity of Muslims approximates that of the global Muslim community (ummah) and includes a sizeable non-immigrant community of mostly Blackamerican Muslims. Managing diversity is a formidable task for any collective; for Muslim Americans, however, managing their unparalleled diversity is even more challenged by the peculiar position of having to debate and (re)define self/community identity and Islam itself within a public discourse that sees them as Other. This is a discourse that more intensely than ever dichotomizes “Islam” and the “West.” Managing this diversity is further complicated by the history and position of Muslims in American society which poses hurdles to the normalization of Islam in America: a) the history and position of Blackamericans in society and the early encounter of many of them with Islam through a nationalistic movement that was seeking a distinct identity to counter whiteness and fight back against racial injustices, b) the steady waves of migrants and the nature of contemporary immigration, and c) the geopolitical relationship of America with Muslim majority countries in a postcolonial world. The disorienting experiences of immigration for some, and of conversion for others, entail a long struggle to find one’s footing in a new society and religious community and make difficult the cultivation of a sense of belonging and authenticity in a rapidly changing world.

The first generation of immigrants and converts to Islam in America are at varying stages along this journey and they have generations of descendants. Unlike their parents’ generation of new Muslims (converts) or new Americans (immigrants), the younger generations of Muslim Americans bear this dual heritage from childhood and are uniquely positioned to elaborate on the meaning of both. Generational gap is a
common phenomenon varying in types and degree within, as much as across, societies and is well-studied in sociology, psychology and immigration studies. The generational gap among American Muslims is further marked by the complexity of the context in which it occurs: the history of Islam in America, unparalleled ethno-racial diversity, a minoritized community in a racialized society, and the contentious history of recent and remote encounters of the “Islam and the West.” The unique position of younger Muslim Americans makes their perspectives and roles critical; and yet to date, they have rarely been explored.

Studies of younger Muslim Americans tend to focus on those of immigrant backgrounds. Consequently, the dominant narrative that has emerged is that these young people are torn between two worlds, the religious and cultural world of the home and secular mainstream society (Ajrouch 2004; Kaplan 2005; Peek 2005; Sarroub 2005; Sirin and Fine 2008). As these young people struggle to negotiate their identities in the “fault lines of global conflict,” as Sirin and Fine put it, they face discrimination, alienation, and experience dissonance and “identity crisis,” which, it is posited, lead to their assertion of an “Islamic identity.” Peek (2005), for example, drawing on Stryker’s (1980) identity salience concept, provides three stages of religious identity (ascribed, chosen, and declared) through which these young people “become Muslim” – that is, more overtly Muslim – as this aspect of their identity gains primacy in the hierarchy of identities. In many of the studies of young Muslims in the West, there is an overtone of concern and alarm about the “identity crisis” and religiosity of these young people (Hermansen 2003; Peek 2005; Roy 2004; Schmidt 2004; Chouhoud 2010; Sirin and Fine 2008). Part of a larger frame that holds Muslims in general as experiencing identity crisis where tradition and modernity collide, this notion of identity crisis among younger Muslims has become salient in public discourse and within the Muslim community.
especially post-9/11. It also figures centrally in the discourse on radicalization and the “war-on-terror”. But what exactly is this “identity crisis”? What does it mean and how does it manifest? These questions are explored in this dissertation project which will illustrate that the term is consequential and has multiple meanings to those who use it.

Another recurring theme in research on young Muslims of immigrant parentage is that they are challenging the “cultural Islam” of their parents and advocating for a “purer” and “cultureless Islam” (Hermansen 2003; Kaplan 2005; Karim 2007; Mir 2006; Naber 2005; Peek 2005; Roy 2004; Sheikh 2007). This development alarms many who see it as an internalization of revivalist discourse of the Muslim majority world, or worse yet, of literalist Wahhabi ideology. It has, for example, been interpreted as a “mindless and rigid rejection of ‘the Other’ and the creation of a de-culturalized, rule-based space where one asserts Muslim ‘difference’ based on gender segregation, romantic recreations of madrasa experiences, and the most blatantly apologetic articulation of Islam” (Hermansen 2003, 310). That may be the case for some or may even be a stage in the lives of some young people as they react to the disorienting experience of that age and of entering college life; however, this theme of challenging immigrant generations’ “cultural Islam” does not only emerge from the religiously conservative. As will be elaborated on later, demands for disentangling “immigrant culture” from the “pure/true Islam,” are articulated by many practicing and non-practicing participants in this project – and others – be they of immigrant or non-immigrant background. These two narratives, “identity crisis” and “pure/true Islam”, are intimately connected.

Surveying the literature on Muslim Americans, one is left with the impression that this is an immigrant community. Whether this is due to the frequent focus on particular immigrant groups (usually Arab or South Asian) or – when a few non-immigrants are included – due to the theoretical underpinning and analysis, Muslim
Americans are typically portrayed as “in between” and struggling to come to terms with a dual heritage. Unfortunately, this perception is reinforced by the tone and discourse in conferences and public events organized by the mostly immigrant-led Muslim organizations where the dominant narrative is one of immigrants trying to find their footing in society. Except for historical accounts like African Muslims in Antebellum America (Austin 1997), African American Islam (McCloud 1995), Islam in the African-American Experience (Turner 1997), Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam (Curtis 2006), and Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection (Jackson 2005), few studies directly engage Blackamerican Muslims. The rare exceptions include Karim (2005; 2007), Khabeer (2007; 2011), Rouse (2004) and Nashashibi (Nashashibi 2011). Non-immigrant Muslim voices and perspectives are generally conspicuously absent from the scholarly literature. Karim (2007) and Khabeer (2011) offer a rare look into the relationship between second generation Muslims of immigrant and convert background and how they struggle to cross ethnic and class lines as they try to negotiate the ideals of their Islamic faith and their American socio-cultural realities.

White and Latino/a Americans conversion to Islam is not new; they and their offspring make a small but growing, particularly since 9/11, part of the Muslim community. Their growing numbers are mentioned in the demographic sections of published works on Muslims, but there is a dearth of research on this growing segment of Muslim America. Except for A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb by Abd-Allah (2006), which is a historical account of the first Whiteamerican convert, scholarly works on Whiteamerican Muslims are few and mostly focus on women’s conversion. One such example is the edited volume Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West (Van Nieuwkerk 2006). Early Latino/a encounter with Islam has been through contacts with Blackamerican Muslims
or marriages with immigrant Muslims. There are several news articles pointing to the growing numbers of Latino/a Americans embracing Islam, but little actual research. Bowen (2010) is one of the few studies to explore the identity and institutions of these Muslims and, again, the focus is mostly on the process of and reasons for conversion. The absence of native-born Muslims, who are not of immigrant background, in scholarly work and in public discourse and media images, makes a large segment of the Muslim American community invisible and seem voiceless, but not for long. They are speaking up and standing out to reclaim “indigenous” American roots for Islam and challenge the immigrant face by and through which Islam has come to be defined.

Dissertation Questions, Objectives and Structure

In general conversations throughout this project’s fieldwork and beyond, among project collaborators and in Muslim as well as public discourses, “culture talk” figures prominently in discussions about Muslims, both locally and globally. Culture, in these discussions, is considered to be the underlying cause of gender and generational divides giving rise to an alleged “identity crisis.” Culture also presumably conceals and contaminates “pure/true Islam.” Culture serves as the scaffold on which all that divides immigrants and converts is built on; the fear of Muslim cultural takeover of American underpins the “Stealth Jihad” narrative. This dissertation engages these generational and “immigrant-indigenous” fissures and the current narratives that dominate Muslim and public spheres. It will do so through the perspectives of the offspring of converts and immigrants. As the children and grandchildren of immigrants and converts come of age, and distant as they are from historical processes (the legacy of slavery and colonialism) that shaped the parental generations while having shared a socialization process as both
Muslim and American, what role do they play in the current chapter of Islam in post-9/11 America? Will the new generation be able to cross the divides, mend the fissures, and play a pivotal role in an “American Muslim community”? Examining how younger generations of both backgrounds view each other and their roles in forging an American Muslim belonging, agenda and discourse is a timely and much needed inquiry. This project aims to contribute by shedding more light on the identities, perspectives and roles of these younger generations through the four dominant narratives mentioned earlier, namely: identity crisis, pure/true Islam vs. Cultural Islam, the Islamization of America, and creating an American Muslim community/identity/culture. These narratives are both part of public discourse and themes generated from interviews, a questionnaire/survey, and personal observation. This ethnographic study examines how American born and/or raised offspring of both converts to Islam and immigrant Muslims in the Phoenix and Chicago metropolitan areas define self and community, how they negotiate fissures and fault lines (ethnicity, race, class, gender, and religious interpretation) within their communities, and how their faith informs daily life and envisions a future. Through participant observation and interviews and by using surveys and examining of digital, visual and published media, I aim to answer these larger questions by exploring answers to the following more specific questions:

1) To what extent do young Muslim American experience “identity crisis”?

2) What is “pure/true Islam” all about? What are its distinguishing or defining features and sources? How and who (or what process) authenticates this Islam as normative? And how is it experienced in the daily life of Muslim Americans?

3) How does the post-9/11 public discourse shape these younger Muslims perspectives and how do they respond?
4) What relationships, if any, do second generation Muslims have across ethno-racial, sectarian, and gender lines and how do they view each other?

5) What does the narrative of creating “Muslim American Culture/Identity” reveal or conceal and what significance does it hold for the future of Islam in the U.S.? Are there visible cultural products (institutions, art, literature, knowledge) of this “American Muslim culture”?

6) How do second generation Muslims view the future of Islam in America? What role do they see themselves playing in shaping that future?

**Dissertation Organization**

After this short introduction, chapter 2 sketches the methodology of this dissertation detailing the centrality of narrative framework from the conception of this project, to its methods, to the challenges encountered, to the analysis, and ultimately to the production of this ethnographic narrative. Chapter 3 will provide a brief historical tour of Muslim America to provide a backdrop and a context that situate participants both in intra-community and societal dynamics. In each of the subsequent four chapters, I engage important issues of the day that circulate as dominant narratives in Muslim and public spheres. The narratives are “identity crisis,” “cultural versus real/pure Islam,” “the Islamization of America,” and creating an “American Muslim identity and culture”. In these chapters, I interrogate each of these narratives, examining its roots, meanings, relevance and implications as it engages and informs the perspective of younger generations of Muslim Americans based on data from interviews, questionnaire and fieldnotes (from the physical and virtual fields). These four narratives, as noted earlier,
are interwoven and in dialogue with one another but are addressed separately in these chapters to allow for deeper exploration.

Chapter 4 problematizes the narrative of “identity crisis” which conceptualizes identity as a stage which one succeeds or fails to achieve. After dissecting this narrative, I explore the theoretical landscape of identity formation and conclude with an alternative synthesis. This synthesis will serve as the theoretical framework for this dissertation where one’s being and belonging (that is, identity) is the central issue that runs through all the chapters. I then explore participants’ self-narration of how they see themselves through childhood experiences at home, school, and college and as adults. Torn between seemingly irreconcilable poles (home/society, being in the secular West/belonging to the religious East), younger Muslim Americans are often thought to be ensnared in poles pulling them in different directions in an ostensibly centuries old conflict between Islam and the West. The pathologized “identity crisis” narrative must be situated within that discourse and within the self-narrations of those presumably suffering from it. My analysis will demonstrate that participants – whether the offspring of immigrants or converts – are aware of their differences and of the multiple demands (by family, faith, peers, and society) on them. They recognize that their non-Muslim counterparts also struggle to balance the person others expect them to be with the person they want or hope to be. They acknowledge that the process is a harder for them, but they learn to navigate that and construct a sense of self that incorporates all of the different “parts” of themselves as one of them put it. They do not see these parts as mutually exclusive. As they narrate this self, one sees the heteroglot or intertextual nature of these narratives where bits and pieces of other discourses are engaged or appropriated and enter inner speech\(^8\) to construct each subsequent instantiation of self. They become comfortable with (and in) their difference but that difference seems to be an issue for some parents.
and for a society that expects them to fit an image that is either/or. The collaborators in this project were comfortable in their own skin. That is not to say, however, that some do not struggle with contradictions imposed upon them through simplistically framed “good/bad Muslim” alternatives. If there is identity problem among some younger generations of Muslims, it could be argued that it is a problem resulting from society and/or some parents who deny them the space and time to experiment with their different “parts”, to ponder and to come to their own understanding of self and faith.

In chapter 5, I explore the salient idea of a “pure/true/real Islam” as compared to a presumably “cultural Islam.” This narrative frame has multiple stories and meanings woven upon it by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Those drawing on it come from across the ideological spectrum of groups labeled “fundamentalists/Islamists,” “modernists,” “traditionalists,” and “secularist.” Younger generations of Muslim Americans as well as many converts to Islam invoke this narrative to argue that the first generation immigrants’ understanding and practice of Islam is colored by their “back home culture.” This culture, so the argument goes, privileges certain norms and traditions and relegates anything different, especially if Western, to the category of un-Islamic. Often, critics of this narrative describe those who invoke it as puritans who advocate an austere form of religion and—whether they are merely quietist/pietistic or radical extremists—deeply reject the West and “Muslim World” and are dangerous to both. Exploring this narrative speaks to fundamental questions about the definition of religion in general and to the anthropology of Islam in particular. Are there one or multiples Islam(s) and who decides which is pure or true? This chapter explores these issues and subsequently demonstrates that this narrative of purifying the faith is grounded in Islamic discursive tradition; additionally, it is a structural narrative frame holding many stories, some of which are indeed worrisome. However, the strand of
purity narrative invoked by the collaborators of this project, as well as many Western Muslims, is neither rejectionist nor dangerous. In fact, rather than discarding culture altogether, these Muslims are seeking to alter the immigrant cultural mantel that has “covered” Islam in order to cloak the faith with a cultural garb that is grounded in their American [or European] realities. They are neither fully rejecting nor uncritically and fully embracing either cultures but are selectively appropriating both.

Muslims of different political ideology and interpretive trends invoke the narrative of true/pure Islam to ground their actions and ideas in the Islamic tradition and to argue against all those whom they see as defiling that tradition. But there is another unlikely group that also invokes the narrative of true/pure Islam and references the Islamic tradition through its own interpretive framework and ideology. This group consists of an alliance of right wing conservatives, Tea Party members, some political and religious leaders, some new atheist icons and a cadre of former and current Muslims, many of whom claim to be “feminists”. The common thread in the discourse of this group is that true Islam is a threat not only to the security of America in particular and the West in general but to the very foundation of Western civilization. Group members posit that backwardness, violent extremism, misogyny, intolerance of the other, and opposition to the freedom of belief, thought and expression are not aberrant ideas of a fringe Muslim group but are in fact rooted in the Islamic religious tradition. Those Muslims who argue otherwise are either guilty of Taqiyya (an allegedly religiously sanctioned lying), or they are reforming Islam to rid it of these dangerous and backward ideas. In chapter 6, I examine the structure and the different ideological trends within this group and explore how this strand in the purity narrative has constructed a narrative of the “Islamization of America.” Whether the rhetoric and actions this narrative inspires can be called Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, or merely a legitimate critique of
Muslims and Islam is greatly debated and I will delve into the significance of these debates. This narrative serves as a strong instrument in the racialization process of Muslims and everyone who “looks Muslim”, particularly Christian Arabs and South Asians of other faiths like the Sikh men who wear turbans as part of their religious tradition. This racialization process and the associated discourses have significant consequences for how Muslims, and particularly the younger generations, see themselves individually and collectively (religiously, ethnically, and nationally) and how they engage their community and society. I explore how this narrative has been both challenging and generative in the ways Muslims see themselves and assert their belonging.

In chapter 7 and 8, all the connections and implications of the preceding three narratives come together as I interrogate the final narrative, one that consists of a call for crafting an “American Muslim community” and creating an “American Muslim culture”. Here, I draw on the insights gained from the previous chapters and the perspectives of younger Muslims to delve into the intra-Muslim community dynamics and the genealogy of this narrative and its multiple and contested meanings. Chapter 7 details the rifts within Muslim America across gender, ethno-racial, immigrant-convert lines. I argue that this narrative indexes a rapprochement between the constituting groups of Muslim America. This is taking place in and through the process of constructing a coalitional socio-political identity inspired by models from American society (for example; Asian, Latino/a, women, gay/lesbian communities) and from the Islamic discursive tradition (the concept of ummah). Chapter 8 shows how this process is one of cultural citizenship that creates a space to at once be different and to belong, a space for creative self-expression, representation, engagement and contribution. It at once challenges the black/white color line that defines authentic citizenship and the nativist anti-immigrant
discourse which marginalize cultural differences, especially that of “new minorities” (Flores and Benmayor 1997). I examine the resultant institutions and expressive culture because, as products, they are essential to the primary concern of this dissertation, the identity formation and expression of younger generations of Muslims. Cultural products are technologies for the dialogical process of construction of self, community, nation and the meaning and relationships that sustain each. Additionally, they serve as tools to both present and represent oneself and one’s group and to struggle against marginalizing and racist ideologies and practices.

Having explored these various topics and the trials and triumphs of being young, Muslim and American, chapter 9 closes with the vision of project collaborators for the future and the role they see for themselves and their community in society and on the world stage. Here again, one sees the interwoven nature of the various discourses and the narratives that circulate locally, nationally and internationally and their role in shaping the perspectives of individuals and collectives. Throughout these chapters, project collaborators are quoted extensively, not so much to “give them a voice” but to get out of their way and let their thoughts, emotions and perspectives come through. This dissertation attempts to highlight the critically important role of narratives in identity formation as they are used both as tools to marginalize or mobilize and as technologies for understanding and (re)presenting self, group, faith and nation.
Blackamerican is a term borrowed and modified by Sherman Jackson from C. Erick Lincoln’s Blackamerica. Jackson prefers this neologism to the terms black or African American because one hides whiteness and the other denies centuries of New World history and locates blacks in Africa (Jackson 2005). His book introduced the concept to Muslim public sphere and, as noted in the title of this conference, is being put into practice. For these same reasons, and to distinguish them from African Muslims of immigrant background, I also use the term Blackamerican in this project. Similarly, to challenge the normativity of whiteness as the unhyphenated unqualified standard American, to acknowledge these centuries of history, and to distinguish European Muslims of immigrant background, I introduce and use Whiteamerican. I use these terms and others to refer to the ethnic background of project collaborators. Additionally, while new a binary of “immigrant-indigenous” is now in use in Muslim public sphere (I discuss this in chapter 7), I uncomfortably stick with immigrant-convert to distinguish the backgrounds of participants. While I see the problematics of this binary and have asked myself and others how long one has to be in America or be a Muslim before one is no longer an immigrant or convert (with all the baggage each terms carry), the immigrant-indigenous binary presents another set of problems particularly since it is American born and raised individuals who are the focus of this project.

All quotes in this vignette are my fieldnotes from this event which I had attended as I was preparing for my dissertation proposal. The conference was organized and attended primarily by Blackamerican Muslims. On the board of MANA, however, there are two second generation men of immigrant background. One is of Arab background and the other of South Asian background. They were among the speakers in this conference.

Geller is a blogger turned author whose role and rise to a status of spokesperson will be discussed in chapter 6.

“Muslim Community” is a salient term among Muslims and in public discourse but it should not be understood to mean a cohesive homogenous group. Furthermore, this community, like all collectives, is not a ready-made group. It might be accurate to speak of Muslim communities considering the unparalleled ethno-racial diversity and the segmentation resulting from the intersection of that diversity with class, gender, and generational lines. “Muslim Community,” however, remains an important and powerful concept that is discursively and practically constructed as this dissertation will demonstrate.

“post-9/11” is itself a grand narrative where the tragic murder of over 3000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania on September 11th 2001 has come to be seen as a decisive historical moment cleaving the world into a pre-9/11 and a post-9/11. Like all other “post” narratives (post-modernity, post-racial, post-colonial etc.), post-9/11 is also a contested term. Not only are its different meanings and significations challenged but what is also debated is whether or not anything has in fact changed. Academic and intellectual debate about the validity of this narrative notwithstanding, to the average person several things mark the change: new vocabulary and images of “war on terrorism” where one is “with us or against us,” the indignities associated with airport security that include body scanning, pat-downs, no-Fly lists, 3-oz liquids and shoes-off, and most importantly the normalization of fear and suspicion. For Muslims globally, the post-9/11 world is one of more than a decade long wars and the death of Muslims in hundreds of thousands killed by soldiers, Drone strikes, and improvised suicide bombs and where the “war on terrorism” is understood as a code word for war-on-Islam. For American Muslims, this has been a defining transitional moment from invisibility to hyper-visibility which, as this dissertation illustrates, has been both greatly challenging and generative.
An ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam introduced by Muhammad Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) in Saudi Arabia that was rebuffed by Muslims scholars but which nevertheless spread with the petrodollars of Saudi state. Though not inherently violent, because of the involvement of Osama Bin Laden and several other Saudi nationals in the 9/11 terrorist acts, Wahhabism has become equated with violent extremism.


Language is the means by which social speech finds its way into the body and becomes inner speech and the constituting elements of thoughts and emotions infused with meaning and values that reflect one’s specific perspective.
CHAPTER 2
NARRATIVE AS METHODOLOGY

Scholars from fields as diverse as neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, and literary theory differ and debate the origins and evolution of the concept of narrative in the human story, but there is consensus that people are skilled storytellers. From infancy to old age and from the cave dwelling era to the Internet surfing days, people have told and continue to tell stories to impart values and inculcate cultural knowledge, to create community and nation, to console and condemn, inspire and entertain and most importantly to know themselves, make sense of and give meaning to their world. Narratives are essential to human communication; damages or dysfunctions of the brain often manifest in impaired ability to comprehend and/or construct coherent narratives. At bedtime or at campfire, in village courtyard or a judge or king’s court, on the stage or film screen, in novels, religious texts or academic journals, narratives – simple or complex– abound. Dautenhahn contends that “human narrative intelligence might have evolved because the structure of narrative is particularly suited to communicate about the social world” because it is overloaded with social information that guides individuals in navigating their social reality (2002, 68). A narrative is a structure within which multiple but related sub-stories are woven. The stories can be added to or subtracted from, and the content of each can be modified in small or big ways but they hang together in a coherent narrative framework (Talib 2011). Narratives are accounts of events and experiences which follow a sequence and have a plot that moves and holds the stories together. In general, narratives have content (what is being told), discourse (how it is told), and the context (temporal-spatial-social) which is essential to the content and the discourse (Talib 2011). It might seem that in our technological age of Facebook, Second-Life and Tweets, storytelling and narratives are diminishing in
importance. In fact, the very technology that enables existence of/in these virtual worlds is seeking new frameworks and is looking at narratives to conceptualize itself (see Mateas and Sengers 2003). This illustrates the centrality of narratives for human communication, be it face–to–face or virtual.

The framework of narratives has marked this project from its conception, shaped its methodology, and guided its analysis and writing. I was prompted to undertake this project by recurring themes including the “true/pure Islam” narrative in my masters’ thesis and by narratives I encountered through many years of work within Muslim American communities. These narratives pertain to inter-ethnic, gender, and generational issues as well as the interface between religion and culture. Dominant narratives in the public sphere regarding immigration, multiculturalism, national identity, the problematics of “Islam and the West,” and the “post-9/11” world informed not only this dissertation but also my own identity and disciplinary journey. Academic narratives about “good” research methods and ethics, authority and credibility and their marginalizing or empowering effects influenced my thoughts and the lens through which I observed, analyzed and interpreted. Narratives of identity formation, about the “fieldsite” and what constitutes “real anthropology” also infiltrated my thoughts and informed my work. I listened to and followed the narratives of others with attention to my own narratives. In the theories and methods that informed data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing, the concept of narrative remained constant and central.

**Narrative as a Way of Knowing**

Socio-cultural and linguistic anthropologists have long documented the role of the narrative and storytelling in cultures through folklore and myths. But narratives are
also essential to identity formation. The narrative approach is particularly suited to the exploration of identity as conceptualized in this project. Through it, individuals tell their stories laced with emotions, memories, beliefs, and values that give meaning to their and others experiences and actions as they try to make sense of the world within and around them. Cohen and Rapport note that “[t]hrough an appreciation of the narratives by which individuals locate themselves in their natural, social, and cultural milieux, as continuously expressed in their words and behavior, the anthropologist can gain access to the grounds…for their actions” (1995, 9). These personal stories, of being— in—the—world, give a glimpse of people’s ability to anticipate, attend and remember, and to link past, present and future. As I will illustrate in the ensuing chapters, a narrative approach also allows for exploration of how social others and society inform and shape the individual and inculcate a sense of belonging or otherness in the way both the “what” and “the way” of narration may signal inclusion or exclusion. While an individual’s narrative is co-constructed with a specific audience and, thus, is flexible and particular to that individual and context, multiple individuals’ narratives can be useful in providing insight into shared experiences. It is this characteristic of the narrative that feminists and others capitalize on to highlight the experiences and knowledge(s) of women and other marginalized groups (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

Narrative is both a qualitative methodological strategy and an object of examination because “[t]he method and the inquiry always have experiential starting points that are informed by and intertwined with theoretical literature that informs either the methodology or an understanding of the experiences with which the inquirer began” (Pinnegar and Daynes 2006, 5). Narrative focused research acknowledges the value of what people have to say to the arguments being made in the research and their collaborative role in knowledge production, thus decentering the notion of an “objective”
researcher observing, measuring, and analyzing (Pinnegar and Daynes 2006). This methodology does not privilege the individual at the expense of the society but attempts to gain insight into the social through the self–consciousness of individuals whose interactions make up the social. The temporal nature of narratives should alert the researcher that it is at once incidental, because it is one of many experiences in which the narrator is engaged, and enduring because it is an essential component in the narrator’s life story. Narration inevitably involves making choices (stated or not) about what is brought forth, emphasized or left out and the researcher’s presence and interactions influence these choices and account for the co-constructive nature of narrative (Hunter 2010).

Narratives are also integral to the identity and products of the field of anthropology. Anthropologists rely on natives’ narratives to gain insights into every aspect (family and social structure, political, economic, religious institutions, and history, and local/global connections) of the cultures they study. They subsequently construct their own narratives in ethnographic accounts of these “natives” narrations. As Geertz composed his ethnographic narrative where he asserted that a cultural ritual is “a story [natives] tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973, 448), he was creating a narrative in which he recounts his fieldwork experiences and in which he analyzes and theorizes the stories he was told. In this process, he was both participating in and contributing to anthropology’s own disciplinary narrative: the stories anthropology as a field tells itself about itself. This narrative has consequential effects on every anthropological project and this one is no exception.
Anthropology’s Narrative and Finding “My Village”

Every community has its origin story, founding elders, traditions, rituals, and rites of passage, all of which are passed from generation to generation and drawn on to authenticate knowledge and practices. Anthropology as a field of knowledge and community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) as well as discourse (Nystrand 1982) is no different. Narratives produce (and are produced by) anthropologists to understand their professional identity and the world. In this narrative, fieldwork remains central and is both a “rite of passage and maker of professionalism” (Clifford 19977). In the story the field tells about itself and inculcates in its disciples, there are normative anthropological practices and characteristics of “real” anthropologists. These include doing fieldwork in a distant and different place and engaging in prolonged participant observation with specific people and culture—one’s village and people. These ideas are “at the base of the enduring power in anthropology of the prospect, or experience, or memory, or simply collectively both celebrated and mystified notion, of ‘being there’” (Hannerz 2003, 202).

As initiates into this community, graduate students study how anthropological theory and ethnography have undergone long soul-searching and deep critique from within and without. They see these theoretical debates operationalized in research. Yet, “fieldwork” still maintains a mythical and mystical place. Often these works leave the impression that the “field” was out there, ready to be found by the researcher who only had to gain entry and establish rapport to start fieldwork. The disorientation, messiness, and anxieties inherent in locating and being in “the field” and the foreboding sense that overwhelms one in the process of making sense of all the “raw data” is hidden from the novice anthropologist who aspires to emulate the polished and insightful ethnographies based on such romanticized fieldwork.
Working in an urban setting and conducting research in a residentially dispersed, ethnically diverse religious “community” was very challenging. I often longed for the “classic” field site where I would presumably live in “my village” and interact with “my research people” from morning to late night. In my project, this proverbial village spatially extended to two states and across cyberspace; temporally, it compressed and expanded from interactions lasting few minutes to hours with a frequency of a few times to daily, weekly or monthly. Nothing seemed stable! The potential participants were everywhere; young Muslims were in the market place, the university, the mosque, and the not-for-profit institutions, the streets and elsewhere. But they were there only briefly then they retreated to their workplace, college classes, and homes. How does one make contacts with these seemingly transient subjects? If fieldwork is about studying people in their “natural habitat”, the people here belong to a diverse urban community in a pluralistic society, making fieldwork a convoluted multi-sitedness and complex endeavor. If ethnography is studying as deeply as possible and describing as thickly as possible a way of life of a group, in this setting it seemed to be an impossible task. My potential collaborators seemed to be everywhere and nowhere. I had to locate them through social networks, emails, and community events but this “community” is one in constant flux. Its members are dispersed geographically, come together frequently or occasionally, change in makeup depending on the event, venue location, or time of the year. “Fieldwork” under these circumstances was a daily struggle with multiple choices of possible venues or events to attend and individuals or groups to join or follow. There were countless moments of being gripped by the anxieties to locate “the field” and the consequences of failing to do so. I began to wonder if and how others dealt with these challenges. What is the “field” to look like in today’s world of multiplicity and dizzying
mobility? Like questions about the nature of identity and narrative, is the “field” there to be claimed or does it emerge in a process of (co)construction?

The privileged status of fieldwork in anthropology is rooted not only in the history of the discipline but also in the contemporary politics of the academe. Fieldwork plays a vital role in distinguishing anthropology from related fields where the “on the ground” participant—observation—based fieldwork is what has marked anthropology “as a discipline in both senses of the word”—a space and its borders and where the “field of anthropology” and “the field of fieldwork” are thus politically and epistemologically intertwined” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 3). Fieldwork defines what makes true anthropology. However, Gupta and Ferguson argued for a deeper revaluation of the notion of fieldwork. They proposed to “decenter and defetishize the concept of ‘the field,’” such that it is “not with time–honored commitment to the local but with the attentiveness to social, cultural and political location and a willingness to work self–consciously at shifting or realigning our location while building epistemological and political links with other location” (1997, 5). In an interconnected world, this seems to be the unavoidable task and in this project it was imperative.

“Locating” The Field

The nature of the questions that I wanted to explore called for a multi-sited project approach from the start. For reasons I will explain, this was to be a project with the offspring of Muslim immigrants and converts in the greater Chicago and Phoenix metropolitan areas (henceforth Chicagoland and the Phoenix–Valley respectively). Because diversity of perspectives is critical here, it was not going to be limited to a specific institution or location within these cities. But in expanding and transcending boundaries from a single site and locale, what seemed as a positive and necessary
characteristic to capture the complexities I anticipated posed many challenges during fieldwork. In her critique of multi-sited ethnography, Candea sees weakness in its lack of “attention to processes of bounding, selection and choice – processes which any ethnographer has to undergo to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account” (2009, 27). This indeterminacy presented itself in my case in questions and choices of: do I include all suburbs, go to every mosque and/or organization, or should I select a few people and follow them everywhere including their houses or work places; is that even possible without being intrusive? How much media analysis of the public discourse and other sources with which collaborators engage should I consider? The freedom of multi-sitedness was almost overwhelming and at times paralyzing. Like Candea in her Corsican village, I grappled with the questions of “how many leads to follow? How much context to seek? How much information is enough information?” (2009, 33). I constantly had to choose between “hanging out” at the mosque or organization, or the Muslim student association, or attending a lecture versus a comedy show, meeting someone for coffee or attending a study circle or a youth-group meeting or social gathering. The constant fear of missing something important or of not being comprehensive in capturing the complexities that I have experienced is due to what Candea aptly calls the “arbitrariness” of the field and the “tyranny of choice” (2009, 34). As I selected one option or another, like her, I felt that “the imagination of freedom and unboundedness made any choice, boundary or restriction feel like an illicit practice, just as the thought that ‘fieldwork’ included every possible interaction, practice or observation, left me with the uneasy sense that any moment spent alone was evidence of ‘shirking’ – nothing was out of bounds, and no time was off duty” (2009,34). I questioned my motives and possible agenda for every inclusion and exclusion.
As I reflected on my fieldwork experience, I realized that, while the impression left by the traditional fieldsite was one of stability and “sitting” rather than a dizzying mobility and multiplicity, the experience outlined above is not limited to multi-sited methods. Yet this sense of incompleteness is obscured in ethnography perhaps in part because the singularity of the conventional site somehow defines and delimits the choices to some degree. Additionally, the ethnographic products of fieldwork, rarely if at all, give insights into the methodological struggles of defining the field site or make explicit that it is an expected and acceptable methodological practice to make choices and delimit the multiplicity and take responsibility for it. Rather than a defect in the design that must be overcome, defining the field through a continuous and deliberate process of inclusion and exclusion is what Marcus calls a “strong norm and accountability for intended, structured partiality and incompleteness in ethnographic research design” and where some sites are “treated ‘thickly’ and others ‘thinly’” (2009, 185).

As I spent time in different venues (homes, mosques, not-for-profit organizations, schools, conference halls, coffee shops or online), met individuals and groups at dinners, lectures, dhikr (remembrance) or dars (study) circles or read books, newspapers, Facebook and blogs, or watched YouTube clips, I was not striving to capture nor simplify the whole of the Muslim American reality. Rather, I was attempting to explore it from different viewing points and frames and show the complexities, incongruities and diversity inherent in such reality to gain understanding of experiences. If anthropology’s objective is to study the “lifeways of its informants” (Gatt 2009, 109), then I must follow the paths of such lifeways however unlocatable the field may seem.

I was working part time during my fieldwork in Phoenix-valley but that was not the case in Chicagoland. In consequence, the rhythms of my days were different at the
two sites. Yet, I was in a way at both sites at any given day through online research, email and phone exchanges, and Skype chats. My day typically started with email correspondences, sending surveys, or scheduling interviews, or following up on a discussion. I checked community calendars for upcoming events to attend and also read the day’s headlines from Google news-alert that I had set up for the keywords “Muslim Americans”. When I was out moving around, I was most frequently meeting a participant or two for lunch or tea and second most frequently attending either a social gathering or community event at a mosque or another venue. During these gatherings, I engaged in individual or group discussions and I recruited participants for my study. I attended programs at different mosques, sometimes on the same day. The interactions I had and relationships I formed were not always connected nor were they all through prolonged face-to-face encounters. Some were in sporadic meetings in different events and venues or through structured emails or planned interviews; some were hours–long deep conversations, others were long-term relationships or encounters that have since turned into deeper collaborations or friendships.

Participants’ involvement in religious communal activities varied from those who never took part, to Ramadan and Eid “holiday Muslims,” to those who were community organizers and leaders. On occasions, it seemed the only thing that connected the activities I joined was my participation. This is not uncommon in multi-sited research. Amit and her contributors, for example, studied networks that did not seem to exist independent of the researcher; in fact, the fieldworker’s “movements and contacts still served as the key articulation between all the individuals, events and sites she encountered” (Amit 1999, 14). When the processes we are exploring “produce common social conditions or statuses…but not necessarily coterminous collectivities” Amit argues, “it may not be sufficient or possible for anthropologists to simply join in. They may have
to purposively create the occasions for contacts that might well be as mobile, diffuse and episodic as the processes they are studying” (1999,15). Under such circumstances, ethnography has become a series of “polymorphous engagements” with collaborators at diverse sites and on the phone or skype or email and where data is obtained from various sources including popular culture, digital and print media and documents (Hannerz 2003).

The absence of the traditional single fieldsite where one interacted with the same people in the same limited locations could be viewed as problematic in terms of the depth of the knowledge gained or the relationships cultivated in this project. But this multi-siteness in fact duplicated the very characteristics of my collaborators’ lives and was not one created by the nature of this project. Among Muslim Americans, relationships are cultivated through invitations and rendezvous at and outside community venues/events as participants traverse places (home, university, work, mosque and other public and private venues) and spaces (online social networks, conferences and cyberspaces). One’s social network crisscrosses state and national lines. Long before, during and after fieldwork, my own life within this religious community, whether in the Phoenix-valley or Chicagoland, resembled my collaborators. Like them, I engaged in “mosque hopping,” found out about events and community news through emails lists, Facebook or friends, or community calendars of the various mosques or organizations. I would attend events and be immersed in “Muslim atmosphere” and leave to my neighborhood or work or school and have no contact for days or weeks at times. These are the rhythms or “lifeways” of many of my participants and mine as well, as Muslim Americans. All these places and spaces are interconnected. Rather than finding the “field” out there existing prior to and post fieldwork, it is through these processes and deliberately with the labor and attention of the researcher that the field is
constructed and defined. Through identifying links and threads, spaces and places and through exclusion as much as through inclusion does the ethnographic field emerge (Amit 1999, Hannerz 2003, Marcus 1998). Yet making these choices was not without struggle and an aboding sense of missing something, a shared feeling undoubtedly due to our internalizing the anthropological narrative.

**Phoenix-valley and Chicagoland: Connections and Disjunctures**

Humans are affected by the physical as much as by the social landscape they inhabit. The physical landscape (places and spaces) determines our activities and alters our moods and opportunities available to us. As Clifford (1997) points out, space is a place plus meaning but conceptualizing space as a social construct does not relegate the physical environment to irrelevance; indeed the physical environment shapes and is shaped by its inhabitants (Gatt, 2009). The historical and geographical distinctions between and within the Phoenix-valley and Chicagoland is not without significance. One could argue that the relationships and experiences project collaborators have “do not ‘transcend’ place, but are made possible and co-produced by what the manifold non–human as well as the human constituents of their environments afford” (Gatt, 2009, 113). Regional geographical and cultural differences, population size and makeup, membership in smaller and more recently established community (Phoenix-valley) versus membership in a larger, older and socially/politically engaged community (Chicagoland) are consequential differences between the two. But the Phoenix-valley and Chicagoland also have historical and current connections that became more and more noticeable during this project.
The desert landscape of Arizona figures in the history of Islam in America. In 1856, the United States Army was experimenting with the use of camels for transportation in the desert Southwest. The army employed the services of an Arab from the then Greater Syria, Hajj Ali, who came to be known as Hi Jolly. Hi Jolly lived and died in Arizona where the Hi Jolly monument is favorite tourist attraction in the Town of Quartzsite. Desert climate health benefits brought Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the NOI, to Arizona in the 1960s and he split his time between Phoenix and his base in Chicago. He and his followers established three temples that represent the earliest contemporary Muslim presence in Arizona. These temples eventually became mosques; the change in the name marks a transition that imbued new meaning to the same place. After the death of the NOI founder, his son W.D. Muhammad (d.2008) transitioned the overwhelming majority of NOI followers –including the Arizona community– to Sunni Islam. The first Sunni Mosque in Arizona is still led by and frequented by members of the late W.D. Muhammad community and thus remains connected to the Chicago community, however tenuous this connection may be.

In general, demographically, Arizona is home to many Chicagoans who relocated here for weather, work, or college and many of these are also Muslims. Those long term residents in the valley maintain contacts with families and friends back in Chicago and were a great resource for me during the Chicago phase of this project. The movement is ongoing. On a regular basis, I met people who moved between the two sites. For example, in one way or another, I became involved with four young Chicagoans relocating to the Phoenix-valley during my project and was able to draw on my connections to facilitate their transition here. Additionally, Chicago is often the site for the largest Muslim American annual conventions, attended by Muslims from around the country. For many Arizona Muslims, especially activists and leaders, these conventions
are venues for networking and religious and organizational education which they bring back to the valley. For many activists, Chicago Muslim organizations and intracommunity, interfaith and civic engagements are models to be emulated. Nearly a century long history of Muslim presence and the unique position of Chicago as home to a very large and well organized and socially/politically active immigrant and Blackamerican Muslim communities along with its centrality to today’s Muslim American presence, distinguishes Chicagoland from the Phoenix-valley.

Chicagoland’s racial geography divides the metropolitan area into ethnic neighborhoods. Unlike in Phoenix-valley, the Muslims in Chicagoland reside in these ethnic neighborhoods. Though mixed to some extent, each neighborhood is dominated by one ethnic group (for example, Bosnians in the North). Chicagoland’s residential segregation places people who are in the same income bracket in different areas. For example, poor South Asians, many of whom are Muslims, live on the north side of Chicago while Blackamericans live on the south side. Middle class members of the two groups live even further apart; a great majority of South Asians live in the north and northwestern suburbs, while most Blackamericans live in the south and southwestern suburbs (Karim 2008). Devon Avenue on the north side of Chicago, for example, is like little India and Pakistan with sights, smells and sounds that give glimpses of the subcontinent. There are ethnic stores and restaurants, and elderly men and women dressed in traditional South Asian garb stroll the sidewalks in summer. Here one can sit down to have Pizza with halal lamb meet at a restaurant and pre-order halal Thanksgiving turkey dinner then browse the shelves of Kazi bookstore, the largest and oldest Muslim American publisher and bookstore. A male second generation Indian American interviewee, commenting on how little interactions Muslims in this area have
with other Muslim groups or the larger society, noted that some children here speak English with a South Asian accent even though they may have been born and raised here.

Many poor and recent Arab immigrants live on the south side of Chicago while most middle class Arabs live in the southwest and northwest suburbs (Hanania 2005). The interaction among Arabs and Blackamericans is strained on the south side of Chicago and often marked by mutual contempt, nourished by the reality that some Arabs own convenience stores and sell alcohol. As one interviewee told me, most then take the money to the suburbs where they live and build million dollar mosques. This residential segregation means that where they worship and interact as a community is also segregated, creating what Jamillah Karim terms *ethnic Muslim spaces*. She notes that though not exclusive to one group, typically one group is predominant in such ethnic spaces or *immigrant spaces* since most South Asian and Arabs tend to share mosques. Regardless of how ethnically mixed such spaces might be, Blackamerican Muslims do not make the distinction and “most lump them all together as immigrants” (Karim 2008, 54).

My connections to Arizona and to Chicago reach beyond this project into friendships developed through years of permanent residence in the Phoenix-valley and frequent visits to Chicagoland. Additionally, I lived in Chicago for three months in 2010 to engage in extensive fieldwork. The relationships and interactions I cultivated for more than a decade while I worked, studied, lectured, organized, mentored and volunteered in the community did not become external artifacts that needed to be shed to strive for “objective” scholarship. Ignoring or breaking these links to “immerse” myself in the fieldwork would, in fact, have been, as Amit concluded, “an oxymoron” (1999, 6). These connections and relations enriched this project and in many ways the people involved are also collaborators in the co-construction of this ethnographic narrative.
The collaborators in this ethnographic project are the adult (eighteen years or older) children and grandchildren of immigrants and converts who identified themselves as Muslim regardless of their level of observance. The collaborative nature of this work materialized rather quickly as I had to change the terms I used in the recruitment script stating the inclusion criteria. I initially used the term “second and third generation” and explained that this meant American born and/or raised regardless of background, but I had to modify that once I learned the different ways the term was being understood. I then specified “the children or grandchildren of immigrants or converts” who were born in the U.S. or whose parents immigrated or converted before the children were thirteen years old. My collaborators are individuals whom I encountered at Muslim places of worship, events, and organizations or who responded to email messages circulated through social networks, Muslim student associations, and community email lists. As a snowball and convenience sample and due to its necessarily small size, representativeness of the full diversity of this demographic is limited and was not the objective of the project from the start. During participant observation in mosques and organizational events and in social gatherings, I paid particular attention to the demographics and interactions of attendees, noting differences between generations, topics and themes of events, religious discourses and rituals and cultural practices. I engaged in many informal conversations and discussions with members of both first and subsequent generations where things might be said that would not be revealed in a formal interview. Some of these conversations turned into passionate debates about the topics that will be delved into throughout the ensuing chapters.
I utilized a self-administered questionnaire for greater participation and to survey a wider range of perspectives. In the end, 246 men and women returned hard copies, emailed forms or completed a secured online questionnaire (Appendix I). The hardcopy forms and electronic document surveys were then entered into the online survey, downloaded into a spreadsheet, and analyzed for themes and patterns. The survey instrument included short answers, multiple choice questions/statements including Likart scales. One set of questions inquired about participants’ sources of Islamic education and sampled their perspectives regarding the key issues of generational/gender/ethnic relations and what they viewed as differences – if any – between their religious understanding and that of their parents. Another set gathered information about what collaborators perceived as the challenges or opportunities for Muslim Americans and about how they envision the future. Yet another set of survey questions gathered demographic information such as age, sex, ethnic background, level of education, languages spoken, and level of involvement in Muslim gatherings and events. Except for age, sex and city of residence, all questions had multiples line available for further elaborations of answers or for general comments. The relationship between these demographic variables and the variations in participants’ responses to the other questions were analyzed to identify themes and patterns.

I engaged in many rich informal conversations, but interviews provided a space for longer narratives of self through which understanding and meaning of experiences emerged. All interviews were semi-structured and began with an opened ended statement of “let’s start with you telling me about your age, your background, your family and anything else you’d like to add.” The co-constructed nature of narrative was apparent from the start in the topic of the discussion, the “semi-structured” format of the interview, and my subsequent and follow-up questions as the narrative progressed. I had
a list of questions but invariably did not go through all of them because I often had to follow my narrator who took me into different and deeper paths of self-exploration and experiences, sometimes surprising both of us. Initially, I was worried about not sticking to my prepared list of questions, but after the first few interviews I realized what was gained in the process. Chase (2005) notes that understanding the process by which people make sense and meaning of their experiences entails a recognition that rather than obtaining straight answers to our questions, it is these narrations that “constitute the empirical material” of our research. This, she notes, requires considering the interviewee as a narrator and necessitates “a conceptual shift away from the idea that interviewees have answers to researcher’s questions and towards the idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own” (Chase 2005, 659).

Participants had an opportunity in the survey to indicate their willingness to be interviewed. Some opted to only take part in interviews or informal discussions and contacted me through emails or text messaging. In the end, 43 people (19 from Phoenix-valley and 24 from Chicagoland including 28 women and 15 men) took part in interviews that varied in duration from 45 to 120 audio-recorded minutes. The open-ended interviews aimed at eliciting narrations of the self, belongings and representations and allowed for a more nuanced exploration of issues of identity and religious understanding/perspectives and the positional variables that shape each. After the first open-ended question that began the narrative, questions like “how do you answer the question ‘where are you from?’ ” and “tell me what it was like in school” followed. Other questions explored their sources and resources for religious knowledge. To address the research question about intra-community relationships, interviewees were asked about their social networks and about the makeup and quality of community leadership (religious and political). Additionally, I asked interviewees about their views on ethnic
and religious differences and relations and about the roles, needs, and interactions of younger Muslims. I also inquired about their views on differences and similarities between Islam as practiced/understood by themselves, their parents, immigrants and converts, and by Muslims in America compared to those living in Muslim majority countries.

This line of questioning also aimed to address research questions about the characteristics and authentication process of Islam in America and its possible cultural products. I entered the transcribed interviews into Nvivo data management software and analyzed for themes and patterns within an interview and across the various interviews and survey material. As I analyzed, I was keeping in mind the five intersecting lenses and the approaches proposed by Chase (2005) for examining narratives: 1) narratives as a “distinct form of discourse” and meaning making; 2) narratives as a “verbal action” which constructs and performs self and social reality; 3) narratives are “both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstance” and this produces both similarities, differences and contradictions; 4) narratives are “socially situated interactive performances” and thus fluid and specific to that context; 5) researchers are also narrators as they analyze, represent and write what they researched and their narrations are, therefore, subject to the previous four lenses (Chase 2005,656-7). The inherent co-constructed nature of narratives and the approach to them as a space for both self-performing and self-discovery was brought home to me on more than one occasion when my collaborators shared with me during or after our exchanges that they learned something about themselves or better understood something about events or experiences in their lives. They were eager to learn the outcome of this project and asked me if they alone had these ideas or if others shared their views. I promised to share my findings and plan to go back and present to the communities where I worked.
To contextualize the religious and public discourses that engaged or affected participants, interviews included discussions about Muslim religious scholars and leaders and what is written or said about Muslims. I also explored oral and written discourse of the primary religious personalities that interviewees identified as most influential. This research project took place not only in the charged post-9/11 atmosphere but also in the context of the recent extremely partisan, intensely anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. Though already growing in the past decade, these sentiments seem to have been accelerated and exacerbated by the election of Barack Obama as a U.S. President—a Black man with African Muslim roots. The Tea Party and the Stop the Islamization of America movements as well as the increasing arms sales and Minute Man militias may well reflect the rise of nativist sentiments and present examples of re-articulation of old racism with new enemies. Because identity formation takes place within a socio-cultural milieu that individuals shape and are shaped by, it was critical to examine the dominant narratives regarding Islam and Muslims in print, broadcast or digital media. I dedicated chapter six to exploring this issue.

This study does not focus on a particular locale, such as an organization, or mosque, or residential neighborhood, and those who frequent it. Doing so might have been easier and could have provided a “thicker” description. But the questions of this project required a larger and more diverse set of participants, not in order to generalize but as a way to gain greater breadth and depth in order to “assemble a composite picture of a group’s experiences” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, 87). As such, the project involves individuals—or follows identities as suggested by Marcus—who engage and/or identify with Muslim Americans, a particular community of knowledge and practice rather than a group inhabiting a particular locale. At the same time, I did not follow a
specific group of individuals. Instead, I chose to focus on generational cohorts as they engaged in daily life and in religiously-centered activities and discourses. These activities and discourses both define and are defined by these participants and their socio-political context, which, they in turn shape and by which they are shaped. In doing so, the individual is not fetishized to the neglect of the culture or society but there is a recognition that individuals create and are shaped by cultural and social landscapes. They are not passive vessels molded and overcome by social structure or culture. The individual here is considered, as Chomicka noted, the site of the “anthropological concrete” because ultimately it is individuals, not their culture or society that can and do act (2007, 9). On the other hand, while it is critical to give the individuals due focus—after all they are the ones individually and collectively experiencing and creating these larger structures—it is important to heed the cautionary words of Metcalf not to “be deceived by models of the individual as simply a cultural consumer picking from a suddenly expanded range of products” (Metcalf 2001, 169). To balance this demand, one needs to engage in a double gaze that alternates focusing the observation and analytical lens on the individual with panning out to the larger social and cultural landscape before zooming back in again on the individual. Additionally, how one conceives the research subject and ultimately frames whatever knowledge that is gained is critically important. Viewing participants as objects mined for information (Marcus 2009) would only provide individual stories, but when they are viewed as collaborators in weaving a narrative system, the cultural landscape emerges from their multiple stories. As Fotour points out, individual subjects enable us to access these “distributed knowledge systems” where individuals are “manifest at the nexus of cross-cutting discursive, political-economic, cultural currents” and could be considered as “nodes” in this systems (Marcus 2009, 189).
In this project then, understanding the lives of Muslim Americans is an attempt to shed light not only on the individuals but also on the Muslim American “community” and its culture. Here culture is understood in Fotour’s “trans-individual sense”, where culture is assimilated differently by different individuals and in the process creates different kinds of subjects. These subjects are constantly changing and continuously engaged in digesting and interpreting this culture and where there is as much “knowledge making” as there is “knowledge holding” (Marcus 2009, 189-90). In this framing, understanding an individual’s “embedded perspective” (Marcus 2009, 193) is an entry point into understanding this distributed knowledge of culture that shapes and is shaped by these individuals. Participants and the researcher’s positionality in the socio-cultural landscape, therefore, determine the views they narrate and co-construct.

**Being a Muslim, Black, and Woman Researcher**

For years, as a youth mentor and member of organizations and committees working with men and women of diverse backgrounds, I had countless discussions about the issues that interest and concern many Muslim women and men, young and old, converts and immigrants. So the questions I aim to explore in this project are inspired by these experiences and observations. But the sociopolitical context of these experiences and questions poses a challenge. Being a Muslim researcher afforded me many advantages in the field: easier access and familiarity with religious discourse; cognizance of the relevant identity politics; and ability to frame my inquiries with proper attention to community sensibilities. While I share a religious and some cultural heritage with my collaborators, my position in terms of gender, class, religious understanding, race and
ethnicity is on constantly shifting grounds, making me sometimes a relative insider and sometimes a relative outsider, depending on the makeup of the group.

From the start, however, I knew that the legitimacy of my questions and my motives would be of concern. Being a woman asking questions about gender issues when outsiders are calling for liberating “oppressed Muslim women,” being Black and asking questions about inter-ethnic relationships in a racially conscious society, asking about/of younger Muslims in the midst of heated debates about radicalized young Muslims and stories about FBI infiltration, all warrant some suspicion and raise questions about my motives and agenda. The fact that a cadre of avowedly feminist Muslims or former Muslims is on a mission to “save Muslim women,” often collaborating with or being co-opted by right wing neo-cons and sharing both a last name and country of origin with one of them (Ayan Hirsi Ali), did not help my case, especially in Chicago where I was an outsider.

To address these issues, I employed multiple strategies:

1) In the Phoenix-valley, people have known me for years and that afforded me some credibility. But at both sites, I made a point of meeting community scholars, leaders and organizers to receive their approval and support. I then made that fact known to all participants.

In Chicago, before I even started, I attended a public lecture by a renowned Muslim scholar with whom I had worked for years and I was introduced to key figures in the community.

2) Beyond a data gathering method, I used participant observation as a way to be seen and known in the community and to discuss my project in details in informal settings where people could comfortably ask me probing questions.
3) I employed a multiple method research design using participant observation, a questionnaire, and interviews. Participants were offered a choice to do one or both of the latter.

I had thought of the anonymity of a survey as a positive feature that would minimize participants’ self-censorship. For many who did not know me, however, the survey was a source of concern and surely deterred some from participating. Others said they would not participate until we met face-to-face. Some collaborators took issues with my questions about gender or inter-group relations. They argued that, as a Muslim and since “Islam liberated women” and “there is no racism in Islam,” I should know better than to ask! So what were my motives? Though these concerns were allayed through our discussions, I have no doubt that suspicion and concern about questions and the questioner dissuaded some from participating. I know the jokes about the FBI using this information were in fact not just jokes. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of people I met were immensely helpful and incredibly generous and open. Those who participated, both men and women, surprised me with the depth and breadth of their responses and honesty. Interviews scheduled for an hour often lasted twice as long and continued as conversation over dinner or tea/coffee.

I was initially concerned that male participants might be reluctant to be interviewed by a female, and a Muslim one at that. But my gender did not seem to be much of an issue even for very observant men, once the above concerns were addressed. In those long interviews, men and women discussed in detail their childhood and family dynamics, their thoughts on community leadership and inter-group relations, Islam in America, and their hopes for the future. They also spoke frankly and in depth about gender relations and interactions. Some, both men and women, accepted my invitation
for lunch or dinner to thank them and these instances became great opportunities for further discussions where they also had a chance to ask about my thoughts.

Research in the “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” Era

Islam and the West have for long been constructed as mutually exclusive universes. This narrative, rooted in recent and remote encounters and histories, is frequently instrumentalized for ideological and political ends by Muslims and non-Muslims. The social and political consequences vary, but a common narrative of the “Muslim problem” is emerging in the West. The public referendum against minarets in Switzerland, the French headscarf ban and criminalization of niqab (face veil) in public, the lower Manhattan Muslim center and Qur’an burning controversies, and the belief that President Obama is a crypto-Muslim – read: “dangerous” – exemplify the current “Muslim problem” narrative. This vociferous discourse and its anti-West counterpart have great consequences for ordinary Western Muslims. Undertaking any research in this charged atmosphere, therefore, is fraught with ethical dilemmas and methodological challenges. Part of the challenge is that this discourse and my research are taking place in the context of a post-9/11 world dominated by “culture talk,” the most prominent among which is a “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” (Mamdani 2002) narrative. This narrative erases all diversity and creates gendered monolith images of violent misogynistic Muslim men and oppressed women. Lumped together in the “bad Muslim” category are: those Muslims critical of U.S. foreign policy, violent extremists, social “conservatives’ and “fundamentalists,” and political and social movements that draw on Islam in one way or another (Mamdani 2002). The “good Muslim” camp includes those perceived as “liberal,” Sufis, non-practicing and, strangely, former Muslims. Membership
in the “good Muslim” camp is only provisional, as the planner of the lower Manhattan Muslim cultural center – Sufi imam and participant in State Department public diplomacy project—found out in the summer of 2010.

The “good/bad Muslim” discourse seems to have a call-and-response relationship with that of Muslim ideologues who define Islam in terms of and in opposition to the West. Though the “dangerous man” image (terrorist/fundamentalist Muslim and heathen/imperial Westerner) is essential to these ideologies, women bodies are the battleground and the borderlines. The hijab (the headscarf, though often referred to as the “veil”) is a potent symbol that has become the litmus test in this discourse among non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The “Muslim woman” is, therefore, essential to this narrative. To one side, her headscarf or face-veil is a sign of piety and of her status as a “good Muslim” and it is often a pre-requisite for her to “represent” the community in public. To the other side, unless she is “unveiled” and critical of Islam and Muslims, she is oppressed and is the symbol of all that is wrong with Islam. In this context, colonial civilizing missions and narratives of “white men saving brown women from their brown men” (Spivak 1988, 297) have been revived along with feminist complicity in that project (Mohanty 2003; Scott 2010). In today’s version, the “war on terrorism” is also about western military men liberating Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Meanwhile in the homeland, as former President George W. Bush had noted, good Christian and Jewish women were apparently helping the Muslim women – “women of cover” - who were too afraid to go in public because of backlash

For a network of critics of Islam, Muslim women confirm the worst of the trope of misogyny and patriarchy, (as though Muslims have exclusivity) and hence serve as the best validators. For example, Canadian Irshad Manji and second generation American Asra Nomani, both journalists of South Asian background, are the public image of “good
Muslims” and credible insiders who expose the “truth” about Islam. They wrote books about personal traumas they attribute to the Muslim-ness of their family and the local Muslim communities that shunned them because of their sexuality. They advocate that Islam must follow in the footsteps of the Christian Reformation and criticize Muslims for outdated practices and beliefs. Women who left Islam make even better validators. Egyptian-born Nanie Darwish founded *Former Muslims United* and argues that those “who take time to read the Qur’an and Hadith and want to follow the example of Mohammed cannot help but be terrorists” (2008, 231). Ayan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim of Somali origin and a former member of the Dutch Parliament, is touted as the premier insider who was subjected to female genital cutting, forced marriage, and sexual repression. Their stories may differ, but these validators contribute to one narrative and share an intellectual and political stance of uncritical exaltations of secularism and Western civilization, unquestioned support of the U.S. and Israel, alarm-sounding about a Muslim threat, and promotion of Muslim profiling, surveillance and whatever else is “necessary” for security. In a racialization process that Muslims and other groups undergo, Comaroff (1996, 166) noted that constructing difference takes place in the minutiae of everyday practices and encounters and that the bodies and dress of women are key sites for construction of difference.

Because of the centrality of “the Muslim woman” to the hegemonic discourse on Islam, I wanted to examine how and whether this one-dimensional category interfaces with and informs participants’ narratives and experiences. Young women shared their frustration with being painted as voiceless and invisible. Those who do not wear the headscarf were bothered that people assumed they were either not Muslims or were non-observant. Many of those who wear a headscarf (hijabis in 2nd generation Muslim parlance) said they are tired of having to always be the “cheery nice Muslim” in public.
lest they be thought of as extremists or oppressed. They expressed frustrations that Muslim women without headscarves were presumed to be liberal when, in reality, they may hold much more socially and politically conservative views than those with headscarves. To illustrate this point, Zakiyah, a thirty year old hijabi woman of African background, told me of an incident where a producer from a major TV network, doing a program the summer of 2010 on Muslim Americans, came to her work place at a Muslim majority organization and asked to interview a “moderate Muslim woman”. Her non-Muslim colleagues assured the producer that all the women there qualified and introduced the producer to this young woman. But the producer saw her and said “sorry but we are looking for a moderate Muslim, one who doesn’t cover”.

The headscarf looms large in discussions inside and outside the community and permeates casual conversations and formal discussions of men and (non)hijabi women. Since those wearing it are framed in public discourse as oppressed, often some of them equally reduce and stereotype non-hijabi women as oppressed by a materialistic culture that exploits their bodies. The image of hijabi women in public in America was to Harvard historian Leila Ahmed a stunning and “disturbing sight,” and the telltale sign of Islamism (2011, 3). This was concerning to Ahmed whose childhood encounters in Egypt with Islamic revival and its ethos of public piety (symbolized by a particular style of hijab), service, civic and political engagement left an indelible negative imprint on her. The new public piety, she says, was unlike the widely practiced “old Islam” personal piety which she and her parents knew. Consequently, the sight of women in hijab and the visceral negative reactions she had toward that image propelled her to ask if there was some kind of “extremist, militant Islam taking root” in Europe and United States. She wanted to know how did these young women learn they had to wear hijab and more importantly why would they —living in a free society—feel compelled to accept what they
were being told (L. Ahmed 2011, 5). This makes her findings all the more significant and surprising. The hijab, she concludes, signifies something worrisome to her and others but had different meanings to younger generations – in the West and elsewhere – who did not share her generation’s history. The meanings of the hijab lost its “older, historically bounded moorings” and became imbued with concurrently circulating new meanings and significations: a sign of Muslim Otherness, a sign of oppression or, to those electing to wear it, a sign of obedience to God or expression of spiritual commitment. It may be a performance of self or an embodied practice that defines certain bodily and behavioral comportments as possible or not and serves as a technology to cultivate a pious inner state (Mahmood 2005).

Regardless of their position on hijab, in this project, in Ahmed’s research, and in the community, women’s activism for social justice was inseparable from gender justice. Women pursued gender equity grounding it in Islamic discursive tradition by debating, challenging and introducing different religious interpretations. For example, Asifa Quraishi-Landes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, who specializes in comparative Islam and U.S. laws, titled a lecture on “Who Says Sharia Demands the Stoning of Women? A Description of Islamic Law and Constitutionalism” (2008). A second generation of South Asian and Whiteamerican background, Asifa presented her lecture at Muslim conferences on family law emphasizing the requirement of gender justice. Committed Muslim women, hijabis or not, be they converts or immigrants from different generations and backgrounds, and across the interpretive tendencies are revisiting canonical texts and engaging the discursive tradition, challenging and proposing new perspectives5. Their primary concerns are local, but their commitments extend to society and the global ummah.
I was surprised by how often feminism came up in my fieldwork, because I avoided appearing to be motivated by it. Those averse to critical community assessment by a woman or suspicious of the legitimacy and priority of these questions to a “community under attack,” blamed Western feminist ideology and Islamophobes for defining Muslim women’s agenda. But even those who accept the caricature of feminism as the ideology of “men-hating aggressive women,” do so as they take for granted the advancement of women and champion pushing that agenda forward, illustrating Baumgardner’s and Richards’ point that to younger generations “feminism is like fluoride” (2000, 17). This was exemplified by a twenty-five year old man of Palestinian parentage who told me that he “detest[s] feminism” and thinks Muslim women should never identify with it. And then without skipping a beat, he noted his scathing criticism of restrictive gender interactions among Muslims and was passionate about Muslim women having active roles in the community. He advocates women pursuing careers and developing intellectually rather than “being obsessed” with marriage, and he had told his parents he would do whatever it takes for his sisters to pursue their education and professional lives. If these sisters need to move out of town to pursue the best opportunities and parents oppose their living alone away from home, this brother would move to the same city to overcome parents’ opposition and in doing so enable his sisters to pursue their dreams. His detest for feminism is in part informed by the image and stance of the women validators of anti-Muslim discourse who are, even as they collaborate with the conservative right, are nevertheless portrayed as feminists. The good/bad Muslim ideology and discourse and Muslims’ reaction serve multiple functions including concealing injustices against women in Western societies and Muslim communities alike.
In such a context, talking about gender-related issues or about self and community is a difficult task. Often there seems to be an imagined interlocutor for whom participants need to show the “real Islam” and defend the community. It is also challenging for a researcher to balance building rapport and methodological and political accountability with critical scholarship, interrogating both apologist and neo-orientalist narratives while championing social justice without confirming the worst stereotypes.

Multiple Accountabilities

As researchers, we too grapple with complex identities and with contradictions. Our accountability is not only intellectual but also social, ethical, and political. Methodologically, I am accountable to represent my collaborator’s views honestly while maintaining their anonymity but, to do so, for some simply using a pseudonym will not be sufficient. On the other hand, the important context of their views will be lost if I overly disguise their identity. I also realize that in being evaluated through it, resenting it, and working against it, I too do not escape the “Good Muslim, bad Muslim” narrative frame. As a member of Muslim America, I also shape and in turn I am shaped by the other narratives presented in this project. I am vigilantly aware of the effects of that.

In the current context, my political accountability is not limited to how my findings will be perceived by Muslims –though that is crucial – but extends to how this study could invite state surveillance and be used against them. At the same time, my questions did not originate in mere intellectual curiosity. As the feminist scholar Harding noted: “questions that an oppressed group wants answered are not a request for ‘pure truth’ but are queries about how to change its conditions; how its world is shaped by forces beyond it...[how] to neutralize those forces arrayed against its emancipation,
growth, or development” (1987, 7). Since a narrative framework inspired this project’s theory and methodology, this project in turn aims to challenge the pervading narratives and contribute to the stories that could potentially create new narratives. As a woman, a member and researcher of a religious minority made up of ethnic minorities, my project is not apolitical and I realize it could have serious consequences beyond academia and on real lives; this is at once a source of great encouragement, empowerment, and anxiety.

**Significance**

This project aims to add to the general literature on Muslim Americans by bringing attention to the perspectives and positionalities of the offspring of both immigrants and converts. Because they represent and express multiple heritages (Islamic, ethnic and American), these younger generations of Muslim Americans are redefining Islam and America; this has significant implications. As members of the second and subsequent generations re-examine Islam in America and do so with an eye and ear on local and global discourses, Islam could be rooted in America just as it has been in many other areas. If and when this happens, Muslims will become producers of Islamic knowledge in the heart of the West. Since American cultural exports span all fields, American-produced Islamic knowledge is bound to be exported back to the Muslim majority world. Such a development would have consequential effects, including the undermining of dichotomizing discourses of extremism on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, as Islam begins to speak uniquely to American realities, as second and subsequent generations of Muslim Americans operationalize their religious values into civic engagement and contribute to addressing societal problems, and as art, literature and other cultural products of American Islam continue to appear, the American public
may come to see Islam as just another American religion—as Judaism and Catholicism became. Only then might Islam and Muslims no longer be seen as foreign. Such a development could have great public and foreign policy implications. This project’s contribution, hence, is to explore the status and state of second and third generation Muslim Americans and how they might be contributing to this process, one so significant to our understanding of pluralistic societies.

I also aim to contribute to identity studies. My theoretical point of departure is that the complex task of understanding individual and group identities requires simultaneously focusing the ethnographic lens on the individual, the social other, and society’s structure and culture. Therefore, rather than selecting one theory of identity formation, I draw upon a synthesis of several theoretical perspectives. This synthesis provides a framework that takes into account both micro and macro processes while interrogating recent and remote histories in which these individual and group self-images and (re)presentations were and continue to be shaped.

Muslim Americans’ minority status – as a religious minority of mostly ethnic minorities—necessitates exploration of the minority-majority relationship. Here a dialogical perspective on ethnicity focusing on power relations within social intercourse, without losing sight of the symbolic elements and the instrumental features of the politics of ethnicity, elucidates the complex nature of this concept. Critical Race Theory also provides a useful framework to deconstruct the duality (minority-majority and Black-White) and examine how whiteness maintains normativity, access to power (material and symbolic) and the simple privilege of being unhyphenated and neutral. Interrogating whiteness also challenges its exclusive claims to the creation of American culture by exploring the contribution of minorities, including Muslim Americans, to the (re)making of American culture.
Additionally, I hope to illustrate that the characteristic dynamism of identity construction extends to religions, which are neither fossilized dogmas nor fashionable trends. Any discourse on religion in a secular democracy inevitably involves questions about secularity’s public–private divide and what is appropriate in the public sphere. This study strives to contribute to those re-conceptualizations of the public sphere that challenge its singularity and problematize the private-public and secular-religious divides. In exploring Muslim American communities, this study will illustrate that public spheres are neither singular, homogeneous, nor culturally and status neutral; but they are instead contested places where some are privileged and others marginalized. These are not merely arenas for policy and intellectual debates but powerful discursive spaces for the (re)construction of religious praxis, cultural beliefs, and mental schemas as well as individual, communal and national identities.

When religion is examined in the context of immigration, it is typically seen as an important ethnic institution which ameliorates the disorientation caused by the immigration experience. Immigrants are pressured to adopt the language and the cultural ways of their host countries but they are generally not expected to change their religious beliefs. As such, immigration studies have long acknowledged the role of religion in facilitating the integration of immigrants into host societies by allowing them to carve their own space while providing them cultural and ethnic shelters from the vicissitudes of life in their new societies. But the significance of religion in the lives of second and subsequent generations, particularly those from non-Christian traditions, has not been well studied. Furthermore, recent immigration theories, such as segmented assimilation, have often neglected religion. This project endeavors to make some contribution in this field as well. First, it will show what becomes of religion among immigrant offspring as they develop their own understandings and practices of faith in
dialogue and negotiation with their parents and with peers of immigrant and convert backgrounds. Second, this project will point to the limitations of the three tracks envisioned by segmented assimilation theory by considering how the religious identity of immigrant offspring may propel them on yet a different trajectory on their path to “becoming American”. Third, it will problematize the widely accepted idea that religion plays a supportive role to immigrant cultures by highlighting how, in subsequent generations, religion might also challenge the practices and norms of these cultures.
See M. Ali (2011) for a summary of the findings and themes of this thesis project.

In the contemporary world, the notion of fieldwork in a “bounded village” if it ever existed became untenable. Consequently, as anthropology grappled with how to study subjects who are always on the move in the new global context, the stories in the anthropological narrative -like any narrative- have been modified to accommodate the new social realities of subjects and a world in motion. To accommodate the new methodological requirement of fieldwork and “being there,” Marcus (1995) proposed a multi-sited ethnography where fieldworker may follow people, ideas, products, people, or conflicts. The “field” remains central but here it is conceived of as multiple but interconnected locations. However, these multi-sited ethnographies have had mostly a transnational focus following migrants and other networks (Burrell 2009), products (Bestor 2001) and ideas (Krauss 2006).

Critics of multi-sited ethnography contend that not only does expanding the fieldwork sacrifice depth and “thick description” but it also purports holism it cannot deliver (Candea 2009; Wogan 2004). In the debates that ensued, proponents of multi-sited methods responded to the lack of depth argument noting that it is based on a traditional understanding of the field that focuses on boundaries of particular locale rather than on connections. Critics contend that such focus is untenable in the rapidly changing interconnected contemporary world (Clifford 1997; Hannerz 2003; Horse 2009; Marcus 1995). Furthermore, they argue, staying put in one place also lacked depth for it delimited the field by severing the locale from the multiple networks in which it was embedded. The presumed depth characterized by intense and long interaction in a mastered native language in the single site was always more of an ideal than a practical research reality (Clifford 1997, 54). Additionally, if participant observation is the trademark of anthropological research and if our research participants are on the move, then we too must experience the world as they do (Clifford 1997). Falzon argues that in participating in the moving world of the participants, the researcher experiences “a broader but possible 'shallower' world, as they did” and that “understanding the shallow may itself be a form of depth” (2009, 9).


Manji is openly gay and Nomani had a child outside of marriage


Unlike traditional assimilation theory, in segmental assimilation, the children of immigrants to America may follow three different trajectories: they might become absorbed into middle class suburban life, or incorporated into inner-city minority underclass and adopt oppositional attitudes towards middle-class norms, or they might become educationally and economically upwardly mobile while maintaining their ethnic cultural norms (Rumbaut 1999).
CHAPTER 3
COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATOR PROFILES

Since the U.S. census does not take religious affiliation into account, the actual size of any religious community in the U.S. is but an approximation with important sociopolitical—and in the case of Muslims—geopolitical implications. Often underestimated by outsiders and overestimated by insiders, estimates of the number of Muslim Americans ranges from 2.6 million¹ to 7 million persons (Bukhari 2003). The actual number is more likely around 5 million persons and rapidly growing because of immigration, a high birth rate, and conversion. While Islam’s public image is that of a foreign religion practiced by Arabs, Islam’s historical roots in the United States reach much deeper and today’s Muslims are hard at work to unearth these deeper roots. Some suggest that Islam’s initial contact with America’s indigenous population might even predate Columbus (Quick 1996), while others point to West African explorers and Muslims from Spain (known as Moors) who accompanied Columbus in 1492 (Muhammad 2005; Nyang 1999). While these findings are rejected by most American studies scholars, there is general acceptance that at least 10 percent of the Africans brought to America through slavery were Muslims (Austin 1997; Diouf 1998; Leonard 2003). Although little is known about these early Muslims, since many lost their religion and cultural practices, some of their stories are preserved in slave narratives (Austin 1997).

From the founding days² of the Republic through its various wars, Islam and Muslims were part of the nation’s history. The first recorded Whiteamerican convert to Islam was the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, Alexander Russell Webb, who was the spokesperson for Islam in 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (Leonard
Muslim immigration begins in earnest in the second half of the 19th century. South Asians as well as Arab citizens of the Ottoman Empire from Greater Syria (today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) arrived in the early 1880s in search of better economic opportunities in the wealthy West (Curtis 2010a). These Black, White and Brown roots of Muslims in America might appear insignificant but they are ones to which today’s Muslim Americans are reaching back in order to ground themselves firmly in the nation’s history and assert their belonging.

Divergent Origins and Converging Histories

The modern history of Muslim Americans, however, starts in the late 19th century and is a story of transcontinental migration, from south to north, and of transatlantic migration, from east to west. It is a chapter in Blackamerican history as well as a chronicle of America’s immigration history. Contemporary Muslim history begins with the migration of southern Blacks to the north in search of better economic opportunities and the arrival of immigrants from the former Ottoman Empire in larger numbers for the same reason. This latter group consisted mostly of young men from rural areas. The numbers and the diversity of immigrants increased dramatically after the 1965 Immigration Act, which abolished national origin quotas. Unlike earlier Muslim immigrants, post-1965 immigrants were mostly urbanites, well-educated, and professionals or students who came from the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Their arrival marked a new phase of Islam in America and changed the demographics and dynamics of Muslims in the U.S. (Haddad and Esposito 2000; Leonard 2003; Burke 2010). In subsequent decades, immigration through family reunification, refugee resettlement and undocumented immigration brought more educationally and demographically diverse groups.
The story of the Muslim community in America is one of continuous struggles by its differing constituent groups to self-understand and self-define in a nation defined from its inception by difference in color and origin. The public narrative on Muslims cuts them off from a deep history and locates them in a post-9/11 temporal-scape. This erases centuries of Muslim presence and double erases Blackamerican Muslim history. Though public, academic, and some Muslim discourse today gives Islam an immigrant face and voice and creates competing narratives of “foreign/immigrant” and “indigenous” Muslims that suggest mutually exclusive histories, the reality is otherwise. The two groups have co-authored the various chapters of Islam’s history in the United States and continue to do so.

Early 20th century Blackamerican movements inspired by Islam and Pan-African anticolonial movements, such as the Moorish Science Temple (MST) and the Nation of Islam (NOI), were attempts by Blackamericans to define a dignified self with a glorious origin story and a noble mission to uplift Black people spiritually, socially, economically and politically. Many Muslims consider the theology of such movements heretical. The NOI theology, for example, could be described as a syncretism of new concepts and novel practices and some Islamic as well as Christian concepts and rituals. The founder, W.D. Fard, was deified and his successor Elijah Muhammad was considered to be his prophet. The Bible and the Qur’an served as references to the NOI. This theology and ideology of racial supremacy of these movements are antithetical to Islam’s teachings. Nevertheless, these movements remain an integral part of Muslim American history and critical to its unfolding story. The NOI created educational, economic, and civic organizations to strive for Black self-sufficiency and uplifting. The NOI is the most important of these early movements and while most of its followers transitioned to Sunni Islam in the 1970s, it remains relevant to both Black and Muslim America.
Sunni Islam, however, has had deeper roots in Black America that predate the transition by the NOI members to Sunni Islam. There were several early Sunni groups most notable among which was a community created by Sheikh Daoud Faisal in 1939 in New York City (Curtis 2010b). Wali Akram, who converted in 1923 in Philadelphia, joined forces with two other Blackamerican Muslims and, in 1943, created the United Islamic Society of America, a Black Sunni organization (McCloud 2003). The significance of NOI, however, is due to its being the path through which the single largest community conversion in Islamic history occurred as W.D. Mohammed, the son of the NOI leader, transitioned most of his followers to Sunni Islam in 1975 (Jackson 2005). W.D. Mohammed’s new community had several name changes and, though he died in 2008, his work and community continues under the name The Mosque Cares project. He was an influential figure among Muslims at home and abroad as evident by the CNN-blog post titled “Farewell, America’s Imam” (Rehab 2008) penned by Ahmed Rehab director of the Chicago chapter of the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR)

Like their American-born counterparts, immigrant Muslims also went through stages in terms of their self-definition, focus, and attitudes vis-à-vis the larger society. Race played a significant role here as well, since legal citizenship was long restricted to “free White persons” and immigration itself was race-based. Muslim immigrants from the Middle East, South and East Asia, Africa or Eastern Europe encountered a legal classification that vacillated between White and non-White several times but socially they continued to be seen as non-White and as “Other”. The majority of the earliest immigrants were single male laborers who, being socially people of color, lived among other people of color and often married American women – usually Latina or Blackamerican. Some Muslim immigrants and Blackamericans united in common cause as they viewed colonialism and racism to be two sides of the same White supremacist
coin, so they joined forces with pan-Africanists and anti-colonial activists. Egyptian American artist and activist Duse Mohammed Ali, for example, edited the *Journal of African Times and Orient Reviews* in 1922 and was chosen by Marcus Garvey to head up the African Affairs Division in the latter’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. Ali also joined with two other immigrant Muslims to form the interethnic Universal Islamic Society in Detroit in 1925 (Curtis 2010c).

The next wave of Muslim immigrants arrived between the two World Wars bringing mainly relatives of those from the first waves. Later, those who arrived between 1947 and 1960 opened the door for educated urbanites seeking higher education or economic opportunities. These families were concerned with maintaining their various ethnic and cultural traditions and created ethnic institutions. But there were also some like World War II veteran and second generation Arab American Abdallah Igram who created the first interethnic Muslim organization. Others established affiliations with Blackamerican nationalist efforts. One significant organization among them is the Ahmadiyya Mission to America which introduced Islam to Black Americans and is central in the history of the early iterations of Islamically inspired movements like MSI and NOI. Early and mid-20th century immigrants created mosques that served more as cultural centers than exclusively religious spaces. In these early centers dinners, social gatherings and celebrations of culture including dances followed religious services (Curtis 2010).

The post-1965 immigrants continued to include urban professionals (doctors, engineers, scientists) and students. They, however, differed in that they were coming from a postcolonial world and a growing Islamic revival, and they saw religion as an inoculation against the perils of an imperial Western culture during their “temporary” stay in the United States. However, as many of them settled and established families,
these later immigrants began to establish more permanent and elaborate Islamic centers and weekend schools. Furthermore, as they made peace with the idea that “returning home one day” was a myth, they began the long process of working to reconcile the culture and institutions of their new home with their religious understandings and attempting to balance that with their ethnic cultures (Bukhari, Nyang, and Ahmad 2004; Haddad and Esposito 2000; Leonard 2003; Schumann 2007). Nevertheless, their understanding of Islam— informed as it was by colonial encounter— had an indelible impact on the practice and understanding of Islam not only among immigrants but also among converts. The focus of Islamic revivalist movements on public piety, education, and social justice work gave rise to the creation of many of today’s national organizations. A Muslim Student Association (MSA) was created in 1953 by those who came to study in the United States and sought a sense of community to maintain their faith. As many of these students remained in the United States after college and established families, they realized that this new situation required an organization to serve their needs outside of college campus. Subsequently, the MSA they created was restructured and named the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and changed through the years to become more socially and politically engaged. A campus-based student organization continued to run as the Muslim Student Association with chapters all over North America. In the 1990, other national organizations were created, such as the Islamic Circle of North America, Muslim American Society, and the Council on American Islamic Relations (a civil rights organization) to name a few. These organizations work to educate Muslims and non-Muslims alike and to advocate for Muslims; the effort to belong—especially for the first generation immigrants—is an ongoing process and a project that was, ironically, accelerated by the tragedy of September 11, 2001.
National and global events and ideologies along with unparalleled ethno-racial and economic diversity pose enormous challenges to the journey of self-definition and reconciliation among Muslim Americans. Today's Muslim Americans reflect the ethnic and cultural mosaic of America and trace their roots in America back centuries. A Gallup 2009 study has identified Muslim Americans as the most diverse religious community in America. Though studies identify Black Americans, South Asian Americans, and Arab Americans as the largest ethnic groups in the Muslim American community, the studies differ on the percentages they assign to each. For example, the previously mentioned Gallup study found Black Americans to be 35 percent of Muslim Americans while a Pew survey found this group to only make up 20 percent (2007). A study conducted by Muslim scholars examined several demographic studies of Muslim Americans and provided the following breakdown: Arabs (32 percent), Black Americans (29 percent), South Asians (28.9 percent), followed by Turks, Iranians, Bosnians, Kosovars, Malays, and Indonesians to which the study did not assign specific percentages (Ba-Yunus and Kone 2006).

White Americans and Latino/a Muslims make a small but growing segment of Muslim America. White Americans’ conversion to Islam dates back to 1800s and has accelerated post-9/11. Though female converts make a majority of White American Muslims, male converts often garner more visibility and make up a disproportionately high number of the prominent American Muslim scholars or imams. The Latino/a Muslim community has been growing steadily since the 1970s but dramatically increased since 9/11 and captures headlines. Many of Latino/a converts see their journey to Islam as a return and reclamation of centuries of lost history that connects them to Muslim Spain. While White converts join existing organizations and mosques, Latino/a American Muslims have created a number of organizations to meet their cultural and
linguistic specificity. The oldest of these organizations, Alianza Islamica, was created in 1975 in East Harlem, New York by a Puerto Rican convert (Barzegar 2003). Consequently, the current chapter in the history of Islam in America is one where assertive voices emerge among different groups (younger generations, converts, women, and gay/lesbian/transgender, to name few). It is also a time where efforts are being made to (re)claim a convergence and a common history of the various groups and of the nation.

According to the Georgetown University’s Project MAPS (Muslim American in the Public Square), Muslim Americans are relatively young, with 74 percent under the age of fifty. They are well educated (50 percent are college graduates compared to 25 percent for Americans in general), they are well off (50 percent have annual family income of $50 thousand or more), and they are socially engaged (77 percent are involved in programs helping the poor, elderly, or homeless) (Bukhari 2003). A nationwide study in 2011 found 2,106 Islamic centers compared to 1,209 in 2000, with the 2011 total more than double that in 1996 (Bagby 2012). Despite their sizeable numbers and relatively high socio-economic status, however, the influence and socio-political standing of Muslim Americans lag far behind communities of comparable size and economic status.

The historical, socioeconomic and political reasons for this marginalization will be discussed later. However, a crucial factor is that, though to some degree the cultural and ethnic differences among immigrant groups seems to have been bridged in the interest of common cause (building institutions and places of worship), there continues to be a great divide between immigrant Muslims and those Americans who convert to Islam, particularly Blackamerican Muslims. The causes will be discussed in greater detail in the ensuing chapters, but suffice it to say for now that it is rooted in the encounter of
postcolonial and post-slavery subjects in a national space of stigmatized blackness and privileged whiteness.

**Project Collaborators: A Profile**

The participants in this project are the American born and/or raised offspring of converts and immigrants. The definition of second and subsequent generation usually relates to immigration status. But for this study, I also include in that term children who were born after their American parents converted to Islam and who are thus raised in a Muslim household. In this study, I also include the 1.5 generation, those children who were under thirteen when their parents adopted a new country or adopted Islam as their new faith. Although the term 1.5-generation is usually reserved for child immigrants (Park 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), I use it here also to apply to child converts. Members of the 1.5 generation are unique in that they are very young when their families are experiencing either a spiritual or physical immigration and may have memories of a previous homelands or a prior family faith tradition while growing up in the new faith or country. Consequently, they share something both the parent generation’s past and the present experiences of second and subsequent generations. To make reading less cumbersome, I will identify which generation (1.5, second, or third) individual speakers belong to, but the term second generation will serve as an umbrella concept that juxtaposes the younger generation with a parent generation.

Two hundred and fifty-six people participated in this study, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty one years with 77 percent of them being thirty years old or younger. Twenty three percent of them were born outside the U.S. but moved back or immigrated here before the age of thirteen. Sixty six percent of them are female and 34 percent are
male. They are mostly single (71 percent) but some are married (26 percent) or divorced (2 percent). As noted earlier, Muslim Americans are the most diverse religious community in the United States and this diversity is reflected in the participants in this project. Rather than providing a list of ethnic categories from which participants had to choose, this information was collected by asking an open-ended question “What ethnic background best describes you?” The answers varied; few listed Black, White, even Brown or Muslim. The standard categories of Middle East (8 people), Arab (35 people), Asian/South Asian (27 people) or African American/Black (16 people) were also listed. However, the overwhelming majority of those of immigrant background listed the family’s country of origin rather than the standard regional categories. For summary, the background of participants are listed (table 1) by having standard category, countries, or regional designation listed together (For example, Arab, Egypt, Middle East). Rather than “multi-ethnic,” those of mixed background listed the backgrounds of their parents for example: “half Syrian (my father), half Russian American (my mother’s grandparents were born in Russia)” or “Mexican and Lebanese”. Some expressed frustration with this line of questions exclaiming that “How long does it take for you to become American?” or “how I understand [it] is that I’m defined as a black/white person or mixed (father/mother). How I define myself is complicated. I would first say a Muslim.” This illustrates that while ethnic and racial categories could be useful for the bureaucracies of the state and society – and even academia – the way people self-identify is more complex and often these categories force people to choose one box over another even if they deem themselves to fit in neither.

Though 86 percent of the participants—including children of converts who learned Arabic—speak more than one language, English is the primary language at home for the majority of participants. Often, however, as is the case with bilingual groups,
participants engage in code switching where English and another language are used in the same utterances. For example, non-Arabic speaking Muslims everywhere sprinkle their speech with Arabic phrases that are typically religious formulae. At the time of this fieldwork, all participants, except for two, either had obtained or were pursuing college degrees, including graduate ones. Being a doctor or an engineer has been the typical career path that immigrants—especially post-1965 immigrants—tend to pursue, and they want their children to follow in those footsteps. While some still do follow this path, many younger Muslims have followed divergent paths including teaching, social services, and social sciences. This is reflected in the fields participants listed as their field of study or occupation. It is noteworthy that law has become a career of choice for many young Muslim men and women in the past decade. Cognizant of legal and political challenges facing Muslims post-9/11, law students and attorneys began to organize for networking and advocacy, often with the explicit purpose of providing legal representations to Muslims and safeguarding their liberty and civil rights. For example, Muslim students at Arizona State University began to enroll in the Sandra Day O'Connor law school and formed a student organization in 2003. The National Association of Muslim Lawyers created the Muslim Advocate (MA) in 2005. MA is a nonprofit organization founded to defend the individual and community rights of Muslims. In doing so, MA attorneys are not just fighting for their community but for “protecting America’s promise.” These organizations reflect the fear among Muslims that their freedom and civil rights are under threat, the more so since 2001. This fear appears to be fueled by fierce anti-Muslim rhetoric that has become what Edward Said once called the “last sanctioned racism.” This public discourse and the resulting fear have had serious consequences for how the Muslims of America see themselves at individual and collective levels, for their
sense of belonging, and for how they expend their energies and resources. These matters will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

Collaborators’ Schooling

Every community has its own conceptualization of what an “educated person” is, but always the path of education starts at home where social and cultural values and norms are inculcated. In the contemporary world, schools play a vital role in shaping young people’s selves and they are sites for competing narratives that often marginalize minorities (Levinson and Dorothy 1996). Early experiences in schools have profound effects with lifelong consequences, which is why many people choose private schools (religious or secular) or home school their young. The University of Islam was the first private school system created to provide Muslim parents such an alternative to public schools in America. It was founded in Detroit in 1932 by Clara Muhammad, the wife of the Nation of Islam’s leader. This elementary and secondary school system, later renamed the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools, provided religious and character education to supplement reading, writing and arithmetic. It also offered a safe place for children to be comfortable with their race and religion. It soon branched out to nearly everywhere the NOI had a temple\(^\text{11}\). The school system persists and still caters mostly to Blackamericans (whether Muslim or not). Islamic schools have increased exponentially since 1980s as Muslim immigrants began to realize they were here to stay. Evidence of this is seen in Arizona, which has two full time Islamic schools, and in Chicago which has at least nine. In addition to this school system, nearly all mosques across the nation offer weekend Islamic schools for K-12 students for those who do not go to full time Islamic schools.
The participants in my project reflect the national trend among Muslim Americans in that, as children, the majority of them attended public schools (86 percent), while some (43 percent) supplemented that with weekend Islamic school. Those who attend Islamic school full time at some point in their childhood were a minority (22 percent). There are several reasons, including tuition, that account for the low enrollment in private Muslim schools. A concern about academic rigor, however, is one of the primary reasons. Critics, including some alumni, also argue that such schools create an artificial “Islamic” environment that does not prepare students for living in a pluralistic society. Others argue that discrimination and other social ills also exist in these schools. Frequently, students may start in a public or Muslim private school then switch at one point, and sometimes more than once as parents try to balance their desire for having their children in a “Muslim environment” and the need for a more rigorous academic curriculum. The switch may also occur when a community can only support a K-8 school.

Like all other religiously-based schools, Islamic schools have to include a core curriculum (English, math, science, social studies and history among others) to which they add Arabic and Islamic studies. Student government, community service, debate team, and other extracurricular activities vary from school to school depending on the perspective of the administration and the school’s guiding philosophy. Muslim schools in America, like their public or private school counterparts, reflect the social class of the student body. This is something that subsequently determines the caliber and qualification of the teaching staff they attract, resources at their disposal, and the activities they provide for students. For example, Universal School in Bridgeview, Illinois which serves the large well-to-do Arab Muslim community there, lists among its activities for this 2012 academic year “competitions such as: Dr. Seuss Week in Kg–3rd
grade, Author J. Awlesworth [children’s books author] reading to our students, Illinois Math Competition, Freedom Express Bus, Character Count Presentations…Shakespeare performances for High School, Science Fair Regional and State, Model United Nations, WYSE competition, NHS ceremony” and Spelling Bees. Though this is an Islamic school in a mostly Arab community, the activities are uniquely American Muslim. They include spelling bees in both Arabic and English, a school newspaper published by journalism students, and team sports (a school alumni returned to coach the girls basketball team). Likewise, Arizona Cultural Academy (ACA) caters to mostly middle class immigrants with scholarships for those of lesser means. This K-12 Muslim school offers a Montessori program, PTA, sports teams for boys and girls, as well as a students’ blog with opinion sections and a style corner for the fashion conscious Muslim girl—hijabi or not.

Unlike Universal and ACA which have large facilities including recreational ones, many schools are housed in smaller buildings and offer just the basic curriculum and limited other activities because the families that patronize them simply lack the financial means. Because of the cost, often communities have only full time K-8 Islamic schools after which students must return to public schools. Often students experience both private and public schools as they switch from one to the other in the course of their schooling, and that is not without challenges. Nasser, a nineteen year college sophomore, exemplified the challenges young Muslims encounter as they switch back and forth. Nasser went to public school until the third grade and then attended Islamic schools in the Phoenix-valley. He talked about how he understood his parents’ choice of Islamic school in order to “get Islamic education and full-time exposure to the mosque, Jumah [Friday communal prayers], and Muslim teachers, be able to celebrate holidays, things like that, that helped build our identity” but he still “really didn’t like the change.” When asked to elaborate on what he did not like, he mentioned the small space, stricter rules
and teachers’ classroom management. Nasser adjusted over time and liked being with Muslim children; however, he switched back to public school at 8th grade and faced similar social challenges in addition to academic ones.

In some public school, Muslim youth are creating Muslim student organizations and many find support in that. Nasser stated that “I don’t know what I would’ve done without that. I mean that was the main club I participated in. We organized. We had Jumah prayer every week. So we rotated giving the Khutba. Sometimes I would come to the mosque for halaqas [study circle] and programs and different Islamic events around the valley but [the MSA] was my main way of learning more.” The khutbas (Friday sermons) covered relevant topics including “a lot of things about avoiding peer pressures and studying, for instance. It depends, we need training. We don’t have a lot of training, but we used some books. When I gave the khutba it was usually about, a story from the Qur’an, one of the prophets or about let’s say a good quality to have, like forgiveness for each other”. These student organizations serve, as noted from this excerpt, as venue for education, training and socialization for Muslim youth.

Collaborators’ Social Networks

Unlike today’s young Muslims, those who grew up the 1970s and 1980s were often the only Muslims in their neighborhoods, and the only Muslims they would meet and interact with might be relatives or family friends living further away. Although many Africans and South Asians come from religiously pluralistic societies, and so do some Arabs (those from Iraq, Iran, Egypt and the Levant with old Arab Jewish and Christian communities), for many Muslim immigrants and their children, dealing with differences based on color and culture was something new. Being Brown or Black in all White
neighborhoods was an early schooling in the color lines and the realization that they did not fit in. An example of this is seen with Thuraya, who was born to Indian immigrant parents and was raised in Michigan and lived early on in a “blue collar” neighborhood where her family stood out as just a “little weird”. They were called “those Injuns, or Indians” and neighbors wondered if they were American Indians. Once in fourth grade, she had to explain to a boy “ad nauseam” the story of Christopher Columbus and why native people were named Indians, and after explaining “the whole nine yards” he asked her “So, are you Navajo?” In exasperation, she said “No, I’m Apache!” To minimize appearing “weird”, her parents allowed her to participate in American holidays. She dressed up for Halloween and, as long as she did not have to say “Jesus our Lord” she could even be the star in her school’s Christmas play. As she moved on in school and got out of her “freaky looking” early teens, she made deep friendships. As children, sleepovers were not common among the immigrants or converts; if they occurred, they took place in their homes because parents were concerned about the presence of alcohol, interactions with the opposite sex, adequate supervision and so forth.

Project collaborators’ friends are ethnically and religiously diverse. Many are non-Muslim childhood or college friends and some of these non-Muslim friends do not drink, party or date because of their own religious or cultural traditions. Having non-Muslim friends or college roommates who do not engage in those activities made some project participants, especially the women, feel less pressured to live up to the image of “college life” expectations posited to be a time of fun and experimentation.

Many of the collaborators’ Muslim friends are either ones they grew up with or ones they got to know in youth groups. Others are from their college days and MSAs. Over and again, my collaborators mentioned that if they “clicked” as friends, then the ethnicity or sectarian differences were not a significant factor in choosing their Muslim
friends; they had Islam in common and that was sufficient. This pluralistic sentiment notwithstanding, the ethno-racial or socioeconomic background of their Muslim friends in reality depends on the makeup of the particular youth group, the MSA and the mosque where they typically encounter each other. For example, when growing up in an environment or attending a mosque that is predominantly a Desi14 (South Asian), then most of their Muslim friends at that stage are typically Desis. On the other hand, if they attend colleges that draw students from different areas, then their social networks are more diverse.

**Generation Next and the Current Chapter of Islam in America**

Unlike their immigrant or convert parents, these offspring of immigrants and converts now in their second, third and fourth generations are born into both Islam and American culture. They have experienced America’s educational system and weekend Islamic schools, minority status (ethnic and religious) and American popular culture. They are the inheritors of shared religious education and cultural traditions even as they differ along ethnic, class and gender lines and religious interpretations. In their grandparents’ and parents’ generations, Muslims in the United States were typically referred to by their race (Black Muslims) or their ethnicity/country of origin (Arabs, Turks, and Pakistanis etc.). More recently, however, the pan-ethnic “Muslim American” label—which is analogous to the pan-ethnic “Asian American” or “Latino/a American”—has emerged (Sheikh 2007; Leonard 2005a; Naber 2005). A racialization process underlies such labels which are both given and appropriated for political reasons to, ironically, homogenize and marginalize but also to mobilize and empower. These terms are institutionalized through the state’s organizing technologies and through public
discourse, but they are also ones with which individuals can identify in terms of ethnicity in a multiethnic racially conscious society. However, while Arab, Latino/a, and Asian are homogenizing terms, they are still geographically and/or linguistically based; on the other hand, “Muslim American” denotes people who represent every group in American society and who only have religion in common. “Muslim American” may, therefore, suggest that Muslims have somehow transcended their ethno-racial and sectarian differences.

It is important to point out here, however, that participants in my project claimed both their ethnic heritage and their American upbringing and sensibilities. But they similarly asserted their religious understandings of a “pure/true Islam” to challenge parental and communal interpretation and attitudes which they saw as contradicting religious ideals. This typically occurs with issues of intragroup relations across race/ethnicity, gender, class lines and on matters pertaining to marriage, leadership, civic engagement, and membership in a pluralistic society. Naber (2005), for example, argues that the “Muslim first” assertion by the Arab American youth she studied allowed them to challenge parental authority, particularly on issues of gender and marriage across ethno-racial and class lines. The youth invoked Islamic teachings or demanded textual evidence for parental proclamations on religious matters. My collaborators expressed similar attitudes but not in terms of “Muslim first”. Challenging authority, however, demands deeper knowledge of faith and young Muslims – both those of immigrant or indigenous background – are eclectic in the avenues they take to such knowledge. While the majority of the participants in this project cited parents as the most important source of their Islamic knowledge, their path to self-education includes books, friends, the Internet (including online classic textual references), the mosque and Muslim conferences. They have an assortment of interpretive or hermeneutic approaches
and teachers. They patronize Islamic conferences, attend intensive religious courses or travel nationally and internationally to study Arabic or deepen their understanding of classic Islamic studies. The knowledge and understanding gained through these paths have consequences for shaping one’s perceptions about self, the Other (Muslim no not), and about Islam in America. What was noteworthy is that only a few of the participants listed college courses as one of their (re)sources. This points to the peculiarity of Islamic Studies in most Religious Studies departments. The origins and history of the field and the fact that, unlike most other religious traditions, it is typically taught by faculty with no other relationship to Islam make Muslim students – and many in the community – skeptical of Islamic studies. Consequently, they do not see it as a means to learn (about) Islam.

While their respective histories and their differing socio-economic and political concerns created an often difficult-to-bridge divide between immigrants and converts, their children’s shared American and Islamic heritage provides the younger generations a common ground, shared concerns and an opportunity for rapprochement. For some, such interactions and relationships come naturally and easily, while for others the opportunities must be actively sought out because their life trajectories and places of worship provide limited opportunities for such encounters. Still for some others, such rapprochement is not necessary because they deny the existence of a divide in the first place. In all cases, rapprochement is a difficult process that requires Muslim Americans to engage in critical reflections, to acknowledge grievances, to deconstruct mutual stereotyping and to overcome mistrust.
1 The Pew report predicts that the Muslim population in the U.S. will double from 2.6 million in 2010 to 6.2 million in 2030. For more details, see Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life. The Future of the Global Muslim Population Projections for 2010-2030 at http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx. While their starting number of one million Muslim in the U.S. is far too low, the 2010 report (released May 2012) by Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies indicated that the number of Muslims have tripled (now 2.6 million) and this study illustrates this rapid growth. “Numbers of Muslims, Mormons rising sharply: report” http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-usa-religion-census-idUSBRE8401NK20120501 accessed 6/12/2012

2 Muslims served in all of America’s wars including the Independence and Civil Wars (Bennett 2010). Morocco was the first country to formally recognize the United States as a new nation and welcome it into the global community in 1777. A clause in the Treaty of Tripoli (1797), which ended the hostilities between the U.S. and North African states that were triggered by piracy in the Mediterranean, has been cited frequently by historians to push back against the recent discourse of the Christian roots of the nation. This ARTICLE 11 states that “As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion, as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen, and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.” Musselmen and Mehomitans were the terms used for Muslims then. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp accessed 6/12/2012

3 Introduced to Islam and African nationalism, some Blackamericans initiated movements to uplift their people. For example, Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple (MST) in New Jersey in 1913 (Leonard 2003). Ali adopted some Islamic terminology and concepts and wrote his own “holy Koran”. He rejected Negro salve identity and labels such as Colored or Black or African American and instead created an alternative origin myth. In this new origin story, Blacks were the original human and Whites were the product of a biological manipulation by Yakub, a brilliant Black scientist (Allen 2000). The Blacks of America, in this origin myth, were Asiatic people and descendants of the Moors of North Africa and heirs to the Arabo-Islamic civilization. They were kidnapped and striped of their heritage and identity. The mission of the Moorish Science Temple (MST) was to restore that heritage and pride and to uplift black people (Allen 2000). The MST ideology was not Islamically based but it adopted some Islamic practice such as prayers, prohibition of alcohol and fornication, and strict cleanliness. With the death of Noble Drew Ali in 1929, several groups branched out of the MST. A former member, W.D. Fard, founded the Nation of Islam (NOI) in 1934, which explains the similarities in their ideology (Allen 2000). For NOI, the Black people of America were the Lost Tribe of Asiatic people whose original home was in Mecca, current day Saudi Arabia and the birth-place of Islam. The Lost Tribe of Shabazz idea is a reference to Biblical accounts, not Islamic references (Allen 2000).

4 How many centuries back is a subject for debates but Muslims are reconstructing that history. For example, Moroccan historian and professor of American civilization and culture, Abdul Hamid Lotfi (2001), wrote “Muslims on the Block: Five Centuries of Islam in America”. Young Muslim American historian of religion, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, challenges the notion of Muslims’ presumed recent arrival in his “A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order” (2010). A group of Blackamerican Muslims have compiled this history in a documentary “8 Centuries of Muslims in America” http://www.baitcal.com/8_Centuries_of_Muslims_in_Ameri.html accessed 4/1/2013
246 people participated in the survey and thirty-nine of them were interviewed. An additional four opted to only take part in the interviews.

Nearly thirty-two percent were twenty-five-years-old or under.

For example: masha’ā Allah (literally means as God so willed but used as praised be God, in sha’a Allah (God willing), khair (something good),

The MA was founded because: “As the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath continue to reverberate, it is more vital than ever that skilled Muslim American lawyers, who understand U.S. legal, legislative and political systems, bring their unique perspective and skill sets to the table.” [http://www.muslimadvocates.org/about/main.html](http://www.muslimadvocates.org/about/main.html).

A Muslim Legal Fund of America was created in 2001 as a non-profit organization that raises funds to assist defendants in their legal battles. One of the cases that MLFA supported was the case of the six imams from Arizona who were heading home from a national imams’ conference and who raised suspicions for having prayed the obligatory sunset prayer, speaking Arabic, and switching seats. They were removed from the flight and interrogated to determine the level of security risk but though cleared they were prevented by the airline from boarding a subsequent flight. The MLFA likewise appropriates national discourse and appeals to American ideals and strives for “restoring the fundamental American principles of fairness and equality for which our Founding Fathers fought so hard to establish. MLFA enjoys the support of thousands of Americans of diverse backgrounds who believe that the ideals of freedom, liberty and justice for all apply equally Muslims in America.” [http://www.mlfa.org/brief-history](http://www.mlfa.org/brief-history). Accessed 6/18/2012


By 1975 there were 41 schools but this number declined to below 30 in subsequent decades. The school system continues to operate today adding, in the 1990s, Muslim Teachers College for in-service and continued teacher education and training (Rashid and Muhammad 1992).


Desi is a term that generally refers to the cultures and peoples of South Asia especially those outside of the region regardless of their religious background. In America, the term is used by younger generations of Muslim of all backgrounds as they use pan ethnic terms (Arab, Desi, African America, Latino/a and so forth) to categorize themselves and their peers.

For historical and (geo)political reasons, Jewish American is a label that straddles ethnicity and religion.
CHAPTER 4

THE “IDENTITY CRISIS” OF YOUNGER MUSLIMS

The term identity crisis was coined by psychologist and theorist Erik Erikson in the 1930s and 1940s and arose from his “personal, clinical, and anthropological observations” (1970, 732). It was his childhood struggles with differences and belonging that sparked his interest. He was raised by a stepfather—a biological fact hidden from him for many years—as a Jewish child of Scandinavian background in a Lutheran and Catholic area in Germany. About how this affected him, he says:

I was blond and blue-eyed, and grew flagrantly tall. Before long, then, I acquired the nickname “goy” in my stepfather’s temple; while to my schoolmates, I was a “Jew.” Although I had tried desperately to be a good German chauvinist, I became a “Dane” when Denmark remained neutral during the First World War [...] like other youths with artistic and literately aspiration, I became intensely alienated from everything my bourgeois family stood for. At that point I wanted to be different. [1970, 743]

Erikson immigrated to the United States in 1933 and the disorienting experience of immigration had an indelible effect on him as did, later, the othering process of McCarthy era hyper-patriotism. He and others were required to take a loyalty oath and, if they refused, they faced calls to send them back to their countries of origin. All of these experiences furthered his interest in issues of identity. This along with his studies of American Indian children’s forced dislocation and boarding school experiences deepened his interest and shaped his understanding. Erikson noted that he and others began to study and think of identity matters and theories precisely at the time and place where identities became a problem. It was the particularity of the historical place (the United States) which tries to create a “super-identity” out of the multiplicity of identities that immigrants brought with them, and at a time when “agrarian and patrician identities” of the countries of origin were being challenged by rapid industrialization
In fact, identity problems, he posited, were “the mental baggage of generations” of immigrants dislocated from their homeland by the “cruel and heartless” process of immigration (Erickson 1970, 748).

Theorizing identity formation from the start, then, was grounded in dislocation and marginalization. The experiences and observations that shaped Erikson’s thought led him to conceptualize psychosocial personality development as occurring in sequential stages: 1) Trust vs. Mistrust, 2) Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt, 3) Initiative vs. Guilt, 4) Industry vs. Inferiority, 5) Identity vs. Confusion, 6) Intimacy vs. Isolation, 7) Generativity vs. Stagnation, and 8) Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Carducci 2009). Each stage is marked by a degree of conflict and possible crisis. Success or failure in resolving this conflict/crisis is detrimental to the next as one moves from one stage to another. Erikson considered youth to be a critical period in identity formation; a stage during which “individuals overcome uncertainty, become more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and become more confident in their own unique qualities” (Buckingham 2008, 2). But adolescents’ ascent to this stage is fraught with challenges and conflict, for they must first experience a “crisis” where they confront critical questions about their values, ideals, plans for the future and their sexuality. Through a rigorous process of reflection and “self-definition”, adolescents ultimately “arrive at an integrated, coherent sense of their identity as something that persists over time” (Buckingham 2008, 2). Crisis, however, in Erikson’s conceptualization is a normal and essential element to development; it is a time of questioning, reflecting and focusing on self-understanding and meaning-making rather than a pathological occurrence. Erikson distinguishes this normative process from an “identity confusion” which he notes is not merely about “contradictory self-image or aspirations, roles or opportunities but a central disturbance dangerous for the whole ecological interaction of a mind” (Erikson 1970, 749).
Though his childhood experiences could be seen to “predispose a person to a severe identity crisis,” Erikson considered the challenges he encountered to be a normative identity crisis, one that he was able to transcend, rather than the “malignan[t]...identity crisis [which] is determined both by defects in a person’s early relationship to his mother and on the incompatibility or irrelevance of the values available in adolescence” (Erikson 1970, 745). He was saved from this latter type of crisis because, though his mother was aloof and his stepfather coaxed him to follow in his footsteps, Erikson knew they both cared deeply for him and in the end gave him time and space to find what resonated with him (Erikson 1970).

Yet while the challenges young Muslims encounter may not seem that different from those Erikson faced, the “identity crisis” narrative regarding younger Muslims is typically framed as that second and malignant type of identity crisis. After the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent launch of the “War on Terrorism”, the greatest fear and dominant narrative has been “homegrown terrorism.” Though the term easily applies to extremist right wing militias like the Oklahoma City bomber, abortion clinic bombers and the Norway shooter, it is exclusively reserved for Western born and/or raised violent Muslims. These younger Muslims, according to the widely distributed New York Police department intelligence unit report, “carry out ‘autonomous jihad’ via acts of terrorism in their host countries” (Silber and Bhatt 2007, 6). According to this report, it is not hopelessness, a reaction to oppression or a retaliation impulse that drives the “Western-based individual” to become a terrorist, but rather it is these young people’s quest for an “identity and a cause” which they usually find in “extremist Islam.” Those young people living in Europe whose host country failed to “integrate” them economically and socially, the report says, are “torn between the secular West and their religious heritage” and this internal conflict renders them an easy prey for extremism.
But even in America, which has purportedly done better integrating its *guest* Muslims, “the powerful gravitational pull of individuals’ religious roots and identity sometimes supersedes the *assimilating* nature of American society which includes pursuit of a professional career, financial stability and material comforts” (Silber and Bhatt 2007, 6-8 emphasis added).

Muslims, in this view, are not at home but are guests in these *host* countries of the West, no matter how many generations they have been there, and no matter the large segments of Muslims who are native to the West. The seemingly logical assumption is then that the “Shoe Bomber”, the “American Taliban” and other Latino, White or Black converts allegedly involved in terrorist activities are somehow also overcome by the “powerful gravitational pull” of their religious identity and become the Other of the West by virtue of their conversion. The stories in this narrative may include the 2005 London subway attack, the 2004 Madrid attacks, or the 2009 Fort Hood shooter, but the narrative is one about an identity crisis that fits neatly into grand narratives of the civilizational conflict of Islam and the West. The salient narrative about younger Muslims is that they are experiencing an identity crisis illustrating that Muslims are difficult to integrate and that this crisis must be managed lest it leads to breakdown or, worse yet, radicalization. Zuhdi Jasser, an Arizona physician and Navy veteran of Syrian parentage, testified in the 2011 Congressional Hearing on Radicalization as a Muslim expert. He noted that radicalization occurs when Muslims fail to get their “young adults to identify with secular Western society and its ideas” (Jasser 2011, 2). Another Muslim, Ebo Patel, a second generation Chicagoan of Indian origins and founder of the now internationally known Interfaith Youth Core, noted in his memoir that extremists who recruit young Muslims are:

> exceptionally perceptive about the crisis facing second-generation immigrant Muslims in the West. They know that our parents, whose identities were formed
in the Middle East, North African, and South Asian half a century ago, have a dramatically different sets of reference points than we do. They know that the identity we get from them feels irrelevant, that it is impossible to be a 1950s-era Pakistani or Egyptian or Moroccan Muslim in twenty-first-century Chicago or London or Madrid. In many cases, our parents built bubbles for themselves when they moved to the West—little worlds where they could eat familiar food, speak their language, and follow the old ways. And because they re-create a little piece of Karachi in Manchester, England or a part of Bombay in Boston, Massachusetts, they assumed their children would remain within the cocoon. But we second- and third- generation Muslims cannot separate ourselves from the societies we live in. We watch MTV, go public schools, cross borders that are invisible to our parents dozens of times a day, and quickly understand that the curves of our lives cannot adapt to the straight lines our parents live by. Raised in pious Muslim homes, occasionally participating in the permissive aspects of Western culture, many of us come to believe that our two worlds, the two sides of ourselves are necessarily antagonistic. this experience of “two-ness” is exacerbated by the deep burn of racism....As we grow older and seek a unified Muslim way of being, it is too often Muslim extremists who meet us at the crossroads of our identity crisis. [Patel 2007, 12]

Yet, as he narrates his life in this biography, Patel makes it clear that it was not his parents’ Eastern ways and religious upbringing that alienated him but the “gut-wrenching feeling” of exclusion from mainstream society caused by the “constant barrage of racist bullying” (Patel 2007,11). Additionally, learning that people who looked like him were being “horribly treated elsewhere” by people who looked like his playground tormentors led him down a risky path keeping company with troubled youth. His “free fall” ended not because suddenly his Eastern and religious home changed—he always knew his parents loved him—but because children at the YMCA embraced him and adults there demonstrated they cared about and for him.

Immigrant parents everywhere and always are deeply concerned about their offspring losing their cultural heritage. Furthermore, in a globalizing world and particularly in secular societies, all people of faith are concerned about passing on their religious beliefs and practices to the next generation. Muslim parents—whether converts or immigrants—encounter these same challenges. Over the past decade, however, this narrative of “identity crisis” has also taken hold among some Muslim parents and
community leaders and has come to permeate Muslim public discourse. Its meaning is mostly in regard to the young losing their “Muslim identity” and opting out of Islam as they “get lost” in society. As in its public version, “culture talk” is also essential to this intra-Muslim narrative. Various organizations have, over the past few years, included variations on the themes of addressing the identity crisis among the young, of reconciling their “Islamic” and “American” identity, and of fostering an “American Muslim identity.” Muslim organizations have dedicated sessions in their conferences for dealing with issues of “identity crisis” and the North American Imams Federation tackled the issue in 2009. More recently, they are also concerned about radicalization, though they do not see it reaching the extent that the general public gives it. Some organizations have created projects to address issues of identity that might lead to radicalization. For example, the Muslim American Society’s Straight Path Project aims to “assist Muslim youth in their bicultural competence, i.e. [the ability to] effective[ly] communicat[e] between several cultural identities [and to] assist in the full integration in society while maintaining their Muslim identity.” The 2010 Muslim Student Association annual convention organized a talk show-style session called “Deen Talk: Radicalization”. The panelists were a second generation Muslim woman and a lead Gallup center researcher on Muslims, a Whiteamerican convert to Islam with a degree from Al-Azhar University—the world’s oldest university and a premier Sunni institution—and a European Muslim scholar and Oxford professor. The panel grappled with the definition and the process of radicalizations and necessary interventions.

The narrative of young Muslims’ “identity crisis”, therefore, might have different stories and interpretations but it has become salient. Much has been said about identity crisis being the condition of (post)modern global world. However, when it comes to the younger generations of Muslim Americans, it is not merely a philosophical/academic
discussion; it has urgent and dangerous consequences in the context of a post-9/11 world dominated by the “war on terrorism” narrative. Underpinning this crisis narrative is a particular and narrowly-defined conceptualization of “identity” and a view that somehow what Muslims experience is unique because of their religious and cultural differences. In this understanding, one possesses one “normal” identity which is expected to blend with society, leaving behind cultural or religious practices as relic of the past. Difference creates crisis which, here, has a detrimental and almost pathological connotation. Narratives of melting pot, assimilation and integration of ethnic difference underpin this notion of “identity crisis” as presumably suffered by Muslims.

Do those who grew up in Muslim households in fact experience “identity crisis” as discussed above? And if so, how do they see themselves? Do they shun their ethnic background in favor of religion and take on the label “Muslim American,” or do they shun both? To gain insights into these matters, I will explore the narratives of the younger generations of Muslims who collaborated on this project. I will consider how they see themselves and whether or not their narratives suggests a malignant (to use Erikson’s distinction) type of identity crisis. Through their responses and narrations, I will problematize this narrative of identity crisis and conclude by offering an alternative explanation. Because one’s conceptualization of identity influences one’s framing and analysis and because, as evident from the disciplinary origins of this narrative, academic discourse and concepts are incorporated into public discourse with serious consequences, it is necessary to first survey the theoretical landscape on identity. In doing so, I explore answers to some important questions about identity. Is identity something we possess as a product finalized or a state “achieved” in adolescence? Are there multiple and conflicting identities? And where does the “self” fit into this notion of
identity? Through this engagement, I will elaborate on the conceptualization of identity that guides this project and then return to the narratives of my collaborators.

Identity Matters

A salient feature of contemporary societies is identity politics that is locally rooted but plays out on a global stage. The discourse of identity politics, claims, and demands are made in essentializing and seemingly primordial terms; however, these politics and claims are rooted in the formation of the modern nation-state. The politics of difference, both those in the developed former center and the developing former periphery, are based on various claims about territory, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or language. Ultimately, however, they are demands for what Charles Taylor terms recognition: an acknowledgement of one’s identity and the entailed legitimacy of one’s claims to self-determination or belonging and equal citizenship (Taylor 1994). Yet, the concept of identity itself is fraught with varying significations and contested meanings for those who struggle to claim particular identities and for those who study them. The nature of identity, its definition and construction, and whether it is egocentric or sociocentric has been the subject of great debates. The terms identity and self, like many concepts in social sciences, do not have agreed upon definitions. This is in part due to the diversity of disciplines that write about and research these topics; disciplines that include psychology, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Whether they take place within or between disciplines, debates about identity always involve discussions about individuals’ internal processes (psycho-cognitive), external processes (those taking place within their socio-cultural environment), and the relationship between the two. The various theories about identity differ in the degree to which they focus on one
process or the other and in how they conceptualize the relationship between the two. The debates and the theoretical perspectives they have generated have also reflected the intellectual climate of the 20th century and the debates that have engaged the Enlightenment project and modernity (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Cerulo 1997; Holland et al. 1998).

Self and Personhood: An Interactionist Approach

Generally committed to the Enlightenment project but presenting an alternative to its ideas of a unitary independent self, the early studies of identity focused on individuals and how their interactions with social others mold a sense of self. This focus gave rise to two main perspectives: identity theory and social identity theory. The first aimed to elucidate a person’s social roles and the associated meanings and expectation while the latter focused on a person’s identification with a social group with which he or she shares views and other characteristics. Identity theory, introduced by Sheldon Stryker in 1968, traces its origin to the sociologist G. H. Mead and is rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective. According to this theory, an individual occupies multiple roles (daughter, businesswoman, wife and mother so on) in a society, and there are shared standardized meanings and behavioral expectations associated with each role within a particular social milieu. This individual internalizes these meanings and expectations and behaves according to her interpretation of them. She compares her behavior to others, noting their reactions to this performance; she then adjusts her interpretation and behavior accordingly to achieve positive self-verification (Stryker and Burke 2000). Identity is defined here as parts of the self and consists of these “cognitive schemas” of internalized shared expectations and meanings. Due to the multiple roles
individuals occupy, they “possess as many selves [i.e. identities] as groups of persons with which they interact” (Stryker and Burke 2000, 287). These various and potentially conflicted identities/selves –especially those closely related– are arranged within the self in a salience hierarchy. The more frequently a particular identity becomes activated, the more salient it is and this salience provides stability for the identity through time and situations (Stryker and Burke 2000). How and what causes a particular identity or self to be activated more frequently and how the conflict between these competing interrelated selves is managed is not clear. This framework often underpins questions like the ones addressed to adherents of Islam: “are you Muslim or American first?”

Social identity theory, on the other hand, examines how membership in groups with which one believes to share common characteristics affects one’s sense of self. The theory focuses on intragroup dynamics, intergroup interactions and the processes by which membership is defined. Social categories and groups (nationality, political party affiliation, religious community, teams and so forth) towards which one has affinity provide “a social identity that both describes and prescribes one's attributes as a member of that group—that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave” (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995, 259-260). Individual members engage in self-evaluation and categorization to determine the degree to which they differ from the out-group and reflect the stereotypical attributes of the in-group. Because of the multiple groups/categories to which one belongs, an individual has multiple selves/identities arranged in a hierarchy of salience. Like identity theory, social identity theory examines individual behavior but proposes to do so by “formally articulat[ing]...basic sociocognitive processes of categorization and self-enhancement with subjective belief structures” (Hogg, Terry and White 1995, 260).
Both theories conceive of multiple selves/identities that are constructed within a particular social context. They use similar terms, including categorization, salience and personal identity, though with different connotation, with each theory focusing on one sphere to the neglect of others. Stets and Burke (2000) note these different foci of examination and point out that where identity theory focuses on “being,” social identity theory focuses on “doing.” Scholars have called for bridging the two theories and combining them to arrive at a more rounded understanding of identity (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). The two theories have been criticized for focusing too much on the individual’s behavior to the neglect of collective dynamics. Critics also argue that the theories neglect the “macro statuses” such as gender, race/ethnicity and class (and I would add religion) and how these social constructs and characteristics influence one’s sense of self and the meanings and expectations associated with the roles and one’s relationship with society’s institutions (Cerulo 1997). These concerns combined with growing interests in agency and the proliferation of social and national movements during the 1980s and 1990s shifted the focus of identity studies from the individual to the collective.

The new theories about collective identity came to challenge essentialist perspectives that rooted such identity in natural primordial elements (Cerulo 1997). This new perspective was advocated by social constructionist theorists who posited that all collective identities are social “artifacts.” They argued that identities are negotiated products of interactions within a cultural context and a socially constructed reality. Consequently, a society’s culture, its socializing agents, linguistic constructs and categorization needed to be examined (Cerulo 1997). This viewpoint has had an indelible effect on the studies of identity as noted by Holland and her colleagues, who conclude that “[w]hen anthropologists and other contributors to cultural studies of the person
write on ‘identities’ they are usually concerned with ‘cultural identities,’ identities that form in relation to major structural features of society: ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, and sexual orientation” (Holland et. al 1998, 7), and to that list I would add religion.

Deconstructing the Self

Poststructuralists and postmodernists took the critique of the Enlightenment and the project of modernity further. They rejected the view of many Western scholars who conceptualized self as an independent and bounded entity. This new intellectual movement argued that this old model of self was nothing more than “a political artifact of the European Enlightenment.” In essence, these scholars declared the “death of self” (Callero 2003, 117). The most influential scholar of this perspective is Foucault, who contended that “the self is the direct consequence of power and can only be apprehended in terms of historically specific systems of discourse. So called regimes of power do not simply control a bounded, rational subject, but rather they bring the self into existence by imposing disciplinary practices on the body” (Callero 2003, 117). Postmodernist theorists criticized social constructionists for ignoring the effects of discourse, power differential in social interactions, and the power of classification. These scholars called for deconstructing the categories of identity and argued for the multiplicity of identities that are dynamically constructed through discourse within fields of power differential and at the borders and intersections of multiple variables. For example, Black and White American women may be influenced by the notions of femininity which are produced by discourses constructing gender in their society. However, their identities as women not only vary between them based on race but also within their respective racial groups
based on personal history, class, religion and regional differences. Among Black women further identity differences emerge based on the lightness or darkness of their skin color. This poststructuralist-postmodernist viewpoint on identity along with post-colonial critique has informed the methodology and analysis of scholars of identity from diverse fields, such as anthropology, cultural studies, political science and sociology.

One might argue, however, that conceiving of an individual as having unstable and fragmented multiple identities that are the products of competing powers and discourses, is not a step beyond modernity. Rather than capturing a transhistorical human condition, this point of view might instead be nothing more than a description of aspects of -or the nature of- a self that is produced by Western modernity’s project. One could also argue that contrary to conventional wisdom about a “Western self”, neither Western philosophers, religious scholars and psychologists nor Western publics had ever reached consensus on this ostensibly bounded and independent self which post-modernism was de-centering (Holland et. al 1998). Consequently, if that bounded self has not existed, then in the words of Bruno (Latour 1993), “we have never been modern”. And while the examination of discourses, power relations and social/cultural practices is essential in identity studies, what is also needed is “a conceptualization of the self as an embodied agent, a knowledgeable, problem-solving actor rather than an amorphous ‘subject position.’ In other words, it requires an appreciation of the reflexive process of a social self” (Callero 2003, 119).

In Defense of the Self

Anthony Cohen (1994) argues that the tendency to “neglect [the] self” by social scientists is inherent in methodologies which have the society as their starting point.
The individual, he points out, is usually abstracted from groups and the structures of society (also see Sokefeld 1999). Cohen calls for attention to selfhood and for individual centered studies. He admits that individuals are not more valued than the collective but they are “in a logical and theological sense prior to community” (Cohen 1994, 18). The “authorial self” as, he calls it (or the narrating self in this project), tells its story and is self-conscious, able to generate and interpret meaning, and it has the ability to enhance and emphasize aspects of itself in various situations; it is creative and thinking. But it is not “wholly autonomous and sovereign [, rather] it has a unique essence formed by the individual’s personal experience, genetics, intellectual development and inclinations” (Cohen 1994, 21). Cohen and Rapport dedicated their edited volume, *Questions of Consciousness* (1995), to exploring issues relating both to the self and to collective consciousness as they attempt to correct for this neglect of self. While they concede the difficulty of this proposition and do not propose a concise definition of consciousness or even one agreed upon by the contributors, the editors propose the use of the metaphor of narrative as a way to access consciousness.

**New Perspectives and Creative Synthesis**

Burkitt (1998) rejected dualisms based on the Cartesian dualism of body-mind that carried over to the nature vs. nurture and individual vs. society debates. Dualism contributed to the conceptualization of the physically rooted, concretely objective independent self which, in turn, has been so vehemently criticized by postmodernists. Instead, Burkitt envisions a complex *unicity* that connects the body, mind, and environment (both physical and social). His main argument is that the activity of thinking is not an isolated inner dimension of the mind and something removed from
the body but that “being embodied and located in the extended world of time and space is not only a necessary precondition for thought, it is, rather, it’s very basis” (1998, 65). He notes that before existing as a thinking being, one—as a body—coexists with the world, and here lies the potential for the development of consciousness. Therefore, the body, the conscious, time and space are all one reality: a way of being—in—the—world with other beings doing the same. This produces ways of thinking and ways of acting and speaking that create and recreate artifacts both material and symbolic, many of which become embodied.

Having argued for uniting the body and mind, Burkitt then defines a person as a human thinking body infused with cultural praxis and meaning. This person has an identity that, like a face, slowly changes though it has an enduring quality. This conceptualization that unites the body and mind with the aim to transcend that particular dualism is very promising until the author tackles the issue of sameness and difference over time/space and social context. Here he seems to reproduce the idea of unitary self (person) and multiple identities (selves). He contrasts the singular semi-stable person with multiple selves that are context dependent. According to Burkitt, person and selves differ in that selves allow for a degree of reflective distance from embodied personhood and for the ability to take a more universal, although still partially situated, stance towards other people and things. In other words, we are able to see ourselves from the viewpoint of others or from the perspective of other things. It is this capacity that allows us to take a more objective view of our own embodied being. According to this viewpoint, it is our ability to take a stance towards our embodied position through the mediation of symbols that enables us to create various self–images that form the impression of a “deep” subjectivity (Burkitt 1998, 79). While this conceptualization attempts to do away with the body–mind divide, it maintains not only
a distinction between self and identity but also holds that an implied multiplicity of context-dependent selves exists.

Reyna (2002) also tries to do away with the dualism that separates the individual’s internal reality from the socio-cultural environment that is believed to be external to the body. Instead, he argues for a monism based on cultural neurohermeneutics. Here, the activity of the nervous system brings external occurrences (E-space) to the internal workings of the mind (I-space). This initiates an interpretative process which evokes previous experiences and emotions associated with them, all of which are stored in the association areas in the brain. The interpretive process is hierarchical due to the various neural associations made with each event and this leads to multiple shades of meaning. This is what the author calls the neurohermeneutic system, which exists in the I-space and is “compose[ed] of linked neural circuits in the brain that interpret antecedent events in the E-space to make action that becomes the basis for subsequent events in E-space” (Reyna 2002, 12). This neurohermeneutic system is the connector of the social monism. The interpretive hierarchy draws on learned cultural memories of past realities to represent the antecedent events in ways that form the basis for desires about future realities. Reyna argues also that there are two cultures in each individual: 1) a neuronal culture that is within the person, within the neurohermeneutic system of the I-space, and 2) a discursive culture in the E-space and thus external to the person. The two cultures are, again, connected because the later penetrates the neural network of the brain and becomes part of it; as such “culture is embodied.” Since people occupy different social positions and have different experiences, no two people have identical cultures nor is there a specific monolithic culture such as (e.g., American or Asian or Arab culture). Instead, “there are as many shreds and patches of culture as there are individuals, and these cultures
are...‘constructed anew by each person over time’” (Reyna 2002, 134) and put out into the E-space.

More recent studies have tried to achieve a synthesis of multiple perspectives that take into account both the micro and macro process. In creating this synthesis, many draw directly or indirectly on Mead’s ideas on reflexiveness. Mead defined this as “the turning–back of the experience of the individual upon himself” and sees it as the means by which “the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it” (Callero 2003, 119). Mead’s conceptualization of an “I” allows for a self that is to some degree universal and is constructed within and through discourses but “without being reduced to it” (Callero 2003, 120). This reclaims the agency of the individual from the dominating discourses and the hierarchy of power – which postmodernists reacted against– while still taking them into account. For example, countering Descartes’s dualism and aiming for synthesis, Norbert Wiley proposes a thirdness. He proposes a self that is social and constantly shifting by combining Mead and Pierce's views with his semiotic self whereby the “lived reality” is understood retroactively by the self through signs (symbols, icons, indices). He argues that we interpret signs within an interpretive community, then add further signification and that “we are what we are in this immediate moment as a living breathing ‘I’ but the I of the present moment is in large part the remembrance of the socialized ‘me’ of the past. Moreover, the ‘I’ of the present moment is also the anticipation of the self that will be ‘me’ in the future” (Bakker 2005, 78).

Another example of this synthesis is the approach taken by Holland and her co-authors in their 1998 book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. They draw on Mead’s reflexivity, Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s semiotics, and sociohistorical developmental psychology as well as on Bourdieu’s metatheory of practice in a synthesis they call the
“heuristic developmental” approach. In this approach, the self is historically and socioculturally grounded yet also cognizing and creative. Further, through “semiotic mediation”, the self is able to objectify itself, which affords it “at least a modicum of agency or control over [its] own behavior” (Holland et. al 1998, 40).

Wong (2002), adopting a Hegelian view, conceives of identity as self-description plus recognition by the other. This recognition, he contends, is so critical to one’s sense of self that non-recognition or misrecognition is a severe injustice. This point is also argued by Charles Taylor (1994) work on the “politics of recognition”. Wong goes on to note that since identity is not permanent, recognition does not entail an expectation of a fixed identity nor should it demand a change of it. The author agrees with the thinking that meanings attributed to gender, class and other categorizations are contested and vary depending on one’s subject position in society. But he calls for research focusing on identifying the mechanisms of change that lead to the transformation or “instability” of identity, research he contends is currently lacking. He acknowledges that people see themselves as belonging to various categories that classify them according to sex, national origin and so on. But the category and the individual are not analytical units. There is nothing essential about these social identities—these categories. Yet, individuals see them as important and identify themselves and others through these categories often engaging in serious struggles to affirm these identities. The recognition of the other is necessary for leading a meaningful life, the author argues. He points to the “interplay” between the individual and collectivity. This takes the form of a “looping effect” whereby those classified respond to the classification, often appropriating and redefining it and consequently changing the characteristic and meanings of the social identity (Wong 2002).
Conceptualizing Identity in this Project

In these and numerous other formulations, scholars attempt to apprehend the relationship of the individual being to self and to his or her social and physical environments. They attempt to account simultaneously for the sameness and difference over time and space that is observable in ourselves and others. Self, identity, person, personality are terms that attempt to capture that quality but do so only partially and in any case mean different things for different users, as we saw above. In fact, in their article *Beyond “Identity”* (2000), Brubaker and Cooper called for doing away with the term identity altogether because it has come to mean too many things to be a useful analytical tool. In its place, they suggest using paired terms like identification/categorization, commonalities/connectedness, self-understanding/social location to capture the different nuances the term is often used to convey. The term identity, however, has so much currency and public and policy implications that it is not likely to be given up any time soon and perhaps it should not be. I would argue that its usefulness lies precisely in the possibility that it could shed light on all facets of human relations (with self and with the social or physical environments) that the authors listed which are interdependent and mutually constitutive and cannot be effectively examined separately.

In this project, I consider identity as shorthand for the images of the self for oneself (I-for-myself) and for the social other (I-for-other) that emerge from a narrative structure on which multiple stories are woven and authored by a cognizing, reflexive, and creative self in dialogue with an actual or imagined social other. My conceptual
framework is a synthesis of aspects of several of the theories discussed above leaving aside some of the issues I noted above with some of them. For example, I take on Burkitt’s (1998) concept of complex unicity that connects the body, mind and time/space as one reality of embodied thinking but forgo his distinction between one person and multiple selves. Additionally, I argue that as this embodied thinking interacts with its environment, it produces ways of interpreting, acting, and speaking. These ways (re)create artifacts both material and symbolic which constitute the output the embodied thinking then presents into its physical and social environments. Social others engage that output and their engagement and reactions return as a modified input for the (re)consideration of this embodied thinking. This mutually constitutive process is what Renya (2002) calls neurohermeneutics where the nervous system brings the external occurrences (E-space) to the internal workings of the embodied thinking (I-space) and what Holland et.al (1998) call the space of mediation. Here, stimuli carried through the nervous system bring the external occurrences—interactions with social others through discourses mediated by power differential in a particular space and time—into the body and initiate an interpretive process that evokes previous experiences and memories laced with emotions. Each interpretive process leads to multiple shades of meaning as it draws on learned individual and cultural memories and depending on the context that initiated it. This initiating stimuli and corresponding associated interpretive process generate a narrative that weaves together the various experiences, memories and associated emotions into stories. Through this narrative an individual authors self and creates an image of how one sees oneself and sees an actual or imagined social interlocutor (representations of I–for–me and other–for–me) and how one presents oneself to others (I–for–other). The narrating/authoring self has a reflexive capacity that enables the self to ruminate about, analyze, and criticize its own thoughts, emotions, and experiences as
well as those of others. These are the effects of inner speech in the stories the self tells itself. The self, here, gains insights into itself (self-understanding) and formulates ideas about its social and physical world. The stories included in the narrative might be modified, deleted or added depending on the context and in anticipation of the response of others. As we tell our narratives, we desire and need the recognition of the social other (Taylor 1994 and Wong 2002), and the stories in our narratives are evoked and modified in response and with the aim of achieving consonance and coherence between who we see ourselves to be and how we are seen or want to be seen by others.

So identity, as conceptualized in this project, is not multiple with the multiplicity of social categories or roles one belongs to or occupies or assigned. It is, instead, the image emerging from a narrative occurring at a particular temporspatial context in a dialogue with an actual or imagined social other where this dialogue is taking place in a field of power deferential and competing discourses. As such, I eschew the notion that there is an executive self that is managing multiple identities which compete for dominance and which frequently conflict with each other potentially reaching crisis levels. Identity, in my view, is an instantiation of self, a momentary halting in a running narrative. The similitude of identity to my mind is that of a perpetually woven cloth (narrative) from threads (stories) varying in color, length and texture. Some threads are short but nevertheless powerful and permanently altering the cloth, others are long and provide defining characteristics to this cloth. The cloth is affected by the weather and by the shape of and tension in the weaving frame. Similarly, the self-narrative is affected by the internal (dispositions/desires/drives and experiences) and external (social and physical environments) contexts. The weaving is continuous and changing with physical elements and the creative impulses of the weaver, who is assessing and altering the threads and tensions; but observers only see aspects of what has thus far been woven and
give it their own meanings. So is identity, that unfolding self-narrative of which others only hear segments; and the very presence of these others shapes and alters, in large and small ways, these self-narrations. As I analyze the narratives of my project collaborators, we see the stories within the narratives and see how the gaze and statements of the social other, including this researcher, enter inner speech and engage in creative tension with the (re)presentations of self.

Claim All Your Parts

Aisha, daughter of Indian immigrants: “who are you? Do you know who you are? How would you identify yourself to answer that question? Well, I used to ask myself this question all the time, especially when I moved here from India at the age of seven with my family. I used to ask myself, what is my identity? Am I Muslim, am I Indian, or am I American? Who am I? And as I got older, this struggle to find myself only got harder [...]. Before, I always thought I had to choose one aspect over the other, pick from one part of myself over the other but through my experiences in life, I learned that I don’t have to choose and you don’t have to choose. And why should you have to compromise any part of yourself when you can be all that you are? As the saying goes “you weren’t meant to fit in, if you are born to stand out”. So claim your identity! I am a Muslim Indian American. Who are you?

Leslie, daughter of Whiteamerican converts: Actually people will say to me “you speak really good English for being a foreign person”. “No, I’m from here”. So I’ve gotten those. And you get a lot of really weird looks when they hear you speak and they kind of look at you [wearing hijab], like that doesn’t match, so what’s going on?

Talib, son of Blackamerican converts: We used to get up in the morning after Fajr and have Arabic class for like two hours [at home]...we had to wear kufis every day and suits. Like my family made us wear suits every day. I mean, growing up nobody’s doing that, you’re like, I don’t want to go in that all the time. But at the same time, I remember growing up in a village. We had, back where it wasn’t that many issues with the particular masjid that we used to go to that was built by Muhammad Ali in Chicago, up from the ground, and our community, that was the central location. And so growing up there, going to Clara Muhammad Islamic Elementary School, even later being homeschooled, we grew up in a Muslim state of mind. So I didn’t realize that people weren’t really Muslims until I started interacting with them as I got older, you know what I mean? If I was at football or gymnastics I would meet a kid that they weren’t Muslim and they were asking me like, well, how are you Muslim? And tell me about Islam. I’d be like what? I’d be like, hey, Mom, they believe that Jesus is God; even though I lived in America, that was crazy to me! Like, wait. Are these the people, like
they believe differently, what? Like, they don’t know who Prophet Mohamed is? What? Mom’s straight African American, you know.

**Naeema, daughter of Blackamerican converts:** I was in public school, I wanted to do the things that the other kids, so I’m like “mom, why can’t we have Christmas? I want a Christmas tree.” You know she’s like, look, Christmas tree is the devil, [laugh] all of the people that celebrate Christmas they’re evil. So she and I talked about this as an adult and we kinda laugh about it and she is like “I didn’t know how else to deal it, I know you had to be in that environment but if you look at them in a negative light then you wouldn’t wanna be them”. I was like, “now that’s crazy!” But you know, we work with the tools that we have, and she was like “that was it”. It was very interesting ...[in school] nobody knew I was a Muslim...I just didn’t eat pork and looked like everybody else, nor did I at that point want to stand out. So it was more about fitting in and making sure that nobody knew that I had any differences than it was about asserting myself and being an individual.

These excerpts from longer narratives convey some of the issues encountered by those growing up Muslim in America; they are issues about being (seen as) different. The questions and insecurities are not unique to Muslims. Children, adolescents and frequently adults of all backgrounds struggle with differences—be they based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation or religion. The differences are compounded by the intersectionality of these categories which then reveal the problematics of simplistic categories and labels. The first of this excerpts is part of a long narrative presented by Aisha a twenty-year old college sophomore female who presented this narrative under the tile “Claim your Identity” in the ThinkDot youth event that opened this dissertation. In it, she details the embarrassment and awkwardness of looking “foreign” because her parents made her wear Indian clothing every Friday when they usually picked her up for Friday prayers. She “smelled foreign” because her mother packed masala spiced Indian lunch and she had a foreign sounding name. She struggled with difference and as she got older this challenge to “find [her]self only got harder.” She acknowledges that this is not unusual since “every youth” struggles with that. She then speaks for her generation and the audience recognize themselves in her statement when she says:
except that I realized that with this generation of Muslim youth, it is much more complicated! [snapplause] Because here is the thing, everybody has expectations from us: with Islam we have to devote our time to Allah, I have to be the best Muslim I can be while living in a non-Muslim country and that's really hard because Islam is a way of life and it influences everything I do. And then there is our parents. Every parent has the image of the ideal daughter or son and part of that for my parents is to follow my Indian culture, a culture that I'm barely even exposed to. And then there is school, media, friends, and basically the rest of the world. Fitting in, societal expectations, peer pressure! So here you are, pulled in all these directions, and as human beings it is just easier to just pick one and go with it. And in doing so many of us resort to the following: some of us, we hide our identity. You know, change your name so people won't know you are Muslim, or Arab or Chinese and then there are some of us who go with the flow, follow what is convenient, do what everybody else does, because it is cool.

The struggle Aisha refers to is occurring in the midst of adolescence. As she and others try to balance different expectations and relationships with self, peers, parents, and God, she searches for an alternative to the choices of hiding or following the crowd. She tells the audience: “But guess what? You don’t have to hide yourself. You don’t have to be another clone [snapplause]. Because if you understand each part of yourself, you can balance it out! You can still strive to be the best Muslim while following your Indian culture and your American culture.” This last statement received a long snapplause. It was in high school that Aisha became comfortable with the different aspects of herself and she recalls a critical moment that helped her in this process. This incident illustrates the role of the social other in self-understanding and identity formation. A non-Muslim friend asked her if she would convert out of Islam when she turned eighteen and no longer had to do what her parents said. We do not have the context of this friend's question, but we can glean the friend's perception of Aisha, her parents and her faith which was likely to have been shaped by observing Aisha’s awkwardness and her discomfort with difference. Whatever triggered this question, it jarred Aisha; so she responded, “why would I even think to convert?” The friend replied that she thought Aisha was a Muslim only because her family was. The question and the response enter
Aisha’s inner speech and interface with emotion-laced memories of experiences at school and home about her Indian-ness, her Muslim-ness, and about her difference; she begins to grapple with whether these are accidents of her birth or choices she can make. The friend’s question prompted more questions in Aisha’s inner speech: “What is my faith? Is this my faith or is this my parents’ faith? Why am I a Muslim?” After some reflection and critical self-assessment, she came to a conclusion which she said she “hate[d] to admit”, that her friend was right! But this was not the end, it was the beginning of a process where she questioned her faith and took a cultural inventory of her heritage. This process led Aisha to decide that not only does she want to be a Muslim but that she would “choose Islam over any other religion even if [she] was born a non-Muslim”. Aisha said that she realized with that question that she had to claim her faith and cultures (Indian and American) as her own. By the end of freshman year in college, a Jewish high school classmate whom she hardly knew sent her a text message “out of the blue” to tell her how impressed she was with Aisha. The message said: “thank you for being a great example of a Muslim woman, for showing me what Islam is really about, that Islam doesn’t hold you back from who you really are but it makes you a better person”. This and other life experiences helped transform the awkwardness of childhood to a new confidence. She grew to claim “all [her] parts” because she believes “you are not meant to fit in, if you were born to stand out”. This last statement, appropriated from pop-culture, is also the motto of Al-Muminah, a young Muslim women’s group Aisha periodically joined. This illustrates how bits and pieces of other discourses shape one’s self-narrative and identity.

In her narrative, Aisha’s difference is something she becomes aware of both compared to what she perceived to be “normal” in her peers and from their questions and statements about her clothes, smells and name but also from her parents. She develops her own understanding of her religion’s expectation as she makes it her “own,
not as [her] parents’” and then engages in cultural inventory. This theme is one that is frequently mentioned by participants in this study and will be discussed further in the subsequent chapter. The process of self-understanding and self-(re)presentation (both how she sees herself and how she wants others to see her) is made more explicit through Aisha’s narrative. It illustrates the process by which the various stories that make up the narrative are woven together to culminate in a consonant sense of self. From the young child who desires “not to be different” to the high school and college student who thinks, analyzes and recognizes that difference is not a liability: “what makes me different, makes me interesting and makes me who I am. It is a part of me. Me being Indian is never going to change for me and it is up to me to decide how much I let it influence me.” While her parents might have wanted her to grow up as they did, she says, they realize that is not going to happen because the reality is she did not. She, and many children of immigrants, Muslim or not, note that when they do not follow their parents’ instructions or when they argue, parents tell them they are “being too American.” Some times in frustration, Aisha (and her audience shows agreement) respond: “we’re like ‘being American!’ What does that mean? We are American! We are born or raised here, we go to school here, we have American friends; this is our country.” But immigrant’s children also realize what parents mean by that is they want them to follow the ethnic norms and practices because “in most cases American culture ...is associated with being bad”. While some norms might be different, Aisha and others conclude that American and Islamic values do not contradict each other; they can select the best of American and their ethnic culture and still be “good Muslims.”

But this project of self-understanding is not a solitary one; the (mis)recognition of the social other plays a critical role. In Aisha’s narrative, we hear the voice of others (parents and peers) and sense their gaze. She is embarrassed by how her mother dresses
her as well as by how she smells, sounds, and looks to her peers. As Aisha approaches late adolescence and college, the positive reactions of her peers and her parents understanding that she is not “Indian like them” help reinforce her evolving self-image and self-(re)presentation. These later experiences gave her a sense of belonging to her peer group, being “just like them” and having similar experiences. But, she grows comfortable with being different in faith and in her selected additional Indian “cultural values.” She says:

In high school, my friends thought I was the coolest thing because I would match my hijab with my clothes. They saw that I could still be modest and stylish. That my religion didn’t stop me from expressing myself, whether it be fashion or words or anything else. And they saw that my American culture didn’t stop me from being modest [snapplause]. And what is even more amazing is that a Muslim hijabi who was born in another country was picked to be featured on the senior profile page in the year book. It didn’t matter that I was wearing a hijab, it didn’t matter that I was a Muslim [snapplause]. It didn’t matter that I was born in another country or that English was my second language. I was just like them, going through the same experiences as them, except I had an immense amount of faith and cultural values. So if you pick the good qualities from each aspect of yourself, you can keep all of them, if you balance it out, you don’t have to choose one thing.

The image of Aisha that emerges from this narrative is an instantiation of her self-image (I-for-myself and I-for-other) at the specific context (time, place, her peers, and the audience) and in dialogue with circulating discourses about young Muslim and identity crisis. It is an excerpt from an ongoing narrative, a snapshot of an ongoing process held momentarily still by this researcher in the process of fieldwork.

Leslie, in the second excerpt, is a thirty year old White female with blue eyes and blond hair that she covers in public. Her parents trace their roots to centuries in America and by the time she was six both of her parents had converted to Islam and she was raised as a Muslim. Unlike many converts, Leslie’s parents did not change their names and gave their children “American” names rather than Arabic or “Muslim sounding” names. So though they sound American (in name and language), Leslie and her mother’s
headscarves confuse people about whom they are. Are they nuns? They do not quite look
the part. So they must be foreign who speak English really well and sound American.
When Leslie informs her questioners she is from here, they are more confused and give
her “really weird looks” because the sight and sound do not match, do not fit! It is only
when, and if, they know she is a Muslim that her foreignness is explainable. As a child,
she was shielded from the scrutiny of curious non-Muslim children and confused adults
because she was homeschooled. This also spared her the pressures of prom, dating and
having male friends all of which her parents, she says, would have opposed. Her friends
were from other Muslim homeschoolers – who were incidentally mostly converts’
children – or young women’s groups. Leslie’s father and brother do not stand out. Their
faith and difference is only known if they wished to reveal it. White converts and their
offspring’s confidence in their belonging to America is conferred upon them by the
normativity of whiteness as the default American and that privilege also has great
currency within the Muslim community. Yet by joining a minority community and a
marginalized religion with a negative public image, they for the first time experience the
plights of minoritization. Women, who also make up the majority of Whiteamerican
converts to Islam, are asked why—living in a free society— would a woman, an American
woman, choose to join such a “patriarchal religion.” Women converts and their children
have to deal with assumptions that they only converted because of romantic interests of
foreign Muslim men. While some women are indeed introduced to Islam by Muslim
male (boy)friends, their ultimate conversion usually is rarely a function of marriage (Van
Nieuwkerk 2006).

Hassan, a twenty-four year old male graduate student of Bosnian background,
relates how his whiteness makes it very easy for him to hide in the crowd, if he so wished
because nothing –other than his name – marks him as a Muslim. In fact, it was difficult
for his public school classmates to understand how he was “born Muslim.” He became a curiosity when he started attending a school in mostly White Chicago suburb. He says they often exclaimed “what is that? Wow, European Muslim, White Muslim, nah, it’s not possible?” and then would add “nah, you’re White you can’t be Muslim”. Hassan said he heard this challenge to his identity “thousands of time” and he would retort “like really! My name doesn’t give it away?” His color also confuses other Muslims who assume he is a recent a convert.

The third excerpt is part of a rich and long narrative by Talib, a twenty-six year old Blackamerican whose parents were members the NOI and transitioned to Sunni Islam in the 1970s. But long before his parents’ conversion, Islam was part of Talib’s extended family some members of which converted to Islam with Elijah Muhammad in the 1930s. Talib’s amazing life starts as the son of Blackamerican converts to Islam who as he put it “have not had the best experience in society” and for whom converting was a spiritual migration “pretty much just wanting a better life, just like [their] ancestors that came up here from the south to the north for a better life.” Seeking that better life meant practicing Islam the best way possible and that included strict upbringing of their children. His parents envisioned him becoming an imam one day. The preparation for that, as the excerpt above notes, began early in his life and in his day with two hours of Arabic lessons at dawn. This spiritual migration also meant distinguishing self with dress style; so his older sisters wore headscarves and Talib and his younger brother wore kufis (skull caps) every day. Though the Muslims in Chicago were then as now geographically dispersed and only a few families in his neighborhood were Muslims, he grew up in a closely-knit community that made him feel like he grew up in “a village.” Talib went to Muslim schools or was homeschooled and “hung around” mostly Muslim kids. Though he played ball with neighborhood children who were not Muslim, it was not until he was
eleven or twelve that he realized that he and they were different. They were not Muslim, they do not know about Islam or Prophet Muhammad and they were asking him about both.

Reflecting back, Talib now realizes it must sound strange that, living in America, he was not aware of this difference. But he notes that young children might notice difference but the meaning of it is often lost on them. All they know is that the friend who plays ball with you is a girl or the boy with “funny felt hat on top of his head sometimes. And you don’t know why, you just know that’s your friend.” At the age of fourteen, his parents sent him to Damascus to learn Arabic and his religion, but he was abandoned by the people whom he accompanied and by his Chicago community which was supposed to financially support him. This betrayal wounded him so deeply that retelling this story, which figures prominently in his narrative and the course of his life until the day of the interview, evokes raw emotions of anger, sorrow and defiance as he fights back the tears. Being on his own and the youngest in an Arabic language school attended only by foreigners, he had to learn to survive and in the process he learned more than Arabic and Islam. He said he learned about trust and betrayal and about himself and the reliance on God; he also learned about being an immigrant and the need to bond with “your people” to make the experience less traumatic. He learned about the nuances and the grammar of color and difference in another society. For the first time, he saw that being American and a Black Muslim in foreign land was a positive thing: “then you’re just like, I’m American. People, you realize, people know a lot. People know you! They know you! That was the crazy part. Like people would tell me about Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson and Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali Clay. I used to be like, what? You know me? You know me! So it was a different kind of experience, [that] really increased my confidence!” In Talib’s narration, we witness the
significance of the recognition of the social other. He recalls the strangers who helped him and those who mistreated him and these experiences profoundly shaped, but did not determine, the person he is (becoming).

Talib does not fault his parents who lived in abject poverty and could barely feed their children, but he is touched by the love and sheer determination of his younger brother who at ten years old “sold body oils and hustled” to raise the funds to bring Talib home after a year abroad. When he came back, those who abandoned him and ignored pleas for help brought out the rage in him and he wanted nothing to do with them. As he recounts these experiences, the mixture of sadness and anger made his eyes well up, but he held back the tears. Lest I wonder if he had abandoned his faith, Talib affirmed that he still was a Muslim and did his prayers, but he did not want anything to do with his community. Instead, he “just wanted to be in the streets.” He notes that the sense of betrayal and anger in his teens made him rebel. He also became well-schooled in racism and the criminalization of Black, and in how immigrants quickly internalize society’s racist image of blackness and climbed the socio-economic ladder on the shoulders and at the expense of Blacks. In his rebellion, he joined gangs, sold drugs, and “collected tax” from the Arab gas stations and shop owners whom he knew looked down upon their Black clients. Through it all, however, he says he never denounced Islam and never stopped praying and feeling God’s protection, but he also says his surviving of the bullets and drugs and avoiding a criminal record was because he was very smart. He says:

because I understood, even though I was in it, I used to always feel like I was manipulating it, everything, the environment... Because I understood! I was always a reader, so I understood why people did what they did. I was fifteen [and] was reading Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X and George Jackson and just different, a lot Black history, revolutionary manifesto type books. So for me, being a thug was like being a rebel. And I understood because being a thug, if you understand, being Black in this country has always been criminalized. Even the formation of police, police in this country were first slave catchers, and then over time they became police. So the formation of having people to enforce laws comes out of criminalizing Black people from being free. So I always looked at, us being here,
civil rights movement is over. The 70’s are over. The pro-Black movement is the last movement that came out of civil rights. Now we’re into hip-hop. So we went from fighting to dancing. But for me being a thug was like being a revolutionary because I wanted to fight somebody, you know what I mean? So being a thug, it was an extension of rebelling, because even though crime has socioeconomic reasons why those crimes are committed, a form of it is still activism and still rebellion. Because Niggas don’t know why they do crimes. They just know they have to. They don’t understand that for them it’s a feeling of how do I continue to fight these people that I feel like are my enemy? I don’t know why I fight nobody, I just gotta fight them. I understood that at a young age. So I manipulated it. I manipulated it to the max.

He saw Islam as an “ideology” and not “just rules”; the discipline it gave him along with smarts enabled him to understand himself and recognize that crime was but “an outlet”. Believing that to honor Black suffering he must “reap the benefits of what [his] ancestors fought and died for,” he hung out on the streets but excelled in school. He was on honor student and class president and knew once out of high school, he was college bound to embark on a professional career.

From a child knowledge-seeker abandoned in the streets of Damascus, to the rebellious youth gang member on the corners of Englewood, Chicago to a caring medical practitioner with lofty ambitions and a solid plan, this young man’s life narrative continues. In these excerpts from Talib’s self-narration, we see the stories that constitute the narrative and the memories of experiences laced with emotions, the bits and pieces of other discourses (race, civil rights and post-colonial, social science on criminality, and so forth) and the reflexive self as it becomes the object of its own contemplation. We witness how these elements together paint the image of self and others (relatives, Blacks, immigrants, community, and society).

Naeema, in the fourth of the above excerpts, grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Her foreign sounding name did not seem out of ordinary in the context of her all-Black school or neighborhood. She just did not eat pork but otherwise she “looked everybody else.” Like Aisha above, Naeema did not want to seem different; because, she says, at that
point in her life “it was more about fitting in” and the only difference for which she wanted to be known was “asserting [her]self and being an individual.” However, trying to be like everybody else and just fitting in a Christian majority Black setting was not going to be easy for a child of parents who converted to seek a different path and came through the NOI to Sunni Islam. The “tools” available to her mother for setting and explaining the boundaries of the new lifeway she wished to impart to Naeema were limited; so the mother used what she knew. When Naeema wanted to celebrate Christmas like her classmates, her mother – drawing on the narrative of the NOI– said Christmas was the devil’s practice. Cognizant of how that must have sounded and to distance herself from this statement, Naeema laughs and says “that’s crazy” but she excuses her mother because these were the “tools” she had then.

Naeema “discovered” race, herself, and her faith in the military. She talked about how disoriented she felt when she transitioned from her all-Black childhood environment on the south side of Chicago to the diversity of military life overseas. She called her sister to tell her “I have to sleep in the same room with White people”, a situation that “freaked [her] out”. She always thought her religious practice was shallow and she was “doing so many wrong things”, including living with a boyfriend for a few years. She realized, however, that others such as her military superiors and colleagues took notice of the subtle difference Islam made in her character and behavior. Prompted by their gaze and questions and becoming identified by them as “the Muslim” and the “designated driver,” she began to delve deeper into her faith. Here, in the military and in life overseas, is where she learned to see diversity of colors and cultures. Naeema said these interactions and experiences transformed how she saw her faith, herself, and others and resulted in a “paradigm shift on how [she sees] the world” and practiced her faith. These experiences and their impact inform her identity and life today.
Taking the World into the “Bubble”

If “identity crisis” in the formative years arises from the difference between one’s identities at the home and the outside world that is encapsulated in the public school and in social norms (gender interactions and dating among others), then one would expect that those attending Islamic schools would be spared all struggles. But being immersed in a Muslim environment does not mean it is the idealized “Islamic environment” everyone hopes for. After all, these students, parents and staff are individuals struggling with all the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies that everyone else struggles with and often fall short of this idealized environment they are trying to create. Furthermore, they are not closed to the outside world or protected from the internal world of their own body and desires; both of these things are the same issues that Muslim youth struggle with even in Muslim majority countries and the same ones that non-Muslim parents and children also struggle with.

Many students from different backgrounds, who have attended or were attending Islamic schools, have told me that parents seem to think that putting children in an Islamic school “protects” them from the world, when in reality they take the world with them anywhere they go. Former students of Islamic schools stated that dating and drugs, the two most serious reasons that the make parents choose Muslims schools, took place in their schools though not in the open or to the same extent as public schools. As Musa, a twenty year-old second generation African American Muslim male who attended and worked in Islamic schools notes, the youth still listen to music and watch movies with
images of drinking, drugs, and with sexual language or images. He knew of boys and girls who have done “horrendous” things with each other and of girls who took off their hijabs or no longer wanted to be Muslims. Parents, he said, often put their children in Islamic school and avoid confronting these issues. But even in the absence of these issues, Musa noted the school environment “doesn’t prepare you for reality,” you just hide from these issues until college. The free mixing and freedom of college life is not something these schools prepare you for; he added that, it is like “you’re sending a sheep with wolves. I mean you’re asking for your kids to get eaten up, you have to take more initiative to prepare them”.

Sami, a nineteen year-old college senior of African background, echoes the sentiment expressed by several of collaborators both female and male who attended full time Islamic school:

I felt like it was a bubble. I felt like it didn’t prepare me for interaction in the real world, so it didn’t prepare me for all these influences that will be there once I transferred from high school and went to college. You know, I felt that it didn’t make me a well-rounded person, to be able to engage with discussion or friendship or a professional connection with any segment of society and succeed at it. You know, I felt that it put me at a disadvantage socially in being able, around a limited group of people who aren’t by any mean representative of the greater macrocosm of American society. And so I felt in a lot of ways it shelters kids and then when all these influences do hit and the peer pressure does hit, they completely fold. And it takes a really strong person to be able to find themselves in that whole huge mess. Because then they go to college and it’s like a huge culture shock.

Participants said that they got over the shock and adjusted eventually, but that initial experience exacerbates the usual disorientation associated with starting college life. These are also the critique many parents lay on Islamic schools and the reason that they opt out of them. Supporters of these schools, on the other hand, think that such a protective environment in these formative years instills values and shields children from racism. Furthermore, though they may experience an initial shock in college, they in fact draw on these values and affirmations to find their footing. Additionally, so the
argument goes, Muslim and ethnic student organizations on campus usually provide a safe and supportive corner on college campuses.

Learning Difference in the Playground and in the Mosque Courtyard

The experiences of Muslim students in public schools varied by the diversity of their neighborhoods, by the student’s sex and religiosity, and by the decade and sociopolitical context of the student’s childhood. For most, it was not avoiding pork, dating and prom that made them “different” so much as it was the color of their skin and/or their headscarves or ethnic clothing. Since most Muslims are either Brown or Black, color was a major issue for many school children. Though the whiteness of many Arabs and European Muslims, especially of the men, often affords them the ability to “pass”, even they report color-based difference as an issue when attending a less diverse school. Hassan, the Bosnian man quoted above, noted that his being Muslim and White was not issue until he went to a less ethnically diverse school. Children of immigrants, whose parents came to the United States as adults and were unschooled in the dynamics of racialized society, encounter color and race issues for the first time in school, as the examples of a young man of African background and a woman of South Asian heritage illustrate.

Sami, quoted earlier, noted that when he was in third grade a White girl touched his skin and said “ewww, you’re Black. That’s disgusting” and that, he recalls, was when he “started struggling with actually the Black identity.” He also relates a White student presenter on Martin Luther King Day using two cardboard-hands shaking each other and notes that he did not understand why the White cardboard-hand was peach color “like skin tone” while the Black one solid true black. He looked at himself and saw he did not
look like this solid black that meant to represent people who look like him. He was confused. He has been called a “nigger” several times and resigns himself to the fact that “growing up with 99 percent White, you’re going to hear that often.” We had the following exchange:

Muna: What did it feel like to be called that?
Sami: That’s like you being in a completely different country, being called an insult that you’ve never heard of that; you have no idea what the history is behind it, and, really, you feel that it doesn’t even apply to you because you don’t even share that ancestry. But at the same time, you’re expected to react to something that inherently doesn’t offend you, because you’ve never been conditioned to be offended by it. You know, it’s not as if it’s something that we’re born with to be offended against and to me it was just like, well, I didn’t understand. I didn’t have that anger; I didn’t have all those emotions. I didn’t appreciate or understand the struggle that all the African American slaves went through to get the opportunity. It took me a while to come with a conclusion or a firm result as to whether I should be offended or not but I came to the conclusion that we’re here because of the struggles of these people. Not only me as an African American but all other ethnicities, whether you’re Chinese or Arab or whatever, we really benefited from those freedoms of the African Americans and their struggles. And out of respect we should definitely appreciate them. Also at the same time, if someone is saying something to you that may not even directly apply to you, but at the same time has the intent of offending you, I think you have a right to be offended.
Muna: So if you were called that today, would you react differently than you did then?
Sami: Well I mean, I wouldn’t react violently or negatively. But I mean, yes, I’d react differently. Because I understand the term much more and I have a lot more experience in social situations than I did back then.

Sami’s learns that he is a person of color and that his skin color connects him to a historical legacy to which he had no other links. As a person of color, he learns to take offence to a word intended to denigrate people of his color.

The childhood of Salma, a thirty three year old daughter of immigrant Indians, illustrates the role of the Other in self-defining and self-understanding in ways that leave a lifelong imprint. She grew up in Chicago in the 1980s in an all-White suburb and she noted how “White children make you feel different. You stick up like a sore thumb. You just wish you could be blond and blend in. But I wasn’t blond and wasn’t anywhere blending in.” She was placed in an English as a Second Language class where Spanish
was spoken until her mother went to school angry and pulled her out of class. But Salma recalls one incident vividly and describes it as a “defining moment” that forever colors her views. She, a brown child, was playing in the sandbox at kindergarten with her two friends, one Black and one White, and then

the little White girl says, “oh, [salma] is just dirty. She’s just dirty”. And I was so devastated, like, what do you mean? And she says “you don’t take a bath! You must not bathe.” I’m like, yes, I do! And she says, “no, you must not, because look, Latisha she’s Black. That just makes sense. She’s dark and that’s her color and there it is. But look, you’ve been playing in the sand all this time and your skin isn’t even getting dirty because look, it’s just like dirt.” And she would look at her hands and she’d say, “see, my hands are dirty.” And I just remember being very shocked and going home to my mother crying. And I remember my little Black friend sticking up for me and saying [to me] “you know, she’s just stupid” and to her “just be quiet. You know, you don’t know what you’re talking about, she takes a bath.” I don’t remember the whole situation, but I just know that feeling of wow, you know, you’re five years old, playing in the sandbox just so innocently and something so big [happens to you]. In retrospect as an adult, that is when I first identified that moment [as] a very self-defining moment. That I am different, and this White girl, she sees me obviously very differently. And I bathed every day, every evening.

Salma added that when she went home and told her mother, the mother “not being from here” did not quite understand “all the racial divisions in this country and the history of it all.” But the mother told her that “in this country you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move forward.” Salma has taken those words to heart ever since but still chocked up as she recalled this “very painful” episode. She played again with that girl but never invited her home. When the neighborhood changed and became more diverse, her color was no longer a distinguishing factor. There she and Mary and Susi could only be differentiated if one knew their names or asked about Christmas, but her closest friends have ever since been non-White. Religious restrictions did not mark her as different that much. All through elementary school, she celebrated all secular holidays including Halloween and Valentine’s Day until she reached junior high school, when her father “put his foot down” and said she can no longer do that. This change caused her a great deal of confusion. She argued with her parents that there was nothing religious about
those holidays and they said that is even more of a reason because they are pagan holidays and they are all trying to become better Muslims. Salma said that as a child, she began to think “being Muslim sucks...you don’t have any holidays or traditions” especially because Eid and Ramadan were mainly celebrations of “food and love and gathering” and did not involve the many gifts as children get for Christmas. But as she got older and had friends of diverse background who had discussions about their differences, holidays were not as much an issue and she was more comfortable with being different.

Color and race are also an issue within Muslim communities and I will discuss them in more detail in chapter 7. But at this juncture, it is worth noting that the race/ethnicity of the children of converts puts their belonging to Islam into question. If the children of immigrants are always the Other regarding their American-ness and are asked where they are from, the children of converts (Black, Whites or Lantio/a) are always asked by Muslims about their Muslim-ness. “When did you convert?” is the typical question. When they say they were born into Islam, their questioners assume the person is evoking the Muslim notion of fitra (the first natural human state) that every child is born a muslim (with a lowercase ‘m’) and that it is parents who raise them in a different faith tradition. This is the reason many converts prefer the term “revert” as they presumably come back to their original state of submission to the one God. When these second and subsequent generations of Muslims, explain they are not converts/reverts, the subsequent response depends on background of the questioners. Often, first generation immigrants seem puzzled. Several of the participants relayed how they were asked by first generation immigrants to recite something from the Qur’an, as a way of authenticating their Muslim-ness. One Blackamerican second generation woman who used to wear headscarf said that, during her hijab period, immigrant Muslims often
assumed she was an immigrant and asked her where her family was from. Because Blackamericans make up the majority of the converts, this is a particular issue for their offspring who are now into their third and fourth generations and are still asked if they converted. If the questioner is a second generation of immigrant background, once the person says s/he was born into Islam, there is no further inquiry as noted by Malik, a third generation Blackamerican Muslim whose grandmother was of Arab background:

if we didn’t talk which is often the case, like you just see each other, and say “as-salamu alaykum” whatever, there’s this initial perception and whole bunch of initial assumptions but it’s fairly easy to work through them. It’s easier to work through them with my peers. I guess. Because we have a lot more similarities it’s easier to get you’re point across, we’re like, alright well, we have this in common, and so we can sort of build on that.

Similarly, those of Eastern European background whose families have been Muslims for generations encounter this kind of questioning because of their whiteness. Hassan, the Bosnian man quoted above, relates how prior to the war in Bosnia many Muslims did not know much about Islam in the Balkans and he was always asked when he converted. But even in college, a few years ago, he was still assumed to be a convert. He relates an incident when he joined the MSA for Friday prayers. After the obligatory prayers, he stayed longer and performed optional prayers and an MSA member waited patiently for him to finish until they were the last in the prayer hall. Hassan did not know the man was waiting for him but when he finished praying the man came over and told him “so brother I just wanted to introduce myself, I just wanted to give you support. When did you convert?” Hassan laughed and said “no man, I was born Muslim” and notes that “it was very awkward and very funny.” He brushes it off, but having to affirm his Muslim-ness to both non-Muslim and Muslim gets old and frustrating.
Because culture is in a process of continuous change as each generation (re)interprets inherited tradition, challenges old practices, and notions and innovates new ones, gaps always and everywhere emerge between parents and children’s generations. As immigrants settle in new lands, often the culture of their origin tends to become frozen in their minds at the moment of departure and they look back nostalgically and romanticize norms and practices of the “back home culture.” Fearing its loss, they try to hold on ever more strongly to preserve that culture and pass it on to their children. Therefore, Muslim parents of immigrant backgrounds are concerned not only about the religion of their children but also about passing on their cultural heritage as it was when they left home. Converts, on the other hand, are themselves trying to find an authentic way of being a Muslim without becoming Arab or South Asian. As they try different ways, this process of experimentation adds to the post-conversion disorientation; not being of a Muslim background also leaves them open to questions of authenticity, generations after they have been Muslim.

Those of immigrant parentage are acutely aware of their parents’ desires and attempts to preserve the cultural heritage of their countries of origin. As young children who want to “just be blond and blend” in school or among neighborhood friends and are mortified to have to wear ethnic clothing among their friends, they, as we saw above with Aisha, at one point realize they can engage in a cultural inventory and claim aspects of that culture. Sometimes a trip to the country of origin clarifies things and can both instill a degree of belonging and difference and also can help them see that the parents’ perceptions of “back home” are frozen in the moment when they left home decades earlier. Khadija and Sara, nineteen and twenty year old sisters of Bengali parentage,
recount a trip to Bangladesh to visit their grandmother. Their mother had them put traditional *shalwar khamis* (Bengali attire) in their carry-on bag to later change into so when they land in Bangladesh they would be “dressed appropriately”. Once there, they saw their peers dressed in jeans and T-shirts instead of traditional clothes. They felt like they were a “blast from the past” dressed and behaving like their mother and grandparents. They realized that their cousins go to hotel parties which are like night clubs in the U.S. and dress in “night club clothes”, things they are not allowed to do in the U.S. Still, the sisters are the ones perceived as “not knowing” what they are doing because they are: “outsiders here, outsiders there, we don’t know what we’re doing anywhere, apparently. So yeah, like we never got to just hang out and do what kids there do because we basically live in the 70’s like they [parents and grandparents] did, their Bangladesh. So it’s pretty crazy”.

Sara’s remark questions the notions that designate them both here and there as “outsiders” who “don’t know what [they] are doing”. In her statement and question of the accuracy of this assessment since it is only “apparently” and not necessarily accurately, we hear an address/response to an Other in whose glances and words, spoken or not, she and her sister read doubts about their identity and belonging. It is not sufficient that the sisters – and other children of immigrant – think and see themselves as insiders who belong to both cultures, the image of self needs to be consonant with how they think the Other sees them. The recognition of the Other is essential.

While these parents’ views of their culture of origin might be a frozen frame from the moment of immigration, the “culture back home” changes in subtle and dramatic ways that make the immigrants seem to be a “blast from the past,” as Sara notes. Additionally, these immigrants are not a closed-off system immune to change. They too experience the culture of their adopted home and their religious adherence goes through
ebbs and flows with new understandings and learning. They might have fasted and prayed always or occasionally and perhaps even dropped the children at the weekend Islamic school to learn the basics of their faith, but they are also busy pursing the “American dream.” And even if they only socialized with their co-ethnics, “American culture” almost imperceptivity enters their discourse, dress, home décor and mannerism even as they chastise their children for being “too American.” Sometimes that trip to the “old country” also makes parent realize that they and their society/culture of origin have also changed. In a previous project, first generation immigrant Muslims shared with me how surprised they were to go back home only to feel like outsiders and “stick out like a sore thumb”. Even though they did not lose the language and thought they knew the norms, both have, in the decades, since gradually changed. Many also talked about how they learned more about Islam after they moved to the U.S., often prompted by having to answer the questions of non-Muslims and of their children who demand to know why and how something is Islamic or not. Some, who were not so religious in their youth, become more observant after immigration and many others became so as they grew older (M. Ali 2011). Recognizing the evolutionary nature of their own religious observance helps parents understand and better deal with their children because they see how they themselves did not come to religion until they were older. Parents may not understand that their children struggle with being a child of color and a Muslim in America but they realize these children are growing up in a different time and place; so they attempt to adjust their parenting methods and their expectations.
Growing up the Child of Convert

Convert parents better understand the experiences of growing up in America but they too have not known what it is like to be Muslim child and how the intersection with religion complicates color and gender for a young person. For the children of converts, their parents have experienced a conversion process where they questioned their entire belief system in the process of learning a new worldview. For Blackamericans who came through the NOI, their initial religious experience was still within a community of other Blackamericans. Their children might have attended an all-Black religious community and schools like Sister Clara Muhammad School but others went to public school and did not have the support of a religious community. In either case, limited interaction with immigrant Muslims allowed them to experiment with social norms without having an immigrant referee telling them what is presumably Islamic or not. For example, one collaborator recalls how her parents let her participate in Halloween dressed as an African princess while another said his parents did not permit taking part in Halloween and instead created a tradition of a family dinner and movie night as an alternative.

Sumayya, a thirty-four year old Blackamerican, whose parents converted before she was born, did not know any Muslims when she was growing up. In fourth grade, her father told her she was no longer allowed to wear shorts or short sleeves. He also said that when she started her menstrual cycle (the age of religious obligation), she would have to wear a headscarf. So in eighth grade, she started the year with her headscarf which she styled after a Libyan friend’s mother who wore it in the style of the “old country” (scarf pinned under her chin) unlike her mother who covered her hair and pulled her scarf back in bun-like fashion. Sumayya says that though her father prepared her for this day, she was mortified to go to school with a headscarf and upon arrival
dashed to the bathroom crying. All her friends followed to comfort her. Even though her friends did not seem to care that she now looked different, Sumayya for a while told schoolmates she wore the scarf because she lost her hair to cancer treatments. Beyond the initial awkwardness, however, the headscarf did not limit her activities as she participated in swimming, ran track and played hockey. She never went to school dances, prom, or any parties where alcohol was served. In seventh grade and in a new school, her parents let her go to a dance for the first time but when she got there she thought “this doesn’t feel right” and asked her parents to go home. Since then, though, her parents made it clear that going to dances and parties with alcohol were not appropriate. That was fine with her since she neither had the desire to go nor felt like she missed anything. This indifference was because she had non-Muslim classmates who did not engage in those activities and with whom she instead stayed home to watch movies and make cookies.

Twenty-nine year old Shareefa, on the other hand, grew up being the only Blackamerican in her otherwise diverse class in the Phoenix-valley. Her parents were involved in the school and that made it much easier for her. Her mother, who wore the hijab, started a Black History month in Shareefa’s elementary school and prepared the students by coming to class and telling them that Shareefa was one day soon going to start wearing a headscarf and what that means. She even brought headscarves for kids to try which, Shareefa recalls, they thought was “cool.” So when Shareefa finally went to school donning a headscarf, it was a non-issue. Her classmates were also made aware that she does not celebrate Christmas or Valentine’s Day so her friends made her “Arizona’s birthday cards instead of Valentine’s day card.” She noted that her parents created alternatives outlets including Muslim youth groups so she did not feel like she was missing out on anything. In junior high, her classmates insisted on nominating her
for prom queen and she had to figure out how to do this in a way that would not conflict with her faith. She wore a formal gown with jacket and a matching headscarf and rather than a date, she went with her brother. To her surprise, she won and she says “it was so amazing.” Her friends knew she could not dance with the prom king and suggested they instead do a group hug. She was touched by this and it shaped her views on public schools which she defends from their Muslim critics arguing that it pays to be involved.

Dates and Dances

There is no monolithic way that Muslim “immigrants” or “converts” dealt with dating or gender interactions in general. Like all parents, there were broad guidelines and variations based on the sex of the child but also on each child’s temperament. Interestingly enough, many of the participants had permission (some parents only consented after their children insisted, but for most it was not a battle) to go to prom on the conditions they dress modestly and go with a family member, another Muslim, or with a group and there was to be no overnight hanging out. Some, like Ishaaq, opted out even when his parents gave him permission without conditions because not attending, he said, was an important distinction of his Muslim-ness that he did not want to lose.

Omar, a twenty-eight year old son of Indian immigrants, noted that in high school as a Muslim kid with a long list of don’ts (don’t eat pepperoni pizza, don’t drink, don’t dance, don’t date) you feel a bit left out and not belonging; but once out of the high school environment, you “create your own social circle and your own environment, then it’s very easy like, that’s just not part of my life. Like, I don’t know any good bars in LA, what are you gonna do! (laugh) but I know a lot other great places in LA that me and my friends would go to.” When he socializes with his non-Muslim friends, he is able to
“navigate those [lists of don’ts]” because friends become cognizant over time that restaurants are fine but bars and clubs may not be.

Dating and opposite sex friendships are probably the two main points of contention between parents and children. Conventional wisdom and studies may suggest that Muslim parents are adamantly opposed to and uncompromising on both. A workshop on parenting by imam Magid of ISNA sums up the perception of the general instructions parents give to their children on gender interaction: “Don’t talk to the Muslim girls, ever; but you are going to marry them. As for the non-Muslim girls, talk to them, but don’t ever bring one home.”9 The reality, however, is that parents might hope for that but they often try to be understanding and pragmatic about this. Therefore, they do not always outright forbid dating; instead, they employ diverse strategies to deal with the issue. Sara, the older of the two Bengali sisters quoted earlier, says she was a “crazy kid in high school.” So when her parents realized she was “hanging out with boys”, the father printed a list of family rules and posted it on the fridge. One of the rules was “no dating until you have a college degree.” So dating, she said, was not out of the question but it was to be delayed until after college, when it would be time to explore possibilities of marriage partners. Her grandmother back in Bangladesh, however, told her she understands that girls her age have boyfriends and that it is fine to date so long as the boy is a Muslim from the Muslim world from Malaysia to the Middle East. Sara says she could see a map in her head and, though she realized that her grandmother’s map excluded her “home country, America,” she was intrigued by the fact that her 75 year old grandmother was open to the idea of dating and understood the peer pressure to date. Sara describes her mother as the first feminist she ever met for one because she always told her daughters that “you need to be in a position where you won’t be dependent on anybody else”.

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I asked Ibtisam, a nineteen year old of North African descent, who was schooled in a private Islamic school and lived in an Arab neighborhood, if her parents talked to her about dating when she got to college. She said that

my mom is so cool. She’ll say “listen, if you meet anyone who is cute and smart at school just tell him I want you to talk to my dad”. She’s like, “because I know you’re going to meet people, but I don’t want you to give yourself too fast or do anything you’ll regret”. But she trusts me so she doesn’t say the stupid things like “don’t date” and stuff because she knows I’m gonna do that. So she just says things like “if you meet someone good, bring him home”.

Ibtisam appreciated her mother’s pragmatism and recognition that it is not a matter of if but of when and how her daughter will grapple with interests of/in the opposite sex. In her mother’s instructions, Ibtisam reads awareness of the reality of young people’s lives. She also reads trust, care and concerns rather than suspicions and parental dictates. This gives Ibtisam confidence in herself as she navigates the labyrinth of “college life” where dating is the norm. In this short excerpt of self-narration, we observe the workings of the embodied thinking self as it interprets the message of a significant social other and forms images of itself and of this social other. The image of the mother for Ibtisam (other-for-me) is that “mom is so cool”, “she trusts me”, “she knows” me so she is not “stupid”.

Ibtisam also assesses that her mother knows her and that she is worthy of the trust. She recognizes herself in the image the mother has formed of her. This recognition of the social other, as noted earlier, is crucial for a consonant self-image.

Contrary to the monolithic narrative of identity crisis that paints all young Muslim as torn between a restrictive home and permissive society, these young people and their parents have diverse approaches. Hassan, for example, notes that because in Bosnia dating is not unusual and gender interactions are very relaxed, his parents never spelled out a particular position on these issues but he had imposed some limitations on himself. In senior year in college, however, he “might have” become “a little bit...loose” as he experimented a little with drinking and smoking. Because it happened so late in
college rather in high school or even the early years in college, however, he does not think he was succumbing to peer pressure, though it might have been a factor. As he was relaying his narrative, he was still trying to understand what might have led him to that, perhaps “sort of latent desire that [he] never expressed.” He regrets this youthful indiscretion and sees these explanations as “complete fabrication, it’s bullshit! Excuse me.” As he tries to understand himself and to figure why he acted as he did, we are privy to the process of theorizing and evaluating where the self becomes the object of its own reflection and critical assessment. This process leads him to dismiss some reasons as “complete fabrication”.

One could also see differences even within a family on how either parent dealt with the situation and here one also sees some of cultural difference in gender interaction norms. Layla is the daughter of a Whiteamerican convert mother and Pakistani father, her parents made it clear that there would be no dating. She said she could understand that but had a harder time upholding her father’s rule that she was to have no friendships with boys because, especially if they were not Muslim, boys have only one thing their minds. As an adult reflecting back, Layla says she could see their reasoning and agrees “with it to a certain extent” but as a child she could not comprehend why she was not allowed to have male friends. She says that her mother, having grown up in the U.S., was more understanding about American gender interactions. So she let her mother know about her male friends but hid that fact from the father.

Many of the female participants – and others with whom I interacted through youth groups and women gatherings – were often resentful of the double standards within the community. Religiously, the code of conduct for both sexes is the same, they argue, but within families and in the community the boys had more freedom of hanging out even
with girls and everyone seemed to be turning a blind eye. The boys would not date
publicly, but it often is an open secret. This is the sentiment captured by imam Magid
quoted above. This topic came up in my conversations with male collaborators some of
whom confirmed they had a little more freedom than their sisters. Others like Ramy, a
nineteen year old son of Arab mother and Persian father, says he did not observe double
standards within his family though his sisters often complained about that, so he
concedes there might be some truth to it.

While parental discussion and openness about how to deal with emotions and
natural sexual desires beyond the notion that satisfying these desires outside of marriage
is haram (illicit), the community typically avoids such topics. Lately, however, this has
been changing. Imams and advisors are getting questions from youth about how to deal
with attractions or how to deal with feeling of guilt if they acted upon those feelings
outside of marriage. In a workshop in Arizona titled Love and Dating and conducted by
two male speakers and moderated by a second generation Arab American husband and
wife team, many of these issues were discussed. Dr. Kamran Rais (second generation
male of South Asian descent) and Osama Cannon, (a convert who is half Black, half
White) both in their early to mid-thirties and nationally known speakers and imams,
were the two speakers spearheading a frank conversation on the topic. Cannon reminded
the audience that young people are not living in an “asexual bubble;” indeed, they are
sexual beings living in a world inundating them with sexualized images and messages in
advertising, music and videos. He exhorts the community to have these frank and crucial
conversations. To add credibility to his proposal, he grounds it in Islamic history. He
gives an example of a young man who came to Prophet Muhammad asking him
permission to fornicate. Cannon highlighted the Prophet’s pedagogy: rather than
scolding the youth, the Prophet acknowledges that sexual desires are only natural. Then,
employing Socratic teaching methods, the Prophet guides the young man to help him see how if he would not want that to be done to his sister or mother then others too would not want that for theirs. The Prophet then prays for the young man placing his hand on his head, in a show of affection. In summoning the Prophetic tradition, Cannon demonstrated his credential as scholar of Islamic tradition and consequently one qualified to speak from a religious perspective on such sensitive issues. He also paved the way to argue for his proposal. Through this prophetic pedagogy, Cannon reminded the audience that feelings of attraction and love are natural and must be acknowledged. There must also be ways to channel and manage these feelings and the role of parents, community teachers, and imams is to know and to give young people the tools; they need to show empathy and understanding to the young. But the young also need to see this as spiritual struggles and not merely as natural urges to be satisfied.

The first half of this workshop was attended by parents and children but separate sessions were planned for the afternoon. The later session was intended to allow the youth and the speakers to have a more candid conversation and to feel more free to ask the questions, written or in person. Questions during the youth’s session were dominated by issues such as how to deal with peer pressure, how to control desires, how to get parents to understand the experiences of young people, when is one prepared for marriage, and whether a person who had a relationship before marriage should tell his/her future spouse. This last question generated back and forth discussion. The reply from the discussants was that it depended on whether or not revealing that serves a constructive purpose. They then added that if God has concealed one’s sins from public judgment, it is not necessary to publicize them. The response did not sit well with some of the audience. This Islamic etiquette of modesty by not revealing repented-for-sins was perceived by some of the younger people as not being forthcoming. They noted that
withholding truth is no different than lying. Two women, one of Arab background the other of Blackameric background, in their mid-twenties argued the above point. They added that if all the parties in this scenario lived in the same area and the affair was known, then the new spouse will sooner or later find out and will resent being played for a fool. Withholding such information is dishonest and will jeopardize the marriage.

The second and subsequent generations of Muslims are, themselves, taking the lead in opening this topic to Muslim public discourse. A new anthology, titled *Love InshAllah*, presents twenty-five stories of dating, love, and marriage experiences showing the divergent ways Muslim women and their families (immigrants and converts) deal with these issues. It attempts to problematize the homogenizing discourse from within and outside the community. Discussions of these issues, led by second generation women and men, are also taking place on social media and on websites. A very popular webzine, *AltMuslimah.com*, with an international readership and a second generation female founding editor-in-chief with busy public engagements, is dedicated to “[e]xploring both sides of the gender divide.” Among other topics, the editors and contributors discuss Muslim gender relations and sexuality. Titles there include, for example, *Muslims Need Dating Dialogues to Open Communication*, *Sex and Islam do Mix, but not in America*, *Relationships: An anti-teen-dating diatribe*, *Hook-up culture: No sex on campus?,* and *Sexuality: Body-talk and the Limits of Islamic Erotica*.

Technology and social media have changed gender interactions and “dating” in society in general and Muslims have also adapted to that. There are Muslim matrimonial websites and even conferences now have matrimonial sessions similar to speed dating though no one would call this “dating” since parents and other chaperons are outside waiting for good news of a possible match. The words dating and pre-marital sex are seen as synonymous and while the reality is that Muslims are not immune to engaging in
pre-marital sex, acknowledging that in public is considered not only a sin but also
ruinous to a family’s reputation. One is expected not to broadcast one’s indiscretions.

“Where are you from?” The Geographies of Belonging

“Where are you from?” is a simple question but depending on the context, it
could either be a simple conversation opener at an airport or a coffee shop or one with
complex implications about origins and belonging, about national identity, boundaries
and exclusion. In this latter case, “where are you from?” implies you are not from here,
not one of us. While the question is common in American social interactions and often
the answer is the state where one is born or lives, for those perceived to be outside the
national imaginary of belonging such an answer is usually followed by “no, where are you
really from?” or “originally” or “your homeland.” Being asked this regularly and
sometimes more than once a day can leave one frustrated at best and excluded and
alienated from where one thinks is (and feels at) home. This question about a place is
more than about a physical location; it is one about the emotional attachments and
connections and the meanings and memories that are essential to a sense of belonging
and being part of a place, its history, and people. As noted earlier, the physical and social
spaces and environments are essential to identity, one’s sense of self (re)presentation.

In the survey, along with the demographic information, I included “how do you
answer the question: where are you from?” and allowed space to “explain as needed.”
Even in that limited space, participants’ responses reflected the loaded nature of the
question and the complexity of the answer. Of the 246 participants who answered this
question, only 48 of them simply answered by stating country of origin and half of those were of Palestinian background to whom maintaining that link with the land is rooted in understandable historical and political reasons. Obviously, for the children of converts the answer is simply the state where they were born/raised but as noted earlier even they, particularly women who wear headscarf, are often then asked where they are “really” from. The great majority of those of immigrant background have a context-dependent formula response, which they say, depends on location (school, work, social gathering), the background and tone of the questioner and what they think the questioner is getting at. For most of them, the answer is the city or state where they were born or grew up and they may add their parent’s background because they “know” the person will not be satisfied with just their childhood city. They know the person is asking about their roots; or as one interviewee put it, “they want to know why I’m brown.” So they would explain, “I was born and raised in Chicago but my parents are from India” or Egypt or Erevia or Somalia or Bosnia or China. Being asked so frequently, however, and because usually it is about origins, many are bothered by the question and find it exclusionary. Their parents might be comfortable answering that question because first generation immigrants assume their accents signal their foreignness but young Muslim Americans know it is the color of their skin (or dress) or name that often motivates the question. Some names are presumed to not be American no matter how many generations they have been American. So they let the questioner work for the answer. Yasmeena, a forty year old mother and student captures this sentiment and formula as she noted in her survey:

I have a system...just to play around with people and have a little mischievous fun! First, I tell the person I am from Chandler. Usually the person is not satisfied with the answer so they give me a confused look or they will ask the question a different way....and then I say Chicago. They will not say anything because they are still confused or uncomfortable or they will say something like...“where are your parents from?”...and then I will say India with a big smile or grin. I usually
end up asking them similar questions, but I get to the point right away “what country did you or your family/relatives migrate from?”

In the interview, I asked Yasmeena to elaborate on the reasons behind her “system.” She said the reason is “the way they ask it.” If she thinks the person is “sincere,” she would just say India. But when she gets “that feeling” that the questioner is “being a little more superior” which has “been mostly the white people”, then she employs her system and ends it with asking her questioner about his/her ancestors too. She does this because she feels there is an implied statement in the question: “like they own this place. They ask it like ’ah, I own this place, where are you from?’”. So with her system, she tries to convey “uh no honey, you don’t own this place, you came here just like I did, you know, maybe you came earlier or your family came earlier or whatever; [so] no you don’t own this place!” She resents, in fact “hate[s]”, that implied ownership which excludes her. So she asserts her belonging by challenging the legitimacy of the question by not readily revealing her family’s origin. Yasmeena’s husband, a first generation immigrant, liked her system so much he appropriated it to assert his belonging, no matter his foreign birth or late arrival in the U.S.

Yasmeena asserts her belonging and challenges her questioners in the same way by asking in return where the person is from. She points out that her system is activated mostly with white people. In this exchange with her questioner, we see the power differential inherent in the privilege and normativity of whiteness as the standard American and her maneuvers to usurp that power from her questioner. In doing so, she wants to drive home the point that if the question is about roots, then the questioner too “is from somewhere else.” But if is about home, then they are both from a particular hometown, USA. In the Black and White racial boundaries that define who is an American – though whiteness is unhyphenated – both at home and abroad, those who do not fit this these poles are constantly asked about their “real” identity. Often it is
when they return to the “home countries” that they are seen as Americans and as they feel and sense their difference that solidifies a sense of belonging. Omar a twenty-six year old male of Indian descent captures this experience. He noted that when he travels abroad, he realizes he is not only American but more specifically as an Angelino. He states that

I felt different because for instance in Pakistan you know they can spot you from a mile away as you’re an American you’re foreigner even though you look the same mostly as they do. And I think society is so different in that it’s hard to identify other than on a superficial level. I think it’s funny that you when you are here in America you have certain identification with Pakistanis and Indians but when you’re in Pakistan you have certain identifications with Americans. You know, it’s just each one bring out the contrast.

I asked him if he feels torn about two worlds and he noted that “this honestly is what I’ve always felt. I felt much more in common with Americans and America and because growing up in Los Angeles, I really primarily identify with Los Angeles and its cultural institutions. I feel like these are MINE (emphasis in tone).

For women, whether or not they are of immigrant background, the headscarf – and how they wear it – is a symbol that immediately marks them and places them outside the national imaginaries and imbues their identity with various meanings. Najla, a nineteen year old college student of East African descent, donned the headscarf in the summer break between her first and second year of college. She was visiting some family in another state for the summer and surprised her parents with it when she came back. The change was not so much of an issue for her friends; in fact, a part of her was disappointed that it did not generate much reaction or questions from her friends. Prior to the headscarf, her features made her background ambiguous to people who typically would then ask if she were Indian, Arab or mixed Black and White. In spite of these questions, she thought that they always assumed she was “American” and to those who have known her, the headscarf did not change anything so far. But shortly before our
interview, she had gone to Hungary and Romania on a school trip and was constantly asked where she was from, while her co-travelers were assumed to be American. She thinks this is because she was both “the only African American and the only Muslim girl wearing a scarf there”. So the questioners thought of her as an international student or tourist. In frustration, she would say “oh, no I’m from America too, we’re all from there.” Even though in the past she had often been asked about her ethnic background, part of her frustration on this occasion was that she was “not used to standing out and being different because [she] just started wearing the hijab last year. So [she was] not used to being perceived as something as other than an American.” She clarifies to herself and to me that she thinks of herself foremost as American; she does not deny her African roots and is interested in and someday hopes to visit to learn more about the culture. Lest I wonder if she abandoning her culture of origin, Najla points out that her family’s connection to their country of origin is itself tentative: mainly through food, clothes and the language, though she and her brother are not fluent. She thinks her father might be a bit more “into their culture”, because he would like her to marry someone with the same cultural background. To her mother, on the other hand, the ethnic background does not matter so long as the potential spouse is a Muslim. It is interesting to note that while Najla did not like how wearing the hijab marked her so that she was not recognized as an American while traveling abroad, she was also disappointed that her friends did not take notice or remark on her hijab. She wanted to be asked about this new self-presentation, for this change to be recognized.
Conclusion

In the dominant narrative of “identity crisis”, identity is conceived of as a stage that one succeeds or fails to achieve. This leaves the impression that it is a condition or a product rather than an ongoing process throughout the person’s life. As this project illustrates, questioning, trying to understand and to give meaning to self, faith, and the Other (family, community, society) is a lifelong process. As a process, it is dynamic, with varying rates of change that are affected by multiple variables. Growing up in contemporary society, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, class or religious background is fraught with challenges at every turn. The challenges are compounded and multiplied in the matrix for those marginalized by the intersections of these categories. Social problems from school dropouts to abuse of drug, alcohol and sex are now globalized issues and bullying and school shootings make public schools seem more like battlegrounds rather than socializing institutions. Yet, “identity crisis” is not the narrative that frames the public discourses on these societal problems. But it is the one through which Muslims (from teenagers to those in their thirties and forties) who are born/raised in the United States or the West in general are typically discussed. Torn between seeming irreconcilable binaries (home/society, country of origin/American, being in the secular West/belonging to the religious East), younger Muslim Americans are thought to be ensnared in poles pulling them in different directions in a presumably centuries old conflict of Islam and the West. The background to this history and its re-articulation in current public discourse will be discussed later, but for now I argue that the pathologised “identity crisis” narrative must be situated within that discourse and within the narratives of those presumably suffering from it. There is no denying that there are Muslims who are born/raised in the United States and Europe who have
committed or are contemplating violent acts; some have or will join violent extremists. But the paths that led them to that position of self and other destruction are not one paved by their parents preventing them from dating, partying, or telling them they are “too American” when they talk back. After all, there are “mainstream” Americans who join gangs, militias or become religious extremists and bomb abortion clinics.

As this analysis demonstrates, the offspring of immigrants or converts are aware of their difference and the multiple demands (family, faith, peers) on them. They recognize that others in their generations who do not share their faith or family background also have challenging experiences where they try to balance the expectations of others with the persons they want or hope to be. They acknowledge that the process is harder for them, but they learn to navigate it and construct a sense of self that incorporates all of the different “parts” of themselves, as Aisha put it. They do not see these parts as mutually exclusive. As they narrate this self, we see the heteroglot or intertextual nature of these narratives, as bits and pieces of other discourses are engaged or appropriated and enter inner speech. Their difference is not an issue for them, but it seems to be one for some parents and for a society that expect these Muslims to fit an image that is an either/or proposition. The collaborators in this project were comfortable in their own skin. That is not to say, however, that there are not those who are struggling with contradictions imposed upon them through the simplistic “good/bad Muslim” and “American first or Muslim first” framing.

If there are identity problems among younger generations of Muslims today, they might be problems resulting from the post-9/11 discourse that demands they be “Muslim” – a particular kind of Muslim – above all else. They are not given the space and the time to experiment, ponder and come to their own complex understanding of self, family, faith and society. The effect of the new pressures younger Muslims face is
articulated by Omar, who points out that pre-9/11 there were those to whom piety was important, others to whom religion was marginal in their lives, and every gradation between these tendencies. Things, he observed, changed in the aftermath of 9/11. Some younger people now feel compelled to present themselves as pious when among Muslims but then to step out of the community and be “the craziest club-going partying guy ever.” This happens, Omar theorizes, because 9/11 brought about a “major cultural shift” where one can no longer eschew preconceived notions about one’s religious beliefs or behavioral expectations by just putting one’s “ethnic identity out there” and let that be the primary identifier. Since 9/11

if you’re Indian automatically the next question is “oh, are you Muslim?” you know. So even people who didn’t want to identify with their religion were forced to answer questions about their religion and become identified with their religion. And I think that kinda leads people who wouldn’t have otherwise bothered with that kinda of identification [to] try to find some balance or some solution.

The solution for some who are “just trying to cope” with this new pressure is to be a pious Muslim in the community and a “partier” outside. In the aftermath of 9/11, some sought to conceal their Muslim-ness, but many more found it necessary to self-identify as Muslims as a way of standing in solidary with a community perceived to be under siege. It might be more accurate to say that it is society and/or families whose own “identity crisis” is projected on the younger Muslim who, otherwise, might just want to claim aspects of or all “the parts” of his or her self.
The 2011 Mosque Report notes that in a survey, mosque leaders around the country were asked if they agreed with the statement “radicalism and extremism is increasing among Muslim youth—in their own experience in their area.” An overwhelming majority of 87 percent disagreed with the statement adding that their challenge is not radicalization as much as it is bringing the youth in and keeping them attached to the mosque (Bagby 2012).

Al-Muminah provides mentoring and a space for diverse young Muslim women to share their experiences and support one another and to engage in recreational activities. It also puts together a graduation gala for Muslim women of all ages complete with formal evening gowns, a talent show, and inspiring talks on learning, “women power” and the responsibility to change the world. The gala started as an alternative to school prom and grew into the largest Muslim event in Arizona.

He explains there is a difference between Negroes who are Black professionals and “movers and shakers” and Niggas who do not follow society’s rules or expectations. He liked the latter for their rebellion against society.

In Islamic discursive tradition, the first and natural state for humans and for the natural world is a state of submission to the one God but that humans, endowed as they are with the intellect, have to make the conscious choice to submit to the Divine Will and guidance.

The difference between culture and religion will be covered in more details in the subsequent chapter. But it is sufficient to say here that the issues of potential conflict between parents and children have to do not so much with actual religious practices or rituals but with dating, dress, dietary rules, and participating in holidays like Halloween or Valentine’s Day or Christmas. Immigrant parents might explain these restrictions to their children in cultural terms “we are Indians and don’t do that”; or they, like most converts might explain them in religious terms, “we are Muslims and don’t do such and such.” Interestingly enough, even the most lax non-practicing Muslim might drink alcohol but would abstain from eat pork. There is diversity of opinion about other meat and many Muslims take the dispensation that allows them to eat meat that is not slaughtered according the rules of Islam (dhabiha) under the rubric that is the food of the people of the book. Those who insist on only eating dhabiha either pack their children’s lunch or tell them to eat vegetarian meals.

In general conversations throughout this project’s fieldwork and beyond, among project collaborators, and in public and academic discourses, “culture” figures prominently in discussions about Muslims locally and globally. In the previous chapter, I explored the notion of an “identity crisis” presumably resulting from differences between a home culture that is ethnic and religious and a societal culture that is presumably secular. In this chapter, I explore the related idea of a “pure/true Islam” as compared to a presumably “cultural Islam.” This narrative frame has multiple stories and meanings woven upon it by Muslims and non-Muslims alike from across the ideological spectrum of groups variously labeled “fundamentalists/Islamists,” “modernists,” “traditionalists,” and “secularists.” Younger generations of Muslim Americans, as well as many converts to Islam, invoke this narrative to argue that the understanding and practice of Islam by first generation immigrants is colored by a “back home culture” that privileges certain norms and traditions and relegates anything different, especially if Western, to the category of “un-Islamic” practices. Critics often consider those invoking the “pure/true vs. Cultural Islam” narrative as puritans who advocate an austere form of religion. These critics claim that whether they are merely quietist/pietistic or radical extremists, these puritans deeply reject both the West and the “Muslim world” and are dangerous to both.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that this narrative of purity has many stories woven into the same narrative framework; in other words, it has different versions. There are indeed those who advocate an austere form of Islam and who are hostile to Muslims and non-Muslims verbally or physically. Yet the version of this narrative invoked by the collaborators of this project and many other Western Muslims is neither rejectionist nor dangerous. I argue that, rather than discarding culture altogether, these
Western Muslims are seeking to alter the immigrant cultural garb of Islam in order to cloak the faith with a culture that is grounded in their American [or European] realities. They are neither fully rejecting nor uncritically embracing either culture but are instead selectively appropriating elements of both.

**Individual Believers, Practice Communities, and Changing Societies**

The following excerpts are the voices of five participants in this project expressing this narrative of a pure/true Islam as compared to a cultural Islam.

**Omar** (28 year-old male, Indian background): I think in particular my parents have a much more culturally tinged practice of Islam in that some of the cultural practices they have, you know, certain Indian things.

**Mukarram** (24 year-old male, Palestinian background): My family’s practice of Islam is fundamentally culturally motivated.

**Zahra** (19 year-old female, Chinese background): their [my parents’] interpretations are more culture based, and I don’t look at religion through culture’s eyes but its true essence...[ Also,] culture and Islam have become intermixed in most Islamic countries and people start using cultural basis for religious ones

**Heather** (26 year-old female, Whiteamerican background): Non-immigrant Muslim Americans tend to be more focused on the core principals of Islam and going back to the essence of the religion as opposed to culturally traditional ways of practicing the *deen* [religion]. I see non-immigrants as bringing Islam back to being a way of life distinct from culture practices.

**Sadiqa** (20 year-old female, Blackamerican background): Many beliefs of immigrant Muslims are based on cultural practices of their homelands and have little or no support in the Qur'an and Sunnah

Differences between generations and between converts and immigrants are frequently discussed in cultural and religious terms. Here, the immigrant generation’s culture of origin is seen to have too great an influence on their interpretation and practice of Islam. These culturally based views of Islam, the argument goes, are then normalized by immigrants who expect others to adhere to them on the ground that this
is the Islamic way. Immigrants too invoke culture as they attempt to practice and transmit the “pure/true” Islam they know. They worry about cultural impurities entering Islam at the hands of converts and young people who try to “Americanize Islam.” All sides of this debate want to practice a more authentic and “pure/true” Islam free from what they perceive as the cultural baggage acquired in America or brought from back home.

The above excerpts were responses to survey or interview questions about differences in the understanding or practice of Islam between participants and their parents; about differences and similarities between how immigrants and converts interpret or practice Islam; and about how participants see the relationships between the converts and immigrants. Culture was also identified as the reason for differences between Islam in the U.S. and in Muslim majority countries. Slightly more than half (54 percent) of the respondents confirm that their understanding or practices differ from that of their families, and a great majority (72 percent) said that immigrants and converts slightly or mostly differ in how they understand or interpret Islam. The sample excerpts above also illustrate the ethnic diversity (South Asian, Arab, Blackamerican, Chinese, Whiteamerican) of those who hold the view that the understanding the immigrants have of Islam is cultural and is not “pure/true” Islam. While culture was the most frequently-cited difference, there also were differences couched in terms of the degree to which participants were “liberal” or “conservative” compared to their parents. Some framed the differences in terms of focus. For example, parents were said to focus on rituals, while children sought a “deeper” understanding and a relationship with God. Even some who said there was no difference between their understanding and practice of Islam and that of their parents qualified their responses by commenting that any differences were minor ones. For example, Maryam, a twenty-four year old of Pakistani
descent, notes these “minor” differences as follows: “my mother doesn’t wear hijab while I do; my father doesn’t have a beard while my brother does [and] my parents do not eat strictly zabiha halal meat, whereas my brother and I do.”

The first of the excerpts above is from an interview with Omar, a twenty-eight year old male of Indian parentage. Omar notes certain “Indian things” that he says “twinge” his parents’ Islam. These “things” include claiming religious bases for things he concluded were merely cultural. He gives the example of having to visit grandparents after Eid prayers; he would do this anyway, he emphasizes, but his parents say it must be done because the Prophet said so somewhere. Putting it this way, he notes, makes it sound like a religious obligation when it is not. The more contentious issue for him, however, concerned the background of his potential spouse. His parents had often said that the ethnicity of his future wife did not matter so long as she was a Muslim, though it would be nice if she were Indian and even better if she were from Hyderabad, their hometown. Narrowing his pool of choices beyond religion, however, was not something he was willing to negotiate:

I flatly told them at that time, and I’m by nature a conciliatory person and I like compromises, [but] that was one respect where I kinda knew right away, no! I’m going to draw a line and I said no! If I find the right girl and she is African American would you like me not to marry her? And they didn’t really have an answer for that. I did, you know throughout, I talked to an Egyptian girl and different ones just to show them you know that look, I’m serious about this! In the end, it is the qadr [fate] of Allah that the right girl was Hyderabadi you know [laugh].

The second excerpt is from an interview with Mukarram, a twenty-four year old single college student of Palestinian background. Mukarram was born and raised in a mostly Arab Chicago suburb and to the question “where are you from?” he simply answers “Palestine.” He grew up in a moderately religious household and also considers himself moderately religious. But he thinks there is a noticeable difference between his
and his family’s understanding and practice of Islam. Having stated that his parents’ religious practice is fundamentally cultural, he explains:

Although this may sound harsh, it was only after migrating to the US that my family began to practice Islam with more conviction and sincerity. Typically, when there is a contradiction between a cultural practice and the mainstream Islamic ruling on a matter, the cultural opinion prevails. This is the main difference between “cultural” Muslims and Muslims who were raised as minorities in the US. For American born/raised Muslims who practice their religion, what tends to take precedence is the Islamic ruling on a matter as opposed to the cultural Arab or Desi status quo.

The idea of pure/true/real—interchangeable terms in this narrative—Islam is salient. For example, on the website of a popular Muslim program called The Deen Show—created and hosted by “Brother Eddie,” a second generation Bosnian American—is a declaration: “American Muslims are there in the United States and it is their pleasure and privilege to help educate and share the true message of Pure Islam without cultural, traditional or nationalistic prejudices and corruption” (emphasis added). The Deen—translated as “way of life”—show is carried online and on a few satellite “Islamic” TV stations. In an interview about an upcoming film documenting his journey from gangster to a daee (someone who calls people to faith), Eddie talked about growing up in a Muslim family which he described as “Muslims on Batteries” or “Cultural Muslims.” Finding his life of “fun” devoid of meaning, he started to research and study comparative religion and found his way back to “true Islam.” Another example of this purity theme is a group called the Chicago Muslim Network that defines itself as “The place where the coolest Muslims meet, mingle, make friends, learn” (emphasis in original). The network’s goals are “to explore true and pure Islamic values of fellowship and peace, regardless of religion, sect or ethnicity” (emphasis added).

I will return below to project collaborators and their perspectives. At this juncture, however, it is critically important to explore why and how this narrative of
pure/true Islam, invoked by young Western Muslims, alarms some parents and scholars (Muslim or not). I will do this at some length because it is integral to the discourse of radicalization and identity crisis addressed in the previous chapter. It is also relevant to subsequent chapters. It is understandable that parents see in their children’s declarations a possible rejection of their culture, but some scholars see something even more worrisome.

De-cultured and Dangerous

In her book article titled *How to Put the Genie Back in the Bottle? “Identity”, Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in America*, Muslim American academic Marcia Hermansen noted that the “simultaneous alienation both from American culture and from the culture of immigrant Muslim parents encourages the embrace of a culture-free, global Islamic militancy” (2003, 308). While she acknowledges that some young Muslims “flee from their Muslim identity, [while] others are progressive activists, [and] most are moderate,” (Hermansen 2003, 309) her concerns are reflected in the title of her piece. The genie that needs to be contained, if Muslims are to pass through a critical juncture in their history in America, is what she refers to as “identity Islam.” Hermansen notes that a central motto of Muslim youth movements is “rejection” of culture in favor of a purportedly pure and true Islam. The cultureless “true Islam” that her students often request to discuss in class is one that is “apparently floating above everything cultural. It is pristine and unassailable,” it materializes politically through “a utopian state where everyone is happy and honest” and the world would be better if this state were to “be re-imposed on humanity today” (Hermansen 2003, 309). Hermansen argues that this type of Islam is globally propagated and materially supported by revivalist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Jama’at Islami* in South Asia. This ideology,
then, crossed the Atlantic with the post-1965 Muslim immigrants and appealed to Muslim masses in America, who saw it as a means to inoculate their children against the woes of assimilation. These parents, however, did not realize that it would also cause their children to eventually challenge their ethnic heritage.

Hermansen is not alone in her assertion and concern. In his widely acclaimed and frequently referenced book, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004), French academic and political analyst Olivier Roy raises similar concerns particularly about the offspring of immigrants in the West. He argues Muslims who invoke the narrative of “pure Islam” are part of a phenomenon he calls a neo-fundamentalist or “Globalized Islam.” Roy chides those who attribute everything negative that Muslims do (violence, misogyny and so on) to Islam as religion or to culture, history and the politics in the Middle East. Instead, he contends, these problems together with identity politics and Muslim social and political activism in the West are rooted in a “born-again” re-Islamization movement that advocates a de-territorialized and “de-cultured” Islam with no connection to traditional Islam beyond the pillars of faith and basic rituals. These Muslims, especially those growing up as minorities in the West, reject both the “pristine” cultures of the home countries, which they see as un-Islamic and Western culture, which they see as alien, “corrupt and decadent” (2004, 25). Roy acknowledges that no culture remains untouched by time and by global changes. Nevertheless, by “pristine” culture, he means “what is reconstructed by first-generation immigrants as their own past.” It is also, he clarifies, the “tradition” referenced by immigrant leaders and by Western specialists (social workers, anthropologists, and lawyers for example) when dealing with immigrant related issues such as immigration, honor crimes, and female circumcision. It is the “tradition” young Muslims confront
from family members objecting to their Western dress, dance, dating or language (Roy 2004, 22).

Roy asserts that fundamentalist Islamism, which aimed to bring about an Islamic state, has failed and no longer resonates with Muslims anywhere. It has been replaced by a post-Islamist, neo-fundamentalist movement that disassociates itself from any culture, asserts belonging to the ummah (global Muslim community), and engages in discursive or political activism, sometimes through (inter)national violence (Roy 2004). Even though only a minority of these Muslims might advocate or partake in violence, Roy argues, this “phenomenon feeds new forms of radicalization, among them support for Al Qaeda” and “a new sectarian communitarian discourse, advocating multiculturalism as a means of rejecting integration into Western society” (2004, 25). He contends that certain groups in Muslim countries and, more importantly, in the growing Muslim populations in the West, are undeniably linked to the “spread of specific forms of religiosity, from radical neo-fundamentalism to renewal of spirituality or an insistence on Islam as a system of values and ethics” (2004, 5). This development, he asserts, is cause for concern. Neo-fundamentalism, whether in its Islamic, Christian, Jewish or Hindu forms, does not harken back to a historical and authentic religion extracted from the past; rather, it is about envisioning an ahistorical and presumably “pure” religious tradition. He posits that neo-fundamentalism brings about a Western-style religiosity that is a product of a secular society and a globalizing world. This form of religiosity shares with Christianity, particularly with Protestantism, a

stress on dogma...self achievement... reconstruct[ion of ] a religious community based on individual commitment of the believer in secular environment.. [and] a personal quest for an immediately accessible knowledge in defiance of the established religious authority, the juxtaposition of a fundamentalist approach to the law (to obey God in every facet of one’s daily life) with syncretism and spiritual nomadism, the success of gurus and self-appointed religious leaders, and so on. [Roy 2004, 6].
Yet, Roy cautions, when it comes to Islam this westernization should not be confused with the Protestant Reformation, because Islamic dogma here remains unexamined. Roy contends that this “pure Islam” is stripped of its content and conceived of as “mere” religion detached from its “inherited cultural habitus or collateral knowledge (literature, oral traditions, customs)” (2004, 25). Ironically, this demand for a “mere” religion is one neo-fundamentalists, secularists, and liberal Muslims share. The difference is that secularists and liberal Muslims want a religion-free public sphere while neo-fundamentalists want to “Islamize” that sphere through activism or violence (Roy 2004). In both case, the individual rather than the collective is the essential element. Roy points out that “uprooted” younger generations of Muslims in the West are neither Pakistani or Egyptian nor French or American but they are “Muslims first” and foremost. Unlike old Muslim minority communities in Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa who have created (or shared the majority) culture, these more recent Muslim minorities in the West have to define what being Muslim means. They must do that in a context of great internal cultural diversity where the only thing they share is Islam (Roy 2004). That indeed is the unique situation of today’s Western Muslims and it has complex ramifications that I will discuss in this and subsequent chapters.

Roy’s book is full of provocative insights and has contributed greatly to the discussion on Islam and Muslims in the West and on what has come to be dubbed “Political Islam”. Furthermore, his rebuke of the culturalist approaches of both detractors and defenders of Islam, who frame everything Muslims say/do in religious and cultural terms, is commendable and much needed. Nevertheless, his thesis and analysis are grounded in a particular conceptualization of secularism and in an understanding of culture and religion (particularly Islam) as separate spheres, an approach which, ironically, seems to reproduce the “de-cultured” religious phenomenon
he is aiming to critique and problematize. I will explore secularism shortly, but here it is worth pausing at the distinction Roy makes between Islam the religion (Qur'an, Prophetic tradition, and scholarly commentary) and “Muslim culture.” Literature, traditions, sciences, social relationships, cuisine, historical and political paradigms, and urban life are the elements he lists as parts of Muslim culture. This “Muslim culture”, Roy says, is “difficult to spot outside” beyond “certain historical areas or geographical regions” (2004, 10). Presumably then, these Muslim-produced traditions, social relations and literature and so forth are not to be found wherever Muslims might exist but only in certain historical territories. Religion, here, is sacred texts plus scholarly interpretation/commentary. That these texts – scriptural or commentary – engage, shape and are shaped by all the elements listed as cultural or that religion/worldviews are included in basic definitions of cultures does not seem to figure in Roy’s framework. Yet, the definitions he adopts are not inconsequential, as the primary thesis and arguments in his book rest on how he conceptualizes culture and religion in general and how they pertain to Islam specifically. Here, Islam has a presumably natural historical and cultural territory and, if it leaves, it becomes deterritorialized, de-cultured, and potentially dangerous.

The different models of secularism and multiculturalism constitute the backdrop for the numerous debates and discussions about religious and ethnic minorities, particularly in Europe, which is grappling with its own identity. Therefore, understanding secularism, religion, the state and its relationship to its subjects, as well as the definitions of private and public spheres—all of which are part of a complex whole—is critical to understanding the socio-political context of Western Muslims and the purity narrative some invoke. Critics of the new visibility of Muslims in Western societies invoke secularism and contend that this new visibility threatens secularism by
seeking to Islamize the public sphere. At the same time, Western publics are reassured that there is a “silent secular majority” of Muslims amongst them. Yet, one could argue that this silent majority is also becoming visible and speaking specifically on the grounds of being Muslim and not on the grounds of being Arab or Indian or Somali, or Black.

A New York Times’ article featuring members of this theorized silent majority lists the markers of their secular status: they do not pray or fast regularly; some may drink alcohol, or date, or have a Christmas tree; and the women do not wear hijab. The article notes that most secular Muslims are second and first generation immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries where everyone was assumed to be a Muslim. In these home countries, one was neither pushed to be observant nor found it necessary to mark oneself as Muslim; faith was a personal matter back home and in the America, these Muslims do not stand out from the rest of society. While not following “all the rules,” these individuals still identify themselves as (and wanted to be known as) Muslims, as expressed by a woman quoted in the article: “People accept me as just another American woman, and I feel like saying, ‘No, I’m also a Muslim’” (Goodstein 2001). Prominent CNN and Time magazine journalist Fareed Zakaria is known for his analysis on global issues and his Newsweek cover story Why They Hate Us (2001) which analyzes the sociopolitical roots of Muslim anger. To the general public, he is not known for being a Muslim, and those who know him most likely consider him secular. But when in 2010 the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) joined the opposition to the lower Manhattan Islamic cultural center project (the so-called Ground Zero mosque), Zakaria spoke and protested as a Muslim by returning the prestigious award and honorarium the ADL gave him a few years earlier (CNN 2010).

By the definition of the New York Times’ article, several non-observant project participants would be classified as secular, but these participants never described
themselves as such and actually considered themselves moderate or mildly religious. Additionally, when it comes to U.S. foreign policy, they and their more observant co-religionists hold similar views. One should recall that from what was said about the behavior of some of the 9/11 hijackers, they were not particularly pious or observant Muslims. Additionally, radicalization and violence, which presumably neo-fundamentalists are predisposed to, are about politics and not piety. This is what Gallup’s World Poll of Muslims – the largest study of its kind – revealed, while Robert Pape similarly found that terrorism is a political strategy rather than a religious motivation⁴. Nevertheless, both the secular groups (for example, the Tamil Tigers) and religious ones (whether Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or Jew) employ religious rhetoric and symbols to frame their causes (Esposito and Mogahid 2007; Pape 2005; Pape and Feldman 2010). It is, therefore, worth pausing here to explore the relationship between religion and secularism that defines and confines citizens’ ways of being.

Religion, Belief and Secularity

Roy is not alone in finding it difficult to apprehend what is meant by the term “religion”. Scholars from various disciplines have attempted to define religion but a comprehensive and widely accepted definition remains elusive. Clifford Geertz defines it anthropologically as a cultural system “of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Asad 2003, 29–30). Generally, definitions of religion tend to be either in terms of the search for meaning (of divine reality, of morality and ethics) or in terms of practices (rituals, prayers, ethical behaviors). The focus of a definition on the individual experience or the social realm and
the approach of the scholar (descriptive, normative, functional, essentialist) also impact the definition (Swidler and Mojzes 2000). These approaches are useful but partial and fail to convey the complexity of religion, Swidler and Mojzes contend. They propose a definition which they claim is simple, yet broad: “Religion is an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, based on a notion of the transcendent, and how to live accordingly; it normally contains the four Cs: creed, code, cult, and community structure” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000, 7).

But to define something is not to merely name an already existing reality; to name and define is also to bring something about. This is why Asad (2012) is critical of these attempts at a universal definition of religion, arguing that defining is foremost an act which includes some elements and excludes others. For example, emphasizing the centrality of “transcendence” and “belief” risks excluding immanence and practice devoid of belief. Far from being intellectual abstractions, Asad contends, these definitions are entangled in fervent social debates and are not beyond the reach of state authority. It is not just which elements fall in the scope of religion that is problematic; it is the very concept of religion, a modern concept, which itself is a product of a specific Western Christian history and the emergence of secularism (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005).

Since a phenomenon is understood in contrast to its opposite, the concept of religion is elucidated by examining secularism: religion’s Other, or as Asad notes, “its Siamese twin.” Religion and secularism emerged in a process of “restructuring of practical times and spaces, a rearticulation of practical knowledges and powers, of subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs, and expectations in modernity” (Asad 2001, 146). In this mutually constitutive process, the presumed neutrality of secularism won it the public sphere—the arena of reason viewed as universal and as limited to facts.
Religion was then to be banished to the private sphere, the realm of passions, beliefs and provincial identities which could be declared but could not withstand public scrutiny (Cady and Brown 2002). Having left its supposed natural historical territory, it is in this private sphere where Islam too is to reside in the West. It is to limit itself to these “provincial” ethnic identities and make no demand on society. Furthermore, when its adherents bring symbols and practices of piety into the public sphere, they are a threat to secularism itself. But this strict separation of private-public and religion-state is mythical.

Typically used as synonyms, secularism and the secular are different notions according to Asad. The latter is “conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism” (2003, 16) and is neither religion by another name nor a break with religion and a rejection of the sacred. It is “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life” and “works through a series of particular oppositions” (Asad 2003, 25). Secularism, on the other hand, is a 19th century “political and governmental doctrine” (Asad 2003, 24) that laid the foundation for the nation state and is the Other of the religious. Secularism is generally accepted as a religion-free political doctrine that fosters tolerance and is the outcome of compromises between warring sects who settled on the “lowest common denominator” in the religious wars of seventeen-century Europe (Mahmood 2006; also see Asad 1993 and Asad 2003). Secularism creates private and public realms, but instead of driving religion out of the public sphere and maintaining its avowed separation and purported neutrality toward religion, the state in fact regulates and defines public manifestations of religion and sanctions certain kinds of subjectivity and practices (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006).

Secularism presumably aims to protect politics from religion but also to protect religion from the interference of the government, so that individuals and religious
organizations can freely practice their faiths. To protect politics from religion, a definition of religion is critical. Here, the state grants itself the role of identifying what qualifies as religious and, in a sense, appropriates a theological role to define and then impose religious signifiers on its subjects (Asad 2006). The public sphere created in the process did not conform to Habermas’s idealized public sphere—if it ever existed. Instead, it became spaces based on social exclusions of which religion is but one. Consequently, religion must be either kept in private or it must concede to making no political demands. Such a requirement might not be objectionable were it not for a built-in inequity. The undue focus on constitutional matters when it comes to the relationship between church and state tends to neglect the disparity between various religions in pluralist societies when it comes to their political and socio-cultural positions vis-à-vis the majority religion (Bader 1999). This hides the “administrative, political, and cultural nonneutrality of the state under the guise of ‘neutrality’” (Badar 1999, 602). By way of example, activism by the adherents of minority religion (Catholics, Jews, Jehovah’s Witness to name few) has led to further disestablishment of Evangelical Protestantism as America’s civil religion; nevertheless, Evangelical Protestantism remains dominant both in local and foreign politics (Bader 1999).

Subjects and Agency in the Public-Private Spheres Divide

In public discourse, references to secularism create an image of a singular model of the relationship between state and religion. In reality, however, eclectic arrangements of this relationship exist throughout Europe and North America, reflecting specific histories and societal identities. The U.S. and France, for example, differ in how they conceptualize religious freedom. To Americans it means that religion is to be protected
from the state, while French *Laïcité* means that the state is to protect itself from religion (Gunn 2004). This difference has significant implications for the degree of freedom enjoyed by religious communities and individuals in the public sphere. Historically, French *Laïcité* emerged not from unifying events but from divisive ones. These events were rooted in the state’s usurpation of the Catholic Church’s hegemony over French society by curtailing its authority and activities and confiscating its properties. This legacy of conflict colors current controversies in France involving religion (Gunn 2004) that spill into global public spheres. While many French citizens and politicians interpret and utilize *Laïcité* to oppose multiculturalism and the public display of religion (particularly by Muslims), in legal terms, *Laïcité* concerns the absence of an official state religion and neutrality towards all religions; the state is to neither endorse nor prohibit public manifestations of religion (Chelini-Pont 2005).

Chelini-Pont points out that much of France’s apparent hostility to religion in public is rooted in its understanding of the public sphere, which differs from that of the U.S. In both countries, the public sphere is understood as a shared organized space, but their publics differ in how they conceptualize this common space. Americans draw their conceptualization of the public sphere from liberal theorists who see it as a common place to all citizens, to debate and deliberate and to engage in voluntary associations, and from theorists like Benhabib and Habermas, who situate the public sphere in civil society, where it is continuously critiqued and deliberated. The French, on the other hand, view the state as a mediator between society and citizens and as responsible for regulating civil society. Consequently, to the French the “true public sphere [...] is the space where the State exerts its authority for the benefit of all at the service of all” (Chelini-Pont 2005, 617).
But it is not only this history and understanding that inform Europe’s treatment of its Muslims. Europe’s relationship with its Muslim communities and Islam has a complicated history rooted in the colonial project and contemporary national/global politics and the religious movements they have inspired. In France, for example, in spite of the large number of its adherents—second only to Catholicism—Islam has had difficulty attaining the privileged “official status” that Christianity and Judaism enjoy. In 2003-2004, in the midst of the headscarf ban in France, purportedly “liberal Muslims” and the then Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, met and concluded that the existing organizations of French Muslims did not represent the allegedly non-practicing majority of Muslims. Therefore, these Muslim organizations should limit their activities to religious education, while new secular organizations were to be established to represent this non-practicing majority (Asad 2006). There was also much discussion about crafting a “French Islam,” more palatable to French society and in essence reforming Islam. At a time when the state strongly opposes communitarianism, it promoted the development of Jewish and Muslim “representative” organizations (Asad 2006). These inconsistencies raise questions about the logic of laws on religious dress and the truth about claims of the neutrality of the French state. Western states have different models of secularism that shape their relations to organized religion and specifically to Muslims. But the resulting controversies and associated political discourse permeate each state’s national public discourse and shape the private views of citizens, including their evaluations of each other and what they bring to the public sphere.

From the above discussion, it should be obvious that the pairs religion–secularism, church–state, and private–public are not separate realms but are mutually constitutive concepts that can only be grasped through each other. The entanglement of the secular state in the definition and regulation of religion and the contrived division...
between private and public spheres where state determines what demands can made in the name of what and in which sphere present a challenge for pluralistic (religiously and ethnically) societies. From reproductive lives, to education and work, to public manifestation of religion, to social interactions and behavior, the state is omnipresent and its citizens and publics engage in continuous negotiations. Minorities and those marginalized by their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or income have to challenge both the state and society and negotiate the right to be at once the same (i.e., with equal legal and cultural citizenship) and different. This relationship of the individual and/or collective to the state hinges on a particular fashioning of the individual as a subject.

The challenge facing the secular state is how to balance an individual's freedom and rights with his/her belonging to a collective and to the nation— and which comes first. To manage this challenge, a secular state, Asad argues, is not “simply the guarding of one's personal rights to believe as one chooses; it confronts particular sensibilities and attitudes, and puts greater values on some against others” (2006, 18). Under this state of affairs, the new visibility and assertive demands by younger Western Muslims for recognition as equal citizens and freedom to be different (to be Muslim and French, or British, or American) present a challenge. Additionally, the narrative of “pure/true Islam” vs. “cultural Islam” confronts the state with a question: which Islam is the one that it should engage?

**Whose Islam Anyway? On the Anthropology of Islam**

Critics fault those who invoke the “pure/true” Islam narrative for calling for an imagined ahistorical Islam, for rejecting culture, and for their antipathy towards modernity. The narrative, however, is one invoked by diverse groups and is not limited to
the young or merely the observant. Muslim apologists who typically assert “Islam is a religion of peace” argue that Muslim violent extremists are not practicing “pure/true Islam,” if they are Muslims at all. Those touted as “moderate Muslims” like Jasser— the Arizonan who testified on radicalization— also appeal to the “pure/true” Islam narrative. In his recent book, A Battle for the Soul of Islam: An American Muslim Patriot’s Fight to Save His Faith (2012), Jasser says he was shocked and angered by the “bastards” who committed the 9/11 atrocities in the name of his faith. This, he says, propelled him to a public role to clarify to his “fellow Americans that true Islam, our Islam, was not what was represented by these madmen” (Jasser 2012, 1. emphasis added). Likewise, non-observant or “secular” Muslims explain their perspectives and positions—even their non-observance— on the bases of a true Islam that affirms that good deeds and consciousness of God are more important than mere ritualistic acts of worship. In these competing claims of “pure/true Islam”, Islam’s scriptural sources, history and intellectual heritage are equally and as passionately summoned by scholars and ordinary Muslims on both sides of a given issue. Those who marginalize and oppress women and those who advocate a gender jihad based on the egalitarian spirit of pure/true Islam ground their arguments in these sources and history. So do those who are against non-Muslims and who see only one culture of Islam, as do those who argue that religious and cultural diversity are a divine plan and an Islamic precept. Muslim and non-Muslim publics alike are puzzled by these contradictions, but so are researchers on Islam and Muslims who have always been caught in the dilemma of what is Islam? Whose Islam is the real and pure Islam? Is it the Islam of the ullahma (scholars of religion) or the Islam practiced by the masses? If it is the latter, then is it that of residents of urban centers or the rural periphery? When individual Muslims say Islam says this or says that, is it the
researchers’ responsibility to challenge or question their statements, if the version of the scholarly class is different? Who has the authority to determine what Islam is or is not?

This dilemma has been tackled in different ways. Gellner distinguished “folk Islam” from “scholarly Islam” and defined Islam as “the blueprint of a social order. It holds a set of rules that exist, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society” (Gellner 1981, 1). This blueprint is accessible to literate Muslims and those who follow their teachings. Geertz, on the other hand, examined local manifestations of “islam” and from them inferred that “Islam” is “the assumed target of all the local variants” (Varisco 2005, 49). In his book, Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation, Daniel Martin Varisco (2005) is critical of Islamicists, including Gellner and Geertz, for representing “an intellectualized and essentialized ‘monolithic conception of Islam’” which conceals how Islam is engaged and realized by ordinary Muslims (2005, 76). Varisco contends that Geertz failed to represent anything individual Muslims said because his aim to represent a model of religion for comparative purposes distracted him from noticing the contradictions of everyday life. Had he focused on what these individuals said, he would have concluded that Muslims differed in their understandings and that “Islam with a capital ‘I’” seemed to elude them. Varisco notes that is would be “foolhardy” to search in the field for that Islam because there are countless “islams” that emerge from lively debates among Muslims with divergent biographies and ideological leanings (Varisco 2005).

Varisco’s idea of diverse “islams” was originally proposed in 1977 by Muslim anthropologist Abdul Hamid el-Zein. For both the anthropologist and the Muslim theologian, el-Zein argued, the starting point tends to be that a “pure and well-defined essence of Islam” exists out there against which local folk “islams” are judged and found
“less ordered, less objective” and contaminated by “magic and superstition” (1977, 243). Theologians then disregard these local forms and affirm a timeless meaning of Islam, while anthropologists disregard them as adulterated by magic and likewise reinforce the idea of a “pure and well-defined essence of Islam” (el-Zein 1977, 243). This juxtaposition of folk Islam versus scholarly Islam, he contended, is an unproductive pursuit in anthropological analyses. Instead, folk and formal theology should be seen as complementary. But where formal Islam begins with unity across time and guards against the unavoidable diversity of meaning by space, folk Islam begins with unity of space and guards against multiplicity of meaning across time. Consequently, el-Zein argued, there is no essential difference between the two that would make one more objective and pure. These two “islams” are equal and differ only as modes of expression: one exists as an institution and the other as literature (El Zein 1977). This proposal, however, raises even more questions than it answers. If these are merely forms of expression that are equally true, what keeps the potentially countless expression from diverging so far apart over time and space that a new and altogether different content/entity develops? In other words, is there something common to all folk “islams” that makes them recognizably Islam to both practitioners and anthropologists and different from a Christian or Hindu mode of expression or local invention?

Another anthropologist, Talal Asad, picked up the discussion a decade later and proposed some answers as to what is the object of the anthropologists of Islam? Asad, in his seminal paper *An Idea for The Anthropology of Islam* (1986), summarized and dismissed three common answers; first, there is no theoretical object such as Islam; second, that Islam is but a term anthropologists use to describe whatever their diverse informants say is Islam; and third, that “Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life” (1986, 2). Asad dismissed the first answer
because it is based on the idea of multiple islam and, therefore, is not a useful anthropological analytical category. Asad noted that while el-Zein’s effort was commendable, it was ultimately unhelpful. As for the second alternative, it too is not viable because there are Muslims within and across time and space who judge as un-Islamic what others take to be Islam. While these views are particular to those who hold them, nevertheless, they are not inconsequential to social relations. Therefore, one should be aware of the diversity among Muslims both in belief and practices without falling back on the “nominalist view that different instances of what are called Islam are essentially unique and sui generis” (1986, 5). Asad dismisses the third answer on the grounds that while the scope of the Shar’iah might be comprehensive, compared to life under the highly regulating modern state, it has always only partially ordered or informed social life. So while the third option is intriguing, it too is ultimately inadequate. Islam, Asad argues, is “neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals.” Rather, it is a discursive tradition which “includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith” (1986, 14).

Consequently, to do the anthropology of Islam, Asad advises, one needs to do what Muslims do and to start from this discursive tradition. However, this tradition is not a fossilized relic and the Other of modernity. A tradition, in this conceptualization, is comprised of discourses that aim to teach adherents about the proper procedure and the objective of a particular practice which “precisely because it is established, has a history” (1986, 14). These discourses link to a past, a point in time when the practice, its meaning, and method of correct performance were established; to a present that relates a practice to other practices and social contexts; and to a future as present adherents fret over how the objective of the practice can be best achieved in the short and long range
(1986, 14). This discursive tradition does not subsume all acts or statements by Muslims. Additionally, it does not entail blind mimicry, because even when to the observer a practice appears to be an imitation of the past, “it will be the practitioners’ conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial to tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form” (Asad 1986, 15).

When this is the point of departure, questions about differences between “classical” and “modern” or folk and elite Islam become moot, because now as then and here as elsewhere, the discourses for the why and how to instruct, learn, and assess the correct performance of a practice are all already constitutive of (or built-in to) the practice itself (Asad 1986). Additionally, assertions that it is rituals (*orthopraxy*) rather than doctrine (*orthodoxy*) that is crucial in Islam neglect the crucial role of the concept of “the correct model” to which all established practices must adhere to in order be authoritative. What determines whether or not a practice is Islamic is that it is deemed so by the Islamic discursive tradition and is taught as such to Muslims, be they ordinary folks or elite scholars, suburbanites or villagers (Asad 1986). Since the etymological meaning of doctrine is teaching, it follows that “orthodox doctrine...denotes the correct process of teaching, as well as the correct statement of what is to be learned” (Asad 1986, 15). Orthodoxy, here, is conceptualized as a power relationship rather than simply a collection of opinions. Subsequently, whenever and wherever Muslims “have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine or replace *incorrect* ones, there is domain of orthodoxy” (Asad 1986, 15). The form and societal circumstances that enable or delimit this power and the subsequent resistance it evokes from within and outside Muslim communities are all the domain and the object of investigation of the anthropology of Islam, be it in the city or the village (Asad 1986).
With this understanding of Islam, I would argue that Muslims who contest different practices and engage in this narrative of “cultural” vs. “pure/true” Islam in various socio-political and time-space contexts are engaging this long-standing discursive tradition. This tradition is the basis on which their arguments and appeals are made and evaluated. Those who see in such arguments signs of a crisis of tradition commonly conceptualize tradition as uncritical conformity; they also understand argumentation as debating, reasoning, and polemics that lie outside the purview of tradition. However, if argumentation is understood as the process of succeeding in persuasion and securing voluntary performance of a practice rather than merely knocking down the other party’s arguments, then the centrality of argumentation to all discursive traditions will be evident (Asad 1986). Such thinking, then, would allow us to view the diversity within Islam that we encounter in the field (across time, space, and people) not as an indication of deficiency or the nonexistence of Islamic tradition. Rather, it is illustrative of “different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain” (Asad 1986, 16). It would be possible, then, to recognize that heterogeneity rather than homogeneity is an intrinsic characteristic of traditions. This heterogeneity, however, does not mean rampant incoherence. Although these traditions may not always achieve coherence due to the political and economic constraints of their time, they are constantly striving for it (Asad 1986). The researcher’s task, therefore, is to understand the context and social circumstances that fashion different “patterns for desires and forgetfulness” and the power relations which “enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation—and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence” (Asad 1986, 17).

Asad’s idea for an anthropology of Islam inspired and informs the works of many but it also continues to generate debates. Marranci (2008), for example, argues that all
this concern about Islam or islam and true Islam is a moot point because the anthropology of Islam is not the theology of Islam. Therefore, rather than starting with Islam’s discursive tradition as Asad had suggested, we should start with Muslims and focus on their emotional aspects; after all, what Muslims and others ultimately have in common is that they are human beings who engage others and their environment. Emotions and feelings are the hallmark of these relations and are the foundations for identity. It is these feelings that anthropologists need to study; how the feelings are “rationalized, rhetoricized, and symbolized, exchanged, discussed, ritualized, orthodoxized or orthopraxized.” Islam can then be understood “as a map of discourses on how to ‘feel Muslim’” (Marranci 2008, 8). Feelings inform one’s discourse on Islam as they affect and are affected by the context of the individual.

Marranci seems, however, not to go beyond the notion of multiple islam. There is the Islam of theologians, books and teachers, which is nothing but “a ghost hunted for by both the believers as well as the academics” (2008, 15). Then there is the Islam of his informants, like the Muslim salesman and the imam. None of these, concludes Marranci, is the “real Islam”. Yet, what these two men tell him Islam says “make Islam part of reality” (Marranci 2008, 16) and that, he postulates, is sufficient for him. Marranci acknowledges that the imam’s and the salesman’s interpretations share the same theology and history of Islam, which they learned from chains of interpretative others before them. But the two men live and embody that Islam differently due to their biographies and identities; multiplicity of interpretations also inevitability results in the multiplicity of ways of embodying Islam (Marranci 2008). Those studying Muslims, he notes, miss the point that “it is not Islam that shapes Muslims, but rather Muslims who, through discourses, practices, beliefs and actions, make Islam” (2008, 15).
But perhaps Marranci is missing something. The multiplicity of interpretations is the heterogeneity discussed by Asad and it is unlikely anyone would disagree that Muslims interpret and embody Islam differently. However, is the multiplicity unlimited? What keeps it from diverging too far and become unrecognizable to anyone? Marranci’s focus on the Muslim person’s feelings, actions and beliefs is crucial and is ultimately what anthropologists observe and write about. However, his assertions raise the question of what makes a person feel Muslim in the first place? Additionally, as discussed earlier, the recognition of others is essential to identity construction. Consequently, it is not sufficient for one to merely feel Muslim; an affirmation and recognition of that feeling by an actual or imagined Other is necessary. Both the salesman and the imam must refer to something to determine what Muslimness entails, something against which to check their practices and beliefs and to authenticate and ground their arguments if they disagree on something. That is the same reason why Marranci found it necessary to dedicate a chapter to “Islam: Beliefs, History and Rituals.” Therefore, there are some things, specific things, that make persons feel Muslim and their feelings, thoughts, acts, and discourses also shape those certain some things. This is the discursive tradition that Asad proposed and that constitutes the chain of interpreters that Marranci notes had taught the salesman and the imam.

_A Living Discursive Tradition_

This discursive tradition with which Muslims engage is not frozen in time but has been dynamic from its founding; it shapes, and is shaped by, Muslims themselves. From the early days of Islam, the impact of cultural and social differences became apparent when the Prophet and his companions left the city of Mecca and sought refuge in the city
of Yathrib (subsequently named Medina). This change in context was reflected in a shift in the Prophet’s focus and in the discourse of the Qur’an. For example, passages of the Qur’an referred to as the Meccan chapters focused on convincing people to abandon polytheism in favor of the “the One God” through reasoned argumentation and vivid imagery of Hell and Paradise commensurate with desert living sensibilities. While Mecca was a homogeneous society, Medina was religiously and culturally diverse and these differences needed to be managed. Chapters revealed in the Medina period focused on organizing a new society and shaping its members. For example, to the chagrin of immigrant Meccan men, the women of Medina, we are told through the tradition, were more outspoken, assertive and present in public. These cultural differences present from the birth of the religious community only multiplied in Islam’s formative years as it expanded into new territories and was embraced by new peoples.

This diversity shaped the heterogeneity within the discursive tradition from the start. How culture and social realities affect the interpretive lens through which scholars engage religious texts was not something left to be revealed through reflexivity; these debates continue today. So important is recognizing the specificity of a context, that a fatwa (religious legal opinion) is invalid if it does not take into account the context of person(s) posing the question. Consequently, ordinary Muslims are not bound by every fatwa, but they necessarily engage, explain, and check their practices vis-à-vis a living tradition. The discursive tradition does not just reside in books or in the minds of scripture scholars; it shapes and is shaped by ordinary Muslims everywhere, though ultimately the degree to which they adhere to the beliefs and practices therein is up to the individual believer. Individual agency and responsibility is clearly articulated in the discursive tradition and Muslims are reminded of it often, both in speeches and in writings. Every Muslim, no matter his or her degree of observance, learns that in the end
every soul is accountable for itself and no one will be responsible for what another has or has not done.\cite{11}

When understood as static, tradition seems incongruent with modern times. It is difficult to see how tradition could inspire modern rational subjects whose claims and concerns are contemporary. But as conceptualized above and as defined by Alasdair MacIntyre, we may grasp tradition’s relevance to our times. MacIntyre argues that a living tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her own good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part.\cite{2001:260}

Muslims in the West and elsewhere, today as in the past, argue with and through their discursive tradition about what is considered “pure/true Islam.” Their questions and concerns are relevant to their time and are prompted by the challenges they encounter. In times of crisis, the debates become both more intense and prevalent. One such crisis has been dealing with modernity, which came to Muslims accompanied by the collapse of the last Caliphate (the Ottoman Empire) and on the heels of a colonization that derided Muslims for a backwardness purportedly rooted in Islam.\cite{12} The successive fall of Muslim countries to colonialism was more than a tragic loss of sovereignty; it was a spiritual wakeup call for Muslims who had historically seen their civilizational success and expansion as “a sign and consequence of both the truth of Islam and their firm allegiance to the truth; for as Allah asserts in the Qur’an, ‘If Allah helps you, none can overcome you’” (Nasr 1994, 119). Thus, for many Muslim thinkers this decline in Muslim fortunes was a sign that “something very serious had gone wrong with the events of history and with the Islamic world itself, something which was not only transient and of
a purely worldly nature but of a practically ‘cosmic dimension’” (Nasr 1994, 119). This perceived decline triggered different reactions. One such response was a literalist trend spearheaded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792). It also precipitated the rise of late nineteenth century “modernist reformers” personified by Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani, his Egyptian student Muhammad Abduh, the latter’s Syrian student Rashid Rida and others. These modernists introduced *Salafism* as a new methodology advocating the reinterpretation of canonical texts in modern contexts (Abou El Fadl 2005). The *Salafism* of these modernist reformers influenced Hassan Al-Banna to form the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. All in all, this socio-political upheaval ushered in an Islamic revival movement to reawaken the masses and reclaim a “pure/true Islam”; a movement that reverberated around the world.

The contemporary history of Islam in America, as elsewhere, is in one way or another a continuation of this movement, formed in the (post)colonial context and in dialogue with colonialism, orientalism and a stage in the project of alternative modernity. However, to accept the notion that the narrative of pure/true Islam is a modern invention, a de-cultured and dangerous phenomenon, is to reduce all the different versions of this narrative-frame and the various groups within this revival movement to their most polarizing and polemic strands. Yet even the most austere versions of this narrative or trend within the revivalist movement do not reject culture wholesale but only certain aspects of culture (for example, art, styles of clothing and some behavioral norms and practices). These aspects are replaced by a particular version of an Arab culture as it is imagined to have been. Even the dress style advocates of this vision adopt is one, as Abou El Fadl (2005) notes, that demonstrates their greater familiarity with Hollywood and Egyptian period films than the historical records on the seventh century Arabia they are attempting to emulate. The different Muslim groups that
invoke this particular version of the purity narrative also function within the proposed
Asadian discursive tradition; however, they selectively appropriate (and even reject parts
of) it. They are also grounded within their cultures, be they Arab, Asian, African or
European or American.

Colonialism and its orientalist gaze were critical to how colonial subjects saw
themselves, and it also shaped how these subjects viewed the West. Colonial
administrations sought to define religion, diminish its hold on society and relegate it to
private spaces; these efforts had profound effects and lasting implications for post-
colonial subjects in general and for Muslims and Islam in particular. Muslims who are
“secular” or “progressive” or “Islamist” or “moderate” are all in dialogue with and
constituted by this encounter. But are efforts to reject cultural “adulteration” of the
“true” faith new and invented? Is it a call for a “cultureless” religion? The reader should
recall that a narrative is a framework for multiple stories. With this in mind, I propose
that this pure/true Islam narrative is situated within the Islamic discursive tradition and
is inextricable from Islam’s founding narrative. Upon this old narrative framework,
however, contemporary stories that are very much a product of their time and place are
woven.

Situating the “Purity” Narrative and its Multiple Stories

For many who see globalization as merely another term for an increasingly
monoculture and Westernizing world, patrolling cultural boundaries to maintain a
presumed cultural purity is a matter of survival. This accounts for the emergence of
fundamentalist movements from across the religious spectrum and even secular ones
that, among other things, share a paradoxical relationship with “the West.” The modern
iteration of the purity narrative notwithstanding, examining cultural practices/norms and discarding those deemed incompatible is deeply rooted in Islamic history from its birth in the cultural landscape of seventh century Arabia. It also extends across the time and place to the present globalizing world.

For example, in the Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists (2005), UCLA’s professor of Shari’ah and lawyer Khaled Abou El Fadl wades through the various categories to which contemporary Muslims have been divided: modernists, moderates, fundamentalists, radicals, extremists, conservatives, liberals, progressives and so on. His final verdict is that the primary schism within Islam is one between Muslim “moderates” and “puritans.” The book then takes up the task of elaborating the history and consequences of this divide; space limitation here prevents delving into this history. But the relevant point for my discussion is that both “moderates” and “puritans” claim to represent pure/true Islam and invoke the narrative of purity to expunge defiling innovations that they claim have entered the faith. Abou El Fadl states that Muslim moderates like him who comprise the mainstream majority must “seek to recapture the purity of the Islamic message as it was before it was twisted and altered by the puritans and forced to cater to the egoism and opportunism of puritanical causes” (2005, 105, emphasis added). The “puritan” camp would argue that Abou El Fadl and his fellow “moderates” are in fact the problem; these moderates, it is said, are diluting and polluting Islam with foreign cultural practices and ideas.

While Muslims engage a discursive tradition, this does not necessarily mean an unexamined acceptance of the ways of forbearers. Challenging inherited cultural ways is part of the founding story of Islam. One could even argue that Islam’s grand narrative is one of transformation and reform to, ostensibly, restore monotheism to its original purity and to perfect human character and morals17. Islam’s canonical sources and
scholarly heritage abound with references to this narrative. In the Qur’an and in Muslim discourse, the state of “heedlessness” of pre-Islamic Arabia is an era of *jahiliyyah* (state of ignorance) where idol worship and social ills had replaced monotheism and its “pure” message of justice and morality. Prophet Muhammad did not bring about a new religion but came to restore the monotheism preached by all the prophets before him from Adam to Jesus and which, the narrative goes, were corrupted over time through customs and human interpretations. The Qur’an, which says about itself to be the best of narratives, abounds with stories of prophets overcoming insurmountable struggles with their people who refuse to give up the practices and ways of life of their forefathers as exemplified in the following verse:

> But when they are told, “Follow what God has bestowed from on high,” some answer, “Nay, we shall follow [only] that which we found our forefathers believing in and doing.” Why, even if their forefathers did not use their reason at all, and were devoid of all guidance? (Qur’an 2, 171).

Consequently, challenging the cultural practices of forefathers is not seen as modern innovation and an insubordination of the youth, but as part of this religious patrimony. Additionally, purity is integral to Islam’s discursive tradition, starting with the mission of Prophet Muhammad who was sent “to cause them [believers] to grow in purity, and to impart unto them the divine writ as well as wisdom” (Qur’an 62, 3). Ritual cleansing to purify the body is required to enter the faith and for rituals. The main Shia school and all four Sunni schools of juristic thought (*fiqh*) dedicated extensive chapters to the fine details of this physical purity. Almsgiving (*zakat*) purifies wealth and the *Hajj* purifies the body, the heart, and the mind. There are compendia of literature for purification of thought and of the heart. Purifying the faith from presumably corrupting cultural practices is thus in line with an old narrative of purity and is invoked throughout Muslim history and especially in time of socio-political crisis.
As Islam spread from its birthplace in the desert of Arabia and expanded to Africa, Asia, and Europe, these narratives of purity and cultural transformations continued. This did not mean, however, that Islam demanded that its new followers jettison their entire heritage and become culturally Arab. The observable cultural differences among Muslims today suggest that historically Islam has not been “culturally predatory” (Abd-Allah 2004, 2), but that it had a positive posture towards cultures. In fact, while some of the pre-Islamic cultural practices were deemed incompatible, most of the Arab cultural practices were retained by early Muslims. Some practices from that era of “ignorance” were even incorporated into religious acts of worship such as the Hajj (pilgrimage) and fasting on certain days. In Sahih Al-Bukhari, one of the primary collections of Hadith, 21 we find examples of a process of cultural inventory whereby the early Muslims were reassured by the Qur’an or the Prophet that the previous cultural practices in question (for example, rituals during Hajj, fasting of ‘Ashura’a, trade during Hajj) 22 were not in conflict with their new faith. Muslims frequently cite how Prophet Muhammad reaffirmed the universality of virtue and ethical character, when he told his companions that those who were best in character prior to Islam will be the best in Islam provided they comprehend the religious knowledge (M. M. Khan 1987) 23. Consequently, embracing Islam did not require a full cultural overhaul, which is why in India or Egypt, in China or Kenya or Bosnia, Muslims and non-Muslims of these lands share common a cultural heritage with few differences.

In times of crisis, people hold on tighter to what they believe to be true and seek authenticity. When societies are in turmoil or transition, they often attempt to reclaim a presumably more golden past and attribute current crises to having veered from what made that golden past possible 24. With this societal and individual tendency combined with the cultural reform and purity narratives rooted in Islamic discourse, it is no
surprise that at different points in their history, Muslims invoke a return to a more
glorious past and an ostensibly purer/truer form of Islam. The more extreme
movements calling for such return were always forced to moderate or were, over time,
marginalized to irrelevance (Abou El Fadl 2005). Those that survived were often ones of
islah (reform) and tajdeed (renewal). This perennial dual process involves the ihya’a and
the tajeddod (revival and renewal) of thought and of fundamentals of the faith (usual-al-
din) as well as the reform (islah) of individual and the collective conduct (see Auda
2008; Ramadan 2008; Voll 1983). These concepts “represent a radical mode of critique
indigenous to the Islamic discursive tradition, although the contexts in which they are
mobilized and the crisis to which they respond to are historically specific” (Shakry 1998,
152). For example, sociocultural and political upheavals in the eleventh century Muslim
world had prompted Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s (b.1058–d.1111) extensive body of work in
an effort to renew the faith and reform the community. In his work, Al-Ghazali seems to
have “felt the need to underline the vital importance of true religion in a corrupt age in
which known truths and spiritual certainties have become effaced, an era overflowing
with strife and trouble” (Hillenbrand 2004, 600). The seminal product of this effort is
titled Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), a compendium about
which Muslims say that if all of the Islamic intellectual history were lost and Ihya’ was
the only thing remaining, it would suffice to reconstruct that heritage. To respond to the
challenges in his time, Al-Ghazali rebutted heretical movements of the day and critically
engaged Greek philosophy by refuting thoughts antithetical to revealed truths while also
employing Aristotelian logic to produce thoughtful and important writings (Winter
1995). He was at once critical of scholarly elites and the masses; the first for being
preoccupied with fame and fortune and the latter for being too consumed with the world
and retaining from religion merely the rituals without the inner meaning or
transformative power. The “[d]eliverance could only come through a rekindling of that sincerity and sanctity for which the early generations of Islam had been celebrated, by means of passing through the refiner’s fire of self-naughting” (Winter 1995, XVI). That rekindling entailed a purifying process that first involves the *Disciplining of the Soul*, the subject of one fourth of the multi-volume *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*.

The purity narrative, therefore, is an old indigenous element in the discursive tradition that Muslims engage to both authenticate and challenge their own and others’ beliefs, practices, and discourses. Within the purity narrative framework, there are different storylines and threads whose motivation, methods and means are context dependent. There are those who invoke the purity narrative while acquiescing to an inherent and accepted plurality in the tradition and also absolutists who narrowly define the discursive tradition. In both groups, there is a spectrum of opinions and ideologies. The absolutists have been labeled fundamentalists, literalists, radicals, extremists, or jihadists. While group members can be intolerant of all sorts of difference – most of all among Muslims – only a few are violent. The moderates and puritans, to use Abou El Fadl’s terminology, draw on an Islamic discursive tradition and a long history of debates, disagreements and sometimes armed conflicts; yet, these groups and the movements they represent are products of their time. They are modern movements emerging from the colonial encounter, engaging a globalizing world and embedded within modernity’s hallmark, the nation state.

**The “Pure/True Islam” of Generation Next**

The notion of uprootedness and deterritorialism, as proposed by Roy and others, is based on a particular conceptualization of identity and of the world which constructs a “world of Islam” or as Roy (2004) puts it a “Civilization area.” This world, however, is
not so much a geographical region with a collective agency as it is a discursive representation and part of a historical narrative (Asad 1986). Likewise, Europe – or the West – itself is constructed through a particular rereading of history; it entails a geographical and historical redefinition of boundaries and of Europe where Islam became Europe’s other (Asad 2003). The “West” is not merely a geographical place, either, but a project, a discursive space constructed through a historical narrative of global imagination and management that granted it an unmarked category—the standard to which all must aspire to reach (Trouillot 2003). Essential to that self-making project of the West, as the cardinal direction implies, is a relative Other, a constructed East. As Edward Said noted “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting images, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture” (Said 1979, 1–2). From crusades to colonialism, Europe saw itself as not only Christian but more specifically as not Muslim.

While Roy’s knowledge and writings on Islam and Muslim are deep, thoughtful and nuanced, I would argue that he nevertheless does not escape this historical narrative. That Roy locates Islam in a particular “historical area” beyond which it becomes de-cultured is part of that discursive representation. A discursive representation, however, is by its nature constructed and contested. Therefore, one could argue that today’s Western Muslims are active agents in this process, as evidenced by their visibility as well as their social and political activism. Rather than a rejection of a “corrupt” West or a “pristine” heritage of the East, perhaps the younger Muslims of the West see a third option: challenging both fellow citizens and co-religionists who present a model of being Muslim that bounds Islam in the East and questions their belonging.
The perspectives of this project collaborators shed light on this process of contestation and construction.

The reader may recall that in the late 1960s and through 1980s, Sunni Blackamericans and the growing population of immigrant Muslims were informed by and engaged in the Islamic awakening that was sweeping the Muslim societies. This awakening advocates piety and activism and inspired the creation of Islamic organizations, mosques and schools. These institutions and the religious literature they produced advanced a “pure/true” Islam through a particular personal comportment and public piety, social norms, social justice and dawah (inviting to faith) to both Muslims and non-Muslims. This discourse privileged norms from the immigrants’ Muslim home countries and shaped what Jackson called “Immigrant Islam” which “universaliz[es] the particular” of home countries (2005, 12). While exposed to this discourse at home, or at the mosque/Islamic school, or the MSA or in all three, most second-generation Muslim Americans have neither the affiliation nor the awareness of the genealogy and roots of this reawakening movement and the sociopolitical context of its birth (Ahmed 2011). To them, the Islam they wish to live and advocate for is the “moderate” Islam practiced by the early Muslims, whose seemingly more progressive ways were altered by the “cultural corruptions” that accumulated over time (Abou El Fadl 2005). It is noteworthy that even those more “conservative” Muslims, who advocate strict gender segregation or who are less tolerant of differences in opinion and lifeways, concede that the time of the Prophet and his companion might have been more lenient. But, they argue, people then were more devout. The decline and decadence of the current times, they note, require stricter approach.

In this section, I will examine the ways project collaborators engage these competing claims and narratives and how they conceptualize pure/true Islam. Whatever
their interpretation and level of religiosity, what are the (re)sources on which participants draw in childhood and as they grow older to learn this purported “pure/true Islam”? In what follows, I will explore these (re)sources and examine differences in understanding and practice that participants perceive between themselves and their families, between immigrants and converts, and between Islam in majority countries and the United States. I will also try to highlight some of the features of this presumably pure/true Islam.

Resources and Religiosity

It is often assumed that when offspring invoke the narrative of pure/true Islam, they are rejecting parental authority, knowledge, and traditions. However, the picture is more complex than that. Asked to rank their sources of Islamic knowledge, 216 participants in this project answered this question as follows (from highest to lowest frequency): parents, mosque, books, Internet, friends, Islamic conferences, CD/DVD, study circles with scholars, and (in last place) college courses. They may question and differ with parents and imams but the family and the mosque are still the primary sources for religious information. Islamic schools are established as a joint effort between parents and mosques. The Islamic school (full time or weekend) has evolved over time. As noted earlier, only 22 percent of the participants went to Islamic school for at least part of their early education where, along with state required curriculum, they also learned Islamic studies (Qur’an, history, and character education) and the Arabic language. A minority was homeschooled and nearly 43 percent participated in Islamic weekend education. The weekend Islamic school operates on Saturday and/or Sunday.
and often uses the same religious curriculum as the full-time Islamic school, but teachers in the weekend system are usually parent volunteers without formal teacher training.

Early on, the schools used improvised Islamic studies and Qur’an workbooks that were put together by teachers or imported from Arab countries (for Arabic language learning), but these proved to be inadequate. Over time, schools and parents recognized the need for a curriculum that met the linguistic and cultural needs of their children. Typically, teachers are first generation immigrants or converts. Some younger generation teachers are returning to teach the next generation, often attempting to correct for what they think were the shortcomings in their experiences in these schools. Sharing with their students the experience of growing up Muslim in America and undergoing the same education (public and Islamic) systems, these teachers claim they can relate better to their students and their struggles. Islamic education also takes place at home through homeschooling, formal discussions scheduled a few times in the week, or informally throughout the day.

To determine how participants view their own and their families’ level of religiosity, they had the option to check the most suitable term (not religious, mildly religious, moderately religious, very religious) and explain in a space provided. Only a few of them considered their families to be mildly religious or not at all. Mildly religious meant that family members might fast during Ramadan, or attend Eid prayers and occasionally pray. More than half (59 percent) said they grew up in a moderately religious family and a modest number (22 percent) said their families were very religious. The numbers are nearly the same in responding to a question about how participants saw their own level of religiosity. This will be discussed below along with the problematic nature of these terms or categories.
Parents were ranked highest as the primary source of Islamic knowledge, yet that did not mean their practices or understanding was passed on unchanged. More than half of the participants said there were differences. As noted in the earlier, even some who said that no differences existed qualified their answer as did twenty-nine year old Shareefa, a Blackamerican from the Phoenix-valley, who noted a minor difference among family members. Her old brother approves of Muslim men marrying Christian or Jewish women, while she thinks there should be a moratorium on such marriages in the current context where Muslim women have limited pool of potential husbands. Shameela, a twenty-year old female Chicagolander, similarly says her parents “believe faith comes before anything else in life and it is compulsory to attend Jamatkhana [mosque of Islamili Shia] regularly.” She, on the other hand feels, “it is more important to just pray three times a day even though [she] cannot physically attend mosque.”

Differences are not strictly generational; the children may find themselves more aligned with one parent and struggle with the other’s views. Some immigrant parents are also adapting to raising their children in a context different from that they were raised in and gear their teaching accordingly. Parents are aware that their children are growing up in a secular society where Islam (and faith in general) is one option among many, so they employ different strategies to inculcate their religious traditions in their children. They may tolerate more questioning and open discussion about the beliefs and practices and the reasons or rationale for why things are done a certain way. Shafiqa, a twenty-year old woman of Indian parentage in Chicagoland, is clear about her parents’ strategy. “My parents raised me to love Allah and fear Him with all my heart. They have influenced me to have a great relationship with Him and to be so happy with my faith, even though their parents may not have done so for them.”
Roy (2004) argues that immigrants came with a pristine culture that is rejected by the second or third generation. What he seems to overlook is that many immigrants, particularly to North America, were of a particular social standing in their societies and already “Westernized.” This fact is noted by members of younger generations, who recognize that their parents understanding of Islam was a product of their own class, culture, and the political situation in their home countries. If they grew up in the upper or middle class with a Western education and appreciating all things Western, then they were Muslims but practices such as hijab were for lower classes and prayers and fasting were something one did in advanced age. Other immigrants saw how Islam was used by their governments as a weapon of control and suppression and wanted nothing to do with it.

Critics of the “pure/true Islam” narrative see young religious Muslims to be more conservative, rigid, and intolerant than their parents. Often this assessment is based on observations of Muslim Student Associations (MSA) on college campuses. What might be overlooked in this assessment is that student organizations, be they political, religious, social, or interest-based, are usually about distinguishing oneself on campus. Furthermore, the makeup of the group and the style and guiding ideology of its leaders, all influence and shape the members. An MSA is no different. The MSAs usually attract only a fraction of the Muslim student body. Many stay away from the MSA because they think it is only for very observant students; others do so because they heard or experienced them to be rigid and judgmental. Nevertheless, MSAs are seen by many members as a safe shelter from a college environment where drinking, dating and partying are often viewed as rites of passage for undergraduate students.

Many of the participants in this project talked about the very dynamic nature of the MSAs, where the same chapter changes from semester to semester depending on the
personality and interpretive leanings of its membership and leadership. Participants have told me about inclusive MSAs where women and students of different ethnicity, faith and levels of practice felt welcomed. There were periods were foreign (or very conservative) students took leadership and tried to impose their cultural norms and a particular understanding of Islam and where conflicts ensued. Participants also talked about the evolution of their own understanding from exclusive and absolutist to more appreciation for the diversity of understandings and practices. Looking back, some identified a stage in their lives where they felt they were more “conservative” than their parents. Only a few of the participants noted that they remain more “conservative”, meaning that they might eat zabiha meat, that women (unlike their mothers) may wear a headscarf, or that they are otherwise more observant. This, however, did not mean that they saw their parents or others as less religious or that they defined themselves in opposition to their parents or rejected society.

For example, eighteen-year old Jumana, a Chicagolander of Syrian background, considers herself very religious and thinks she is “more conservative in some things” than her parents. But she also grew up with a father who considered himself an atheist; she did not experience Islamic schooling of any kind and when she was growing up her family was only “mildly” religious. Her self-described “conservative” label notwithstanding, she is involved in both civic (education and political) and faith-based organizations. Her number one source of Islamic knowledge is her parents, followed by friends, scholars’ study circles and conferences then the mosque and college courses. To the usual question of where are you from she says: “I’m from America. Born and raised here. I identify with American core beliefs and ideals much more than Syrian/Arab ones.” Jumana says she is very optimistic about the future of Muslims in America because they are “moving ahead and the law is on [their] side”. It is evident then, that the
people that occupy these categories and labels (moderate, conservative, liberal and so on) are more complicated than the labels suggest. Additionally, less religious is not necessarily more open-minded and tolerant. Javid, a twenty-nine year male Chicagolander of Indian background, explains “conservative”:

I feel that certain Islamic issues are more important to my family than to me. I feel that sometimes they are more interested in using religion as a form of cultural preservation, social control, or as a way to make youth conform to a certain mode of thinking rather than the more revolutionary and deep aspects of Islam. In fact, there is quite a bit of revulsion in my family towards people who are “too Muslim.” I disagree with them on issues regarding interest [and] hijab. They find hijab/niqab awkward, I feel that it’s a woman’s right to choose.

I asked participants about the notion that younger Muslims are more religious and more conservative than their parents. They did not deny it but had a different take. Maryam, of a Pakistani background, says that younger Muslims are “definitely” more religious and gives the example of how she and her friends took up the hijab against the wishes of their mothers who see no reason for it. She finds the notion that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab as both “ironic and funny,” since the ones she knows fight to wear it. She posits that immigrant parents, marked as they are by accents indicating their foreignness, try “so hard to fit in and are going above and beyond.” They see assimilation as an ideal; therefore, being as inconspicuous and under the radar as possible is crucial. Maryam and her generation, on the other hand, are “not as defensive” and have a “more nuanced” understanding of assimilation which they do not see as a “duty or expected” of them. After all, they are born here; this is their country, culture, and they “could not live anywhere else.” Consequently, they are more comfortable practicing Islam. They are more religiously and politically assertive as their blogs, anthologies, and op-eds suggest.

Children of converts were as likely as those of immigrants to note some differences with their parents. Ameerah, for example, a twenty-year old Blackamerican
woman from Chicago, says she differs from her family in that she began to “think critically” about Islam so she can practice and apply it in her life at a “level more comfortable” for her. She is no longer taking “anything at face value” and is always exploring different dimensions of meanings and is “a bit rebellious in [her] interpretations at times.” In her rebelliousness, she is not rejecting beliefs or practices, but her studies lead her to ask, how does this “directly translate into my own life? Like what does this mean for me, how do I interpret this?” This creates some tension with her parents, who do not always approve of her “interpretation”. Ameerah grew up in a moderately religious home and also considers herself mildly religious, though she prefers to think of herself as “more spiritual than religious.” This phrase is usually understood to mean that the person does not engage in religious rituals. Ameerah, however, is regular in her daily prayers and Friday mosque attendance. She studies the Qur’an and Hadith, is civically minded and involved with MSAs and other Muslim organizations, and performs religiously-inspired spoken word poetry. She is influenced by, and personally knows, some of the most prominent Muslim scholars, including the late imam WD Muhammad, imam Zaid, Dr. Umar Abdullah and Usama Cannon. Ameerah authenticates her need to think critically by saying that it is these very scholars who encourage Muslims to study and to think. She does not criticize her parents’ approach because she realizes that they had “converted for very different reasons” from what helped her “remain[e] Muslim”.

She chose to wear the hijab as a high school junior partly because it helped her feel part of a community; but after her freshman year in college, she took it off to see what life was like without it. She, however, wears it when she performs her poetry in public in order to mark her identity as a Muslim and to “represent Islam”.

Ameerah’s idea that she is thinking more critically reflects a recurring theme. To some of their offspring, parents seem to practice an unexamined faith adopted from the
“old country” where everyone was a Muslim or, in the case of converts, as they were taught by their imams and leaders without questioning it. Many participants intimated that being religious is a choice in America and they have to make sense of Islam for themselves and be able explain it to others. Nineteen-year old Nariman from the Phoenix-valley articulates this sentiment. She says her moderately religious Lebanese family adheres to an Islam based on the culture and the habits of Muslim Lebanon rather than the scholarly interpretation sought after by members of her generation who, growing up in secular society, had “to fight to follow” Islam. To do so, they must gain deeper knowledge. Seeking a closer relationship with Allah means performing rituals, cultivating deeper spirituality, and understanding the reasons behind what is allowed or not are other recurring themes among project participants. When parents reply that the reason for something is “because Allah says so,” the typical response is “yes but why” because to participants like Nariman there is always a reason for a divine decree.

As they get older, many younger Muslims embark on a journey of self-education that often includes studying the English translations of the Qur’an and Hadith collections. Some do so individually and others in groups. Naeema, the Blackamerican who rediscovered herself and her faith while serving in the military, joined a young adult group in her mosque when she returned to Chicago. The group met on Sundays for taleem (study) sessions to discuss among other things verses from the Qur’an and their implications. Afterward, they caravanned to feed the homeless and along the way, they would stop at a park to pray. Naeema said the group was “just wow! To me, it was like, I found the place. This is it! Conscious people that would help keep you conscious. Instead of other way around [where with] all these unconscious people, I [was] trying to keep the conscious and I’m struggling myself. You know what I mean and I need some support.”
As they get older and read and study more, many realize that things are “not black and white” and there are indeed many shades of gray and scholarly differences in interpretations. At this point, they begin to appreciate complexities beyond rules and rituals. This propels some to embark on a spiritual path to give meaning to the rules as reflected on by Nada, a thirty-three year old former Syrian-Chicagoan now residing in the Phoenix-valley. She sees that, beyond the rules, developing one’s own connection with God is crucial. The connection enables one to discover that there is “a lot more loving, peace loving and openness” and to become “a more happy, spiritual person and feel like you’re connected to a higher being.” How does one go about doing that, she asks and answers, is through a kind of knowledge that sees the black, the white and is comfortable in the shades of gray and finds love and peace there. She explains that “you can read all the *fiqh* [jurisprudence] you want, that’s not gonna get you up for *fajr* [dawn prayers]. You can read all these books and legal things, and this is what you should do but how does that help you in daily life? So I kinda see it more as what helps you in daily life...as a person that’s more practical I guess.”

Disentangling *Haram* and *‘Ayeb*

The narrative of pure/true Islam vs. cultural Islam is one often invoked to create a discursive space to challenge parental authority and cultural hegemony where religion is summoned to sanction cultural practices. One of the frequently cited examples of the differences across generational and ethnic lines is gender roles and interaction norms. Here the terms *haram* (religiously illicit) and *‘Ayeb* (culturally disgraceful) are often conflated. The offspring of both immigrants and converts demand a differentiation between these terms because that which is explicitly illicit on religious grounds cannot be
challenged but cultural norms from “back home” are subject to negotiation and change.

Nada illustrates this contested process and associated frustrations:

that’s when you start knowing, ok this is just cultural, yes? And it’s not Islamic teachings...it’s just like this cultural taboo of: you shouldn’t [act a certain way], that’s ‘Ayeb. They keep telling you something’s haram or ‘Ayeb, you start to differentiate; ok what’s haram, what’s not haram, and what’s just ‘Ayeb? ...I remember I’d get into fights with my mom, especially, because my dad was always more progressive, more liberal. Like he was very religious but just much more open minded. Like [mom] you know what, this is not haram, it’s not haram, why the heck are you making life so difficult? But my mom, with the Syrian community, it was just so tight knit in Chicago [and] everybody talked about everybody and you didn’t want, especially your daughters to kind of [get] labeled as something. And so I remember getting into so many fights with my mom because she wouldn’t let me do things; like I couldn’t go to a plays to watch Shakespeare and it was like, I don’t understand! Why can’t I do that? ... I’m like but it’s not haram so stop telling me it’s haram! You need to get over it, cuz I’m not gonna do anything [haram].

Nada understands and empathizes with her mother’s attempts to protect the family from being fodder for gossip mills, but she resents and challenges the use of religious discourse to justify the restrictions on her behavior and activities when they are not religiously prohibited.

Zahra, a nineteen-year old Chicagoan of North African background, says that the conflation of haram and ‘Ayeb also happened in the Islamic school she attended. Though she excuses them for that “subconscious” mixing of the two notions, it nevertheless bothered her greatly because it “confuses people.” She appreciates the richness in cultures that immigrants bring but thinks “the bad point about that is they may not understand how it is to grow up in American society, especially if you’re a young adult. So they might expect things from a Muslim teenager that are very difficult.” An example she gives of this difficult expectation is an incident when high school teachers told them that when in college, Muslim girls are not “to talk to any guy unless it’s business related or something.” If they are partnered with males on projects or science labs, they are to tell the teachers that it is against their religion to do so. Zahra said: “I took that very
seriously and I was like college is going to be so hard and miserable...and [especially because talking to boys] is not even *haram*.” She also related an incident at a funeral where a woman who is considered knowledgeable in religion was speaking to the women attendees and gave a beautiful speech only to “ruin it” in the end by chastising the young women wearing makeup who came to offer their condolences. Zahra, who does not wear makeup, was offended and greatly angered by the words of this speaker who again mixed *haram* and *‘Ayeb* and did not consider the fact that many of the young women who came had never visited a mosque before, and some were non-Muslim friends of the family of the deceased. This, she says, has motivated her to study religion so she could attain the authority that would enable her to give lessons and speeches to younger women to whom she, because of her experiences, can relate unlike that woman.

The confusion and unease that younger people experience and which Zahra identifies is a recurring theme most palpable in gender interactions, but it is not one that should be read as evidence of an “identity crisis”. According to Mukarram, much of the confusion arises because young people of immigrant background think Muslim women are “are automatically Xed off [and] there is no room for dialogue” but interacting with non-Muslim women is unproblematic. He is exasperated by the contradiction: “I can’t talk to you because your name is Fatima but if your name is Jennifer, we’d go to lunch. It’s no big deal. I don’t understand what the origin of that is and how people can justify it, unless they just didn’t think about it at all.” When asked about his theory for why this happens, he explains it is in part due to the lack of critical thinking and also due to “shame and the culture”. Critical thinking would reveal the contradiction in attitude since both Fatima and Jennifer are women who should be respected and treated equally. Shame occurs and cultural norms are given priority because Islamic rules and the reasoning behind certain behavior and norms have been misapplied and obscured by
cultural values. If one thought critically and understood correctly, Mukarram notes, one would know when it is religiously recommended to guard one’s gaze (ghad el-nazer). In the absence of such understanding, one takes the extra precaution by avoiding interaction with “the girl who also holds on to that ideal and is equally ignorant” of its proper application. This is even more so because the young Muslim man and woman know that if an “auntie” sees them having lunch or coffee, to her this is “a big deal”; it is not just lunch. She will begin to inquire if they interested in each other and are planning to get married. To non-Muslim Jennifer, lunch is most likely just a meal together but the meaning of lunch with a Muslim girl becomes ambiguous because she and/or he is unsure how the behavior and interaction would be interpreted by the other. More importantly, both know how an “auntie” would interpret it. Thus, it is best to be on the safe side and avoid it altogether. If they are in a group then there is no perceived intimacy, and lunch is just lunch. This does not mean that there is no room for attraction in group setting, but the social boundaries of behavior and the safety in numbers make such occasions less likely to attract attention from on-looking aunties. Because even non-observant Muslims travel in their ethnic circles, parents who might otherwise be very liberal or “secular” may not look favorably on openly dating offspring. Young people, hence, become very creative in keeping any romance under the radar of the community gossip channels.

For its members, the MSA becomes a theater where gender interactions and norms and associated anxieties play out. MSA chapter leaderships as well as interactions in the meeting/prayer space and social events are contested and subject to ongoing negotiation. Large educational events with guest speakers and “Islamic Awareness Week” activities where non-Muslims are invited are gender mixed. But questions arise with routine activities. Should the sisters’ prayer and meeting space be separate or is it
sufficient that the group naturally would divide across gender lines in a shared space? Should there be separate social events or separate dining tables if they are together? Should weekly or monthly study circles be mixed or separated? These are the issues that these younger people have to tackle and figure out, and they often feel ill-prepared because their interactions with each other are very limited in mosque, Islamic school or youth groups. Sometimes they have to seek guidance from the faculty advisor or the Muslim Chaplain on campus. Whatever is agreed on for that term is subject to renegotiation and change when the board changes or when new members join, or when the current group realizes their choice was unworkable. For these reasons, when I asked project participants about their experiences in MSAs, they were always very careful to point out the dynamic nature of the perspectives and the rules guiding interactions and activities even within one chapter. A few did report feeling out of place and judged on their degree of religious observance or their behavior, when they joined an MSA chapter at a time when strict interpretive thinking dominated. However, the overwhelming majority of those interviewed generally had positive experiences as MSA members.

On a few occasions people find their spouses in the MSAs. In general, however, because everyone is supposed to “behave Islamically”, they feel that not only do they have to address each other with the honorific terms brother and sister, but they have to see and feel that way about each other. Shareefa, the Blackamerican woman quoted earlier, reflects on her membership in youth groups and her MSA chapter and notes that they did not have “permission to like each other.” In order to work together in the association and for both parents and young people to feel comfortable with these interactions, young men and women had to “have in [their] heads that they are like a mahram (unmarriageable kin)”. This make-believe kinship, notes Shareefa, has “to shift, to say that it’s okay if you develop an interest in somebody, but this is how you go about
it.” How one goes about it would not involve dating as popularly understood. Instead, it would involve recognizing the attraction to a potential suitor and then getting to know that person, not only from what one says but also by observing how one handles oneself and treats others. This shift also involves alerting one’s family to the interest without making it a community affair. It means facilitating “normal interactions.” Shareefa’s choice of this phrase reflects her assessment that the way many young Muslim American men and women interact is odd. Like Mukarram, she has observed the cordial relationships that Muslims have with non-Muslims of the opposite sex but not with one another. She thinks that is because no one wants to be perceived by the community as an “outcast.” This, however, poses a problem for Muslim women and the community. If they are taught “don’t give anybody any hint” that you are attracted to them, then Muslim men conclude that “Muslim girls are just too untouchable, too unapproachable” and end up marrying “Suzie Q [who is] approachable.” These restrictive cultural norms that make younger people feel they cannot approach each other in Muslim settings are not limited to immigrants but exist among some converts as well. This is one of the things young people see as an intrusion of “cultural Islam” on “pure Islam”.

Besides gender issues, different understandings of even simple routine expressions contribute to the notion that immigrants are prone to conflate religious and cultural ideas. For example, it is common for Muslims to respond with in sha’a Allah (God willing) when asked to do something. Those born/or raised in the West usually understood that to mean “yes, I shall do that, God willing.” But they soon discover that for most immigrants that does not necessarily mean the answer is in the affirmative. In sha’a Allah may also be a face-saving strategy in social interactions when one does not want to commit to something. After a while, children’s response to parents’ in sha’a Allah is “in sha’a Allah yes, or in sha’a Allah no?”
“Media-Muslims” and Self-Image

Public discourse and images (news, film, TV) penetrate that mediation space within the self where these words and images interface with previous memories and inner speech and shape one’s identity. Therefore, how others see Muslims is critical for how Muslims see themselves, and the narrative of pure/true Islam is not limited to how believers see Islam but extends to concerns with how non-Muslims view Muslims. The images in film, TV or in print are incongruent with the images of “pure/true Islam” that these Muslims espouse or imagine. I shall return to the public views in the next chapter, but it is important here to point out a consensus among participants that the prevailing negative views and images of Muslims in “mainstream media as terrorists or otherwise violent” do not depict the “true nature of Islam”.

As mentioned earlier, most of the project collaborators considered themselves either moderately or very religious. But the meaning of these terms is unstable and participants acknowledge the different ways that the terms are understood and used among Muslims and in public discourse. Many of those who self-identified as very or moderately religious listed ritual acts of praying and fasting, reading the Qur’an on regular basis, frequenting mosques and cultivating a closer relationship with God as what makes them identify in that way. These are also acts listed by some who identified as mildly religious and even those considering themselves more spiritual than religious, like Ameerah above.

Jihan, a thirty-eight year old woman from Phoenix-valley, does not frequent mosques or pray consistently, nor does she wear hijab or “conservative” clothing (for example, she wears short sleeveless dresses); furthermore, she dates. She dresses up her
children for Halloween and puts their gifts under an “Eid tree” so “Eid is more fun”. With this profile, she exhibits the markers of that presumably silent secular Muslim majority. Yet, Jihan sees herself as moderately religious and says: “my faith is deep, my practice is inconsistent, my worldview accepting. I think I am deeply religious in my belief but based on the ‘popular’ connotation I’m more moderate.” She explains that what marks her as moderate in “popular” perceptions is the way she dresses, meaning no hijab. She does not think that her clothing choice indexes less religiosity, especially now that her intentions have changed. Prior to performing the hajj she dressed “less modestly” and joined friends in clubs because as a divorcee with children, she felt she would have to “get noticed” if she is to have any chance of remarrying. Since the hajj and after much reflection, she is more “modest” and selective; if she buys short sleeveless dresses now, it is not to attract attention but simply because she likes them. Drawing on the legal maxim in the Islamic discursive tradition that actions are judged by the intentions behind them, Jihan believes the change in intention should still “keep [her] slate clean,” eluding to the idea that hajj, if performed well, erases one’s prior sins. She thinks people obsess about rules and she disagrees with “the idea that there is this certain set of rules and if you don’t subscribe to this set of rules then you’re not Muslim. People forget that all it takes to be Muslim is to believe in one God and believe that Muhammad is a prophet. And as long as you believe that, you’re Muslim. And all of the other stuff supports that.” Here again, she draws in long debates in the discursive tradition about what minimally qualifies one as a Muslim.

Women who wore hijab considered it as an act of worship that qualified them to whatever level of religiosity (mild, moderate or very religious) that otherwise best described them. Similarly, while realizing that both other Muslims and non-Muslims may consider them less religious, those who did not wear the hijab felt that not doing so
did not take away from their status as moderately or very religious. This latter point is demonstrated clearly by Jihan’s example. While in public discourse and often among Muslims, the headscarf is a symbol of high religiosity and the lack of it as liberal marker, these women do not conform to these stereotypes. The hijab is only one act among countless attributes that enter into how one assesses one’s own piety; these other attributes include ritual acts of worship, one’s closeness to God, one’s virtues, and how one treats others. These women are not, however, untouched by discourses circulating in Muslim and public spheres. Hiba sees herself one way, but because she has internalized the negative connotation it has come to have, she avoids it. She explains: “I wanted to check very religious, but when someone says ‘very religious’, I perceive that as an extremist...It depends on who’s looking at you too. Some people might think I’m very religious while others see me as mildly religious. But to me alhamdulilah [praise be to God], I feel as though I am close to my religion.” While Muslim women are not impervious to the public and Muslim discourses where the hijab is a symbol of subjugation or liberation respectively, many of the participants in this project did not see the hijab in and of itself as a mark of piety. Several said they had to think hard to recount who among their friends wore it or not because they do not pay attention to its presence or absence.

However they describe their level of observance, project collaborators were clear that religion was important in their lives and had become more significant as they get older. They do not find it necessary to “put it in people’s face”, but it is a central part of their sense of self and of the world; so they do not hide that aspect of their identity. Nureen felt mistreated by her mostly South Asian community even as her parents were pillars of that community. She also had a contentious relationship with her father, who she describes as authoritarian and who would not allow her to hang out with friends,
especially males. These factors have resulted in her becoming a “non-practicing Muslim” which, among other things, she says means she dates, does not perform ritual prayers or fast. She does, however, pray by sitting quietly and remembering God; so she feels very religious and close to God and has the “same core beliefs” as other Muslims. It is important to her that people know that she is, specifically, a non-practicing Muslim because she does not want people to assume she is not a Muslim or that she is a Muslim who does the “whole nine yards.”

Engaging peers who seem free to do as they wish, encountering academic theories about science and about religion including that “religion is the opiate of the masses,” witnessing how religion is used by despots and extremists to justify oppression and violence, being dissatisfied with community and family’s conduct, and knowing that in this society Islam is an option among many, lead many young Muslims to wrestle with and question their faith. Nearly everyone who participated in this project narrated a moment when they came to “own” their faith— a conversion story of sort. It is a moment when they realize that they choose Islam as a spiritual path because a relationship with God through this religion gives them “peace and strength”, gets them through good and through difficult times, and helps them make sense of the world. To some critics this sudden spiritual awakening is problematic and is seen as step on a path to extremism.

Roy calls those who suddenly find their faith as “born again Muslims”, who, like their Christian counterparts, see religion as “the central principle” of their lives where rituals and religious formulae sanctify every act. They are often fundamentalists who “cannot accept the gray areas of secular life” (Roy 2004, 186). The now common practice of extending concepts such as fundamentalism, reformation, church-state relations, and born-again that are grounded in the historical trajectory of Christianity into Islam is problematic on several levels. The critique of such slippage has been elaborated by many
These concepts do a lot of work for the arguments being advanced because of the mental frames they tap into. There is no question there are Muslims, in the Muslim East or West, whose religious awakening might follow a trajectory that leads them to intolerance, fanaticism or violent extremism. Demagogues of all stripes prey on alienated young people, including religious ones, for malevolent ends. But the markers of “born again” that Roy outlines are not suitable for Muslims. For one, the centrality of religion as the organizing principle in one’s life, including the peppering of one’s speech and the sanctifying of one’s acts with religious phrases, is a common Muslim phenomenon. Additionally, for my collaborators, their moment of spiritual awakening seems to enable them to see the gray between the “black and white” of rules and propels them to seek deeper religious knowledge and become agents of social change in their communities and society. Furthermore, their recommitment to Islam is not without internal conflicts or questions about some aspects of the religion. Sami, the nineteen-year old Arizonan of African heritage quoted previously, gives us a glimpse into this struggle. Sami is an aspiring scientist who questioned his faith when he experienced what he described as an episode of depression resulting from a combination of things, including wrestling with theories of religion and science and what he sees as the lack of critical thinking, consistency and transparency in his local Muslim community. He emerged from this episode with a renewed faith because without it he says:

I would never have any peace for myself or any comfort and even if this [religion] all turns out to be a complete lie or fairy tale and any Muslim will say *astaghfiru-Allah* [God forgive me], I think it keeps me at peace. It makes me more comfortable within myself [more so] than would leading a life completely devoid of any religion or any God. And maybe it’s because I’m so accustomed to it at this point, maybe because I grew up with it. Maybe it’s because when I pray or when I read Qur’an or whatever it is, I feel at peace. Maybe it’s that. I realize that religion is a part of my life that I think is essential, that I want to incorporate it into my future. It’s something that I want to keep in it, even if there are some things that I’m at odds with as far as belief. I don’t understand how they work.
Project participants share the “pure/true Islam” narrative with diverse others but they are neither ideologues nor extremists. They may consider themselves mildly or moderately religious or spiritual rather than religious, but these labels do not adequately reflect the complexities of their understandings or practice. They struggle with common questions about faith in the modern world and with contradictions between religious ideals and diverse Muslim cultural norms, and so they appeal to a “pure/true Islam”.

A Crisis in Authority? Religious Authority in a Changing World

The narrative of “pure/true Islam” is inevitably framed by critics as a crisis of authority in contemporary Islam. Therefore, a brief exploration of authority in Islam is necessary to consider these concerns and how project participants conceptualize authority. The oft-repeated truism that there is “no church in Islam,” implies that authority is not centralized in a particular institution, but that does not mean it is absent. As an article of faith, Muslims hold that ultimate authority resides with God and that the Qur’an is His literal word. The Prophet was the human authority that carried out God’s Will, and that explained and embodied the Qur’anic ethico-spiritual tenets. But even the Prophet was reproached in the Qur’an and questioned by his companions about issues pertaining to community affairs; thus no human authority is absolute. It was disagreements on leadership and authority after the death the Prophet that resulted in the Sunni and Shia split. To the Shia, primary authority is limited to the descendants of Prophet’s household, while to Sunnis it is open to all qualified Muslims. Being a descendent of the Prophet gives Shia imams more interpretive latitude. Among both Shia and Sunnis, however, it is jurists (ullama) who hold the authority to extract legal rulings and to interpret canonical sources (Abou El Fadl 2005).
While there is no final or definitive authority that speaks in the name of God, the *ullama* form a jurist class in society that defines what is (or not) part of the religion. Jurists undergo rigorous training and have an intellectual lineage and guilds that issue certificates (*ijazah*) of competence and completion. The authority they enjoy is not binding but is one of persuasive argumentation dependent on textual evidence and sound reasoning. Individual Muslims, according to Islamic law, are duty-bound to do due diligence to inquire into the qualification and the evidentiary basis for the jurist’s opinion (Abou El Fadl 2005). Individual Muslims may directly access canonical sources and the truth therein and are responsible and accountable for implementing God’s Will; nevertheless, the authority of the jurist is deeply rooted in Islamic beliefs and inherited tradition (Abou El Fadl 2001; Ramadan 2008) and safeguards against following one’s whims and speaking for God.

There are long debates and established distinctions between God’s Will in the ideal sense (*Shari’ah*, meaning the way to the source) and human understandings and applications (*Fiqh*, meaning deep understanding) of that Will. Since it represents divine Will and—as an article of faith—God manifests perfect justice and benevolence, *Sharia’h* is believed to embody the ideals of justice and equity. *Fiqh*, on the other hand, is a jurist’s attempt at understanding and articulating the higher objectives and the intended purposes (*maqasid*) of *Sharia’h*. Jurists work through the rigorous methodology of the fundamentals of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) but diversity of opinion is an inescapable and acceptable outcome of these attempts at realizing these ideal objectives (Abou El Fadl 2001; Auda 2008; Ramadan 2004). This differentiation between *Sharia’h* and *fiqh* is essential because it underscores a recognition of the imperfection of human attempts at understanding and implementing the divine Will (Abou El Fadl 2001). This spiritual precaution and intellectual humility is articulated in
how jurists and scholars in general usually end their legal opinions and scholarly
treatises with the phrase *wa Allahu a’alam* “and God knows best” (Abou El Fadl 2001).

Early Islam witnessed dynamic and productive debates as the Muslim empire
extended in all directions and encountered diverse cultures, necessitating
reconsideration of legal opinions in light of new contexts. Today’s inherited scholarly
tradition shows, as a consequence, a rich diversity of opinion\(^{33}\) that was and continues to
be positively viewed as a sign of divine mercy. In the past, a tradition of endowments
afforded scholars financial independence from governing powers and enabled them to
act as check. Co-opted scholars were not authenticated by power; they still had to
withstand an authentication process by their intellectual peers and the community at
large (Abou El Fadl 2001). Qualified jurists must master Arabic, Qur’an and Hadith
sciences, and juristic methodologies, and they must earn the critical regard of peers. It is,
however, the acceptance of the Muslim community that ultimately marks a jurist’s work
as either an authoritative opus withstanding the test of time or only a passing exposition.

There are different prerequisites and distinctions between a jurist who followed
precedents (*muqallid*) and those qualified to exert independent intellectual effort
(*Mujtahid*) and propose new normative juristic canons (Abou El Fadl 2001, Ramadan
2008). This resulted in numerous schools of law by the tenth century and, along with
turbulent socio-political events, this led some to advocate for closing the “doors for
*ijhihad*.” Yet, because it was more a “rhetorical device employed to resist [this] chaotic
proliferation” (Abou El Fadl 2001, 38) than it was a mandate, this call to close the doors
of *ijtihad* did not affect the Shia and did not fully stop Sunni scholars. But along with
subsequent internal conflicts, external attacks and eventual colonization, the call had
profound effects on Muslim scholars and masses. Consequently, the earlier diversity was
pruned down to eight schools in contemporary Islam\(^{34}\) but the interpretive trends persist

In the post-9/11 context, in the age of the “fatwa online,” “ask an imam,” and “efatwa,” and headlines like “Battle for the Soul of Islam,” statements about the crisis of authority in Islam abound and give the impression of an emergent phenomenon threatening not only the world of Islam but the world at large. However, there are countless works that date the decline of the privileged position of the juristic class to a much earlier period. Early signs began with domestic political and economic problems across the Muslim empire. Recovery from these problems would have been possible were it not for the onslaught of colonialism as Muslim societies began to fall one after another starting with Egypt in 1798 (Abou El Fadl 2005; Nasr 1994). For a while, jurists still had enough social and religious authority to call for public resistance and rebellion. But gradually, they were rendered powerless as colonial powers instituted Western secular laws and privatized religion, relegating Islamic law to the limited arena of personal and family law (Mahmood 2012). Further erosion of juristic authority was due to authoritarian native rulers often installed by the departing colonial powers. Cognizant of the power jurists can wield, these secular and Western-educated rulers closed many jurist education institutions and brought the rest under state ownership. The state became a de facto administrator, appointing faculty, firing and silencing those opposing it, restricting curriculum, lowering educational standards and wages, and limiting the scope of jurists’ activities to personal law, prayer leadership and pre-approved sermons (Abou El Fadl 2005; Mahmood 2012). Abou El Fadl notes that through these policies, the state effectively “ensured that the religious schools only attracted the least able and bright students” (2005, 36) and even then did not train them well. Subsequently, the graduates are “no longer jurists or legal experts...[and] the ‘ulama became more like
Western-styled ministers, who functioned at the margins of society as religious advisers without being able to influence social or political policy in any meaningful way” (Abou El Fadl 2005, 36).

Modernity’s project, post-colonialism, globalization, and the primacy of identity politics and rigidly-defined boundaries of the self and the other all reduced the complexities of *fiqh*. Though they differed on where in Muslim history the dividing lines lie, the result privileged imitation (*taqlid*) of the past and aversion to innovation (*bida’*) regarding anything pertaining to religion (Abou El Fadl 2005). But even the most restrictive groups, who limit the golden age period to the time of the Prophet and his companions and who advocate direct reading of the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition, cannot fully escape the accumulated scholarly commentary and juristic schools that they wish to bypass. The Qur’an can be read directly but its meaning and the Prophetic tradition itself—which explains the Qur’an and expounds on acts of worship and social interactions—are part of the scholarly heritage that complied it according to a rigorous methodology. On the other end of the spectrum are those described as “Progressive Muslims,” who take the position that only the Qur’an’s authenticity is unchallenged; everything else is human production that must be bypassed and individual Muslims should do their own *ijtihad*. Between these two poles, there are varying degrees of championing or criticizing imitation and the uncritical acceptance of the inherited knowledge and calls to re-engage canonical sources within the contemporary context (for examples see Abou El Fadl 2001; Abu Zayd 2006; Al-Alwani 2006; Al-Qaradawi 1990; An-Na‘īm 1990; Arkoun 1994; Moosa 2003; Ramadan 2008; Wadud 1999). The challenge for Muslims is always one of how to acknowledge the past without becoming imprisoned by it and how to engage the present without being enamored by it.
The advent of public education, print and translation and now the Internet have all put the Qur’an, the Hadith collections, and a great deal of the classic works of scholars in the hands of Muslim masses. The consequences have been analogous to that of the Internet and medicine. People go online to find about what ails them. The information empowers some to ask insightful questions and contribute to their medical care while others use it to self-diagnose and shop for therapeutic interventions pharmaceutical or otherwise. Similarly, some use these religious resources to deepen their understandings of religion and formulate insightful questions to address to qualified scholars. Others read them literally and form their opinions or shop around for opinions that agree with them. Western Muslims’ socio-cultural and political circumstances compel them to find answers to challenges and new situations they encounter in the West. Except in the old Muslim communities of Eastern Europe (for example, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania) with established scholarly traditions, Muslims in the West have had to look eastward for religious authority. Questions beyond the scope of “imported imams” were passed on to scholars residing “back home.” Their juristic rulings on mortgage, banking, meat, political participation and civic engagements in non-Muslim Western societies were then circulated among Muslims. But over time, particularly in the past twenty years, there has been an increasingly more vocal realization that as well-intentioned and reasoned as these religious edicts might be, the scholars that offer them lack an essential qualification for issuing an opinion: an experience-grounded knowledge of the social reality from which the questions arise.

Understanding the social context is an integral component of any interpretive endeavor; without it, any religious authority risks not only being irrelevant but also betraying the historically-established methodological tradition and the higher objectives of the law (*Maqasid Al-Shari’ah*) (Abou El Fadl 2001, Auda 2008, Jackson 2005,
Ramadan 2008). Others qualified neither in religious texts nor in the social context have assumed authority in some mosques and in the transmission of knowledge to the young in weekend schools. This, however, has been changing and with greater momentum post-9/11. This development is due both to external factors (concerns with security as well as greater public scrutiny) and to internal ones including the realization of the disconnection between imported imams and the needs of the local community, especially pronounced with younger generations. These conditions have led to concerns that Islam could become irrelevant to future generations.

In Search of “Evidence-Based” Islam

The pure/true Islam narrative among younger American Muslims is emblematic of a search for a better understanding of what and why they practice Islam and for authenticity, a way to be grounded in one’s faith and in one’s reality. As young adults outgrow the phase of parental instructions— or of being “force fed”, as one participant put it— and influenced as they may become by the academic skepticism of inherited knowledge, they argue that the truth of their faith cannot be merely based on “my parents told me so”. Rather it must be validated and claimed for one’s self through a quest for deeper understanding. Malik sums up this thinking:

this sort of proof by authority, well it must be true because my parents told me, [is not sufficient]. I mean you finish college and there are all these things that are not true because your parents told you, right? And so in the context it’s hard to be “I’m Muslim because my parents told me” and so that’s why I think like these deen intensives are popular and why like the ALIM program [is successful]. I went the first year they did it and it got bigger and they started doing an ALIM winter weekend... I mean the generations of Muslim that sort of grew up here, really feel like they need certain basis for their education that is more than inherited because you are a minority, because it’s a society that is skeptical of certain kinds of knowledge. So now a lot of people in this situation or have the quirky desire to like “Ok, I’m going to spend six months in Egypt”.

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The desires of Malik and others to build their faith on an examined foundation and the “quirky desire” of some to travel to the Muslim East illustrate the irony of this pure/true Islam narrative. Both a repudiation and an idealization mark the relationship of American Muslims to the Muslim East. For while the narrative is invoked against first generation immigrants’ presumably “cultural Islam,” American Muslims seeking to ground themselves in Arabic and Islamic studies travel to a Muslim East imagined as a repository of intellectual heritage and religious knowledge. Going there and “extracting and de-territorializing sacred knowledge, they hope to reintroduce a common vocabulary of argumentation in their mosques to develop an indigenous, American expression of Islam” (Grewal 2006). The duration and goals for their trips vary: some go for few months for self-development, others spend a year or two to become competent in a particular topic (for example, Qur’anic recitation), and yet others enroll in degree-granting institutions and return as credible imams and scholars. This transnational education became common in the 1990s but has been curtailed by post-9/11 security issues. Several of the participants in this project, particularly Blackamericans, undertook this journey to learn Arabic and to deepen their religious knowledge, but they learned more. The initial elation of being in a Muslim country, waking up to the call of prayers, not worrying if alcohol or pork is in the food, and having a sense of heightened spirituality eventually gives way to the disorientation and disillusionment of immigration. As students who initially imagined and idealized a land of Islam encounter the lived realities of Muslims, diverse cultural constructions of race/color, time and citizen-state relations and the daily trials of navigating all sorts of bureaucracies, they grow weary and long for home.

Nawaz and Salem are Chicagolanders of Pakistani descent who separately went to Jordan to study and later became friends in Chicago, where both are graduate students
of Islamic studies. Salem was there for only a few months and had to return to the US for family reasons. His memory of Jordan was one of blissful spiritual days devoid of the struggles of Muslims here. Nawaz, on the other hand, lived and worked in Jordan after he completed his studies. He realized that his “subjectivity is American” and that being a Muslim in Jordan had its own struggles, including making it to the mosque for daily prayers. His teachers there told him that one can only authentically practice the faith from his particular subject position rather than try to become someone else. He said this helped him embrace his American, specifically his Midwestern, sensibilities. He observed that many Americans who live in Jordan live the life of an immigrant who nostalgically recreates and remains connected with home, an effort now made easier by the Internet and satellite television.

Subsequent students benefit from the experience of those who went before them and who post their trials and triumphs online. Suhaib Webb is a Whiteamerican convert who obtained a degree from Al-Azhar University along with private instruction from scholars at Al-Azhar mosque and came back to serve as an imam and scholar. In A Letter to the Aspiring Western Student of Islam, posted on his website, a second-generation female of Indian descent and former student of Webb still living in Egypt advises the readers that the path to sacred knowledge is demanding in discipline, time, and energy. She warns them they will be homesick and even if they and others in America questioned if they belong, the trip abroad will make them realize how American they are. Most importantly, however, she warns them of the hazards of getting lost in the methodological debates and the “baggage of impassioned, unyielding opinions” on some issues. Those bringing back such “vitriolic debates to the West and centering their classes and programs on them” are faulted for focusing on issues irrelevant to Western Muslims struggling with practical issues.36 But extracting any knowledge from its cultural milieu,
However unrealistic, is what many exhort returning imams and scholars to do. Nawaz and Salem see this as untenable and think, instead, one should be cognizant of the relationship between knowledge and its cultural milieu and try to make knowledge relevant. This is achieved by grounding it in the new context while remaining normative, without “fudging” established juristic positions to suit the American context.

The necessary funds and time make studying abroad a privilege of the few. For many second generation Muslims, the search for what Malik above called “evidence-based” faith takes multiple tracks that usually start with parents and local imams. They then research reference books, join study groups or scholars’ study circles, or go online. Many critically examine what they read there and consider the veracity of arguments along with the credentials and credibility of authors or speakers. Musa gives an example. He wanted to know if it was necessary to pray both the congregational Friday and Eid prayers if they fall on the same day. He looked up a Hadith where the Prophet approved of either praying both or just the Eid prayers and Musa liked the latter dispensation. But he wanted to make sure he was not “just following [his] own whims”, so he checked online sites that he trusted and read various “scholarly answers” to readers’ questions on the issue. After considering the options, he took the latter dispensation.

While some stick with one madhab (a juristic school), many younger Muslims are arguing that if the differences between these juristic schools are based on different evidence from the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition, then they are all acceptable ways and one could choose from among these options depending on the situation one encounters. This “post-madhhab” approach is not a uniquely American phenomenon but one characteristic of Islamic Revival. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood observed it among the women’s piety movement in Egypt and notes that it is a “character of modern
religiosity that has been glossed as *talfiq*, namely, an increasing flexibility displayed toward one’s fidelity to a *madhhab* in twentieth-century Islam” (Mahmood 2005, 81).

Roy (2004) argued that a hallmark of neo-fundamentalism is a focus on personal piety and a “personal quest for an immediately accessible knowledge in defiance of the established religious authority” (2004, 6). Second generation Muslims are indeed seeking accessible knowledge and “evidence-based” understandings for their belief and practice as they strive for piety. But as evident from the participants in this project, the knowledge they seek is a normative kind acquired from authoritative texts and individuals conversant in canonical sources, classic debates and contemporary challenges. They seek knowledge not as an abstract intellectual exercise but for its practical daily application and relevance. This is similar to anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s (2005) findings about the pedagogy of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt and is a common characteristic of the Islamic Revival movement in general. Roy likens this self-focused spirituality to that of Protestant Christianity, and one could even say that it resembles the modern self-help movement and associated industry, but there are great differences. In Muslim piety, there are “sources of authority on which these practices of self are based” in addition to “the architecture of the self and its sense of potentiality [which] are dramatically different in these [different] genres” (Mahmood 2005, 80). Piety, in Islamic context, is focused on reforming the individual through the work of self-fashioning in thoughts, behavior, and body without fetishizing the self. The objective is to know self in order to fashion and discipline it. Rather than discipline coming from an external religious authority, it has to be cultivated from within and manifested internally and outwardly. In the tenth century, Al-Ghazali had dedicated a fourth (ten books) of his compendium *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* to technologies for disciplining the self and purifying the soul to achieve proximity to God.
Today, countless publications and nearly two million online search engine hits put these technologies at the fingertips of those seeking this piety and proximity.

Malik attributes the perception that children are more religious and conservative than their parents to a phase that younger Muslims go through whereby, due to this “evidence-based” desire, they check their parents’ practices against the ideals they learn and find them wanting. Drawing on his experience, he theorizes that “the conservative piece comes in because very often people don’t have the opportunity to spend very much time” to digest what they learn. Theirs is a case of “I’ve read a book all at once, I spent two days in a *deen* intensive” and now want to put all of it into practice. It is not the case of “I’ve spent eight years immersed in the tradition” and learned the complexities therein. The difference in the two approaches leads to “very narrow understandings” on the part of the young. However, as their learning deepens, they begin to understand the nuances in juristic rulings and realize that this wisdom had been passed on through the lived experiences and inherited knowledge from grandparents to parents but they, the children, arrive at it only after time-consuming research. Along the way, there are those whose belief and practice is based on that inherited knowledge. Others take the approach of “I’m doing this because I learned three things and I’m applying all three” and work through things to “get to a sort of comfortable lived experience.” Malik related his experiences with a perspective gained through time as he reflected on his younger cousin who is experiencing this now. As this young man tells family what they are to do or not do, family members alternate between giving him time and space to explore and engaging him to point out that “here’s the other Islamic issue that you’re totally trampling on in your effort to be the, I don’t know, be the first in line at the prayer because that’s where the blessings descend. No, that doesn’t mean you can step on the old lady, not literally but you know [laugh].”
That quest for a practice based on authenticated knowledge is one element of the generational differences participants cite. The other is what twenty-three year old Tasneem called the “intellectual Islam” she found in her MSA where both “conservative and liberal” students felt welcomed and engaged in discussions and attended lectures and scholars’ study circles. This “intellectual Islam” is about:

actual challenging ideas: thinking about Islam in the context of America, thinking about Islam in a philosophical context, thinking about Islam on a personal level, how does it manifest in my life every day other than the perfunctory prayers? And those conversations started happening by virtue of meeting other people who are all from different backgrounds religiously and socially and that’s when I really started to think about Islam in terms of myself and really formulate my Muslim identity. Who do I want to be? And that’s when on my own, over the course of the four years, I stopped doing a lot of things that my parents wouldn’t approve of and then started doing things my parents would never have thought about. Like, they would say “what is this you are going to a lecture? You’re going to listen to this person?” At first, they were like, “oh, it’s great, you go to iftars! You can go to jummah!” But then, to this day, they don’t get why I need to sit and explore Islam so much. They’re just like: do your things and be a good Muslim! You’re there to go to school. That’s what it’s about! Go to school, get a job and make some money or whatever. My parents, I realized this, at first there was that struggle because they didn’t want me to do certain things that I wanted to do when I was in high school. Things that weren’t Islamic. Then it became, I want to explore all these things and they’re like “no! This [school, work, family] is your function in life. You need to stick to that. And it’s great that you want to know about your religion’ but they never understood that or really encouraged it.

Tasneem says that this focus on education and career is common to immigrant families because they came to seek better lives and futures. She seems puzzled because she sees them as very religious, but they do not grasp “this intellectual idea of going and learning more things in an academic scholarly setting”. Tasneem turns to her friends for answers to her questions and to online resources where she looks for “someone who is authentic.” In the end, she consults her heart because she believes if one is sincere in faith, one would know when something rings true or not. She must be humble, she says, and accept that she does not always have the “capability to know whether this is truth with a capital ‘T’.” In those times, she uses her “moral compass” as she searches, studies
and reads. She realized she has to ground her knowledge in Qur'an and Hadith and began to feel less intimidated to go “directly to the Qur’an for guidance.” She finished reading the Qur’an at the age of nine and would occasionally pick it up during Ramadan but otherwise it was this “thing in Arabic which sounded nice” but which she did not understand. The translation was useful to get the literal meaning but did not help her with questions about life which she says is an interpretive level that requires linguistic competence in Arabic and most importantly sincerity. She approached the Qur’an by an ongoing process of “fixing [her] character” and praying for assistance to understand. She now engages in a “personal reading of the Qur’an” that gives her “a lot of insight.” But for “just academic knowledge”, she reads and attends lectures of prominent European and American Muslim scholars who, she says, have spent a lifetime studying and whose teachings resonate with her “ethics and morals” as well as with her “intellectual paradigm.” She may read a Hadith and reflect on it but realizes “you need more learned people to interpret for you.”

Authority for Tasneem and project collaborators is not merely textual or personality-based; it has to also speak to their realities and intellect. Participants listed scholars that influence them most and whose work they consider as resource or reference. All but few of the scholars they listed where born and raised in the North America or Europe. In order of frequency of listing, the top six included: Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, Suhaib Webb, Tariq Ramadan, Umar F. Abdallah, and Sherman Jackson. All are American converts except for Ramadan who is a second- generation Swiss Muslim of Egyptian parentage. All of these scholars underwent training in classic Islamic scholarship in the Middle East; Jackson and Ramadan are also renowned professors of Islamic Studies. The various reasons— intellectual and temperament— these scholars are influential is summed up by Abdul-Samad, a thirty year old man of Indian background:
It was only after I started thinking actively about issues relating to self-identity, my place in the world, and how to live in it as opposed to around it, that I started to look for answers that led me to directions that my parents had not investigated and most likely had no need to investigate in their formative years. These scholars speak to me on many levels. First and foremost, I feel that they each possess sound and authentic knowledge. That is very important to me because there are many charismatic (and sincere) speakers who I feel are not grounded in traditional Islamic knowledge. Second, they all grew up in the West and understand it not just theoretically but practically and in a deep way. They have developed a strong sense of who they are, as Americans and Muslims, and have balance, love, hope, open-mindedness, compassion, and humility. On a separate note, which is probably more related to psychology than anything else, these speakers tend to take a softer, contemplative, and accepting tone rather than a loud or aggressive tone. I feel more comfortable with this approach just because of my own nature of being fairly soft in tone and contemplative and also as a struggling Muslim I need more encouragement than being told how bad of a job I’m doing. So there are mainly intellectual reasons but some psychological reasons as well that I’ve gravitated towards these figures. I would add that I’m very tolerant of other religious leaders and love and respect our scholars.

A peculiar feature of Islam in America is that authority has an ethno-racial dimension where immigrants, specifically Arabic speaking ones, are assumed by Muslim Americans generally to be more knowledgeable. This came up time and again in this project, often as an element of frustration not only by those who are excluded even when qualified but also by those assumed to be qualified. A young man of Arab background told me “just because I can pronounce ح (Kh) and خ (’)[Arabic letters] people assume I know more and can be the imam [prayer leader].” While as Jackson says “olive skin – routinely functions as a proxy for religious knowledge and authenticity [and] it does reflect a prima facie presumption that no one else enjoys” (2008, 80), it does not preclude black or white skin from this authority. At the local level things may differ but as noted earlier, the most influential imams and scholars identified by participants are Black or White converts and their sessions at Muslim conferences are always packed with young and old immigrants alike.

Project collaborators are also acutely aware of the various debates on authority, particularly as questions of “who speaks for Islam?” are frequently posed in public and as
Muslims across the ideological spectrum claim to speak authoritatively on Islam’s position on complex issues. Mukarram shared how second generation Muslims are often caught (and take sides) in a polarized discourse: either everything is open for critical reevaluation and everyone is qualified to do so, or nothing is debatable and no one but “clergy” can render an opinion. But there are those, like Mukarram, who hold the proverbial stick in the middle. They see the necessity of critical engagement with canonical sources and critique of social practices but it has to be done through valid methodology and credible argumentation. To navigate the cacophony of voices in these diverse and partially overlapping public spheres, these younger Muslims need evidence-based arguments and strive to sharpen their own critical judgment to assess the veracity of the arguments and discourses37.

At informal discussions and in interviews, collaborators were critical of the phenomenon of “Progressive Islam” for tackling issues of marginal concerns to the community (for example, women leading mixed prayers) when more pressing issues and problems exist (for example, proper space for women in mosques). The most common criticism, however, was that the public figures of this trend, like the journalist/author Irshad Manji, were not speaking from within the community or Islamic discursive tradition. The childhood and family experiences that inform Manji’s arguments generate empathy among Muslims but her “Muslim refusenik38” (2003) position is seen as alien and misguided. Mukarrum says that Manji and others in this camp present a “break in the chain of scholarly rhetoric.” He explains that authoritative scholars “amass all this knowledge and this criticism and mindset...in an evolutionary process.” Progressive Islam, however, “comes as a result of a break in that chain in the sense that there is some friction in the system and instead of dealing with the friction and removing the sand
from the gears, they decide to build a new gear box.” Advocates of progressive Islam, he contends, lack the scholarly chain on which to build and add their critical contributions.

Conclusion

The nature of a narrative as a structure or a framework that holds different but related stories is illustrated by the variety of Muslims who invoke the pure/true Islam narrative. Some who use this narrative advocate an austere version of Islam but theirs is one among many. When this narrative is employed by young Western Muslims, it raises concerns about a de-cultured, demanding, and potentially dangerous Islamic neo-fundamentalism. Considering the competing visions of the different groups of Muslims who appeal to this narrative, however, one is right to ask if one Islam is the pure/true version or if there are multiple “islams”. But this question and the implication that anyone appealing to this narrative is a potentially dangerous neo-fundamentalist are based on a particular conceptualization of religion, identity, and citizenship. This conceptualization is entangled with secularism and its relationship with religion and the resultant division of the public and private spheres.

Different groups of Muslims from across the interpretive and political ideological landscape employ the same narrative but conceive of this pure/true Islam in line with their particular approach, objective or agenda; yet, they all appeal and ground their ideas and arguments in the Islamic discursive tradition. The participants in this project also ground their arguments in and authenticate their practices and thoughts through this tradition. Critics may deem this “tradition” as a nostalgic reconstruction of the past and “auratic” nod or even as an “invented tradition” summoned to authenticate wholly modern practices (Mahmood 2005). This is the critique hurled at Islamists for apologetic
and illusionary readings of concepts such as the nation-state and other contemporary socio-political and economic practices back into Islamic history, when in fact these practices have no pre-modern Islamic historical precedents. But while such critique is important, it is based on a particular understanding of tradition that is contrasted with modernity. And here, Asad’s conceptualization of tradition as discursive, which draws on MacIntyre and Foucault (Mahmood 2005), enables us to view tradition as a field of statements and practices whose structure of possibility is neither the individual, nor a collective body of overseers, but a form of relation between the past and present predicated upon a system of rules that demarcate both the limits and the possibility of what is sayable, doable, and recognizable as a comprehensible event in all its manifest forms (Mahmood 2005, 114-115).

In such an understanding, tradition is dynamic and is a field through which subjectivities and identities of believers and the tradition itself are (re)made. When religion in general and Islam in particular, is understood as a discursive tradition, the Qur’an, Hadith collections, and juristic expositions are not the exclusive purview of scholars of religion but are instead essential embodied practices, sensibilities, discourses and relationships within a field of social power differentials (Mahmood 2005). A modernity that dethrones the old is a narrative contradicted by the reality of contemporary lives that are at once constituted through the past and lived anew through “revivals, reworkings, and rediscoveries, including rediscoveries of buried sensory experiences” (Hirschkind 2001, 642).

Project participants’ notions of cultivating a critically assessed and spiritually and intellectually grounded evidence-based faith, their arguments with their parents about distinguishing cultural norms from religious teachings, their wearing hijab against family wishes, and their civic engagement that they consider an ethic and a practice of piety as well as a civic duty, all invoke Islamic past but with contemporary recalibration suited to their lived reality. The themes that characterize the pure/true Islam that project
collaborators envision is one that both transcends and embraces categories of gender, race, culture, and nationality but it is not de-cultured or de-territorialized. Instead, it challenges the hegemony of immigrant cultural norms to create a space for norms grounded in American society but calibrated by models in the discursive tradition. They say it is “non-judgmental” of others’ piety or behavior because “only God knows what’s in the heart”. As they are reminded time and again in lectures, appearances can be deceiving and thinking badly of others is incongruent with the ethics of piety. The pure/true Islam they want speaks authoritatively through canonical sources and competently through the present social reality and is, therefore, normative and relevant. It is where self-purification is a personal jihad and a pre-requisite to changing the condition of the collective.

Roy and others might see this focus on personal piety as a confirmation of the thesis that there is less focus on religion and more on religiosity. Though Roy concedes iman (the inner dimension of faith) has always been important in Islam, he argues it is the emphasis that contemporary Muslims place on it that is peculiar, Protestant-like, and represents the triumph of individual-based Westernization. Emphasizing religiosity (a focus on one’s relationship with God) rather than religion (with its social, intellectual and theological aspects) are the posited markers of this neo-fundamentalism. As participants in this project demonstrated, however, these two dimensions cannot be disentangled. Additionally, this focus on the inner aspect of faith is not new but rather is one drawn from the discursive tradition. It is an institutionalized pedagogical objective for religious education/training that involves “the cultivation of the body, the disciplining of the self, the formation of moral character, the inculcation of the virtues, and correct conduct—all to be embodied practices” (Shakry 1998, 153).
These embodied practices are an essential part of the discursive tradition which necessitates correct, apt, and effective performance (Asad 1986). Having merely a set of beliefs that have no outward manifestation differs from the case where these intellectual ideas and belief system cultivate “lives that are organized around gradually learning and perfecting correct moral and religious practices” (Asad 1996, n.p). The former is characteristic of religiosity in Europe and of the very definition of religion in general (a set of beliefs) and differs significantly from the case where proper practice is both necessary for and an objective of religious virtue (Asad 1996). The latter is what matters in Islam and to the young Muslims here. Their arguments and questions about what is and is not part of pure/true Islam, is not merely about doctrinal issues, the answers to which have no bearing on their lives and let them live in the same way as everyone. Rather, cultivating correctly performed practices changes how one lives. These are methods and rules to bring about a way of being.

Muslims in Western societies are told that they must abide by the separation of a private sphere where religious beliefs ought to stay and a public sphere where citizens are equal and differences of faith are transcended. But can cultivated embodied practices be left out of the public sphere? Or can their racialized bodies be unmarked and transcended? Because of Christianity’s historical trajectory in the West, rituals have come to be viewed as merely serving a social control function. Viewed as irrational and external (unlike the inner state of belief), religious rituals and practices are seen as symbolic political acts challenging liberal states (Asad 2012). However, when identity/self is understood not as a solitary internal project but as something (re)constructed in and through social interaction, then these external rituals and their embodied public expression may be seen not merely as something imposed by a
submission-demanding authority but as both expressions of and cultivations of subjectivities and ways of being.
Afifa Jabeen’s interview with Eddie Redzovic of The Deen Show on 04/16/2011

Chicago Muslim Network has a membership of 328 including non-Muslims as of June 20, 2012. Two of the goals of this network are to provide a safe place for single Muslims and to encourage American Muslim engagement in the larger society

This does not seem to be unique to Muslims as illustrated by a CNN 2007 poll which showed that 59 percent of Americans surveyed identified themselves as Christian first and American second. The number was smaller among Muslims in general where 45 percent identified religion first then nationality but among younger Muslim Americans the sentiment was 60 percent and nearly equal to that of Christians. “Poll: For Christians’ identity, it’s faith first, U.S. second”.

University of Chicago professor and terrorism expert, Robert Pape, examined a total of 315 terrorist acts worldwide from 1980 to 2003 and concluded that there is little connection between religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Instead, the common thread in all suicide terrorism was “a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland.” Religion, Pape concludes, is but a “tool” used by terrorist groups to enlist volunteers and funds (2005, 1-2). The religion and ethnic background of the victims matter little. In another study, Pape and Feldman argue that understanding the roots of terrorism is essential to America’s approach to combating it. The authors argued that the failure of the efforts against terrorism thus far is in large part due to “the intellectual climate of opinion” that holds on to the narrative that terrorism to rooted in Islamic fundamentalism (Pape and Feldman 2010, 328) Additionally, a group of researchers have refuted the claim that terrorists are inspired by Qur’anic verses referring to violence and conclude that “verses extremists cite from the Qur’an do not suggest an aggressive offensive foe seeking domination and conquest of unbelievers, as is commonly assumed”. Instead, the verses they cite “deal with themes of victimization, dishonor, and retribution” (Halverson, Furlow, and Corman 2012, 2). Additionally, a Gallup study found Muslims to be the least likely American religious group to see attacks on civilians by individuals, groups or governments as ever justified. The report shows that only 11% of Muslims as compared to 19% Mormon, 26% Protestant, 27% Catholic, and 23% atheist/agnostic/no religion say that it “sometimes” justified for individual or group to kill civilian. http://www.gallup.com/se/148805/Muslim-Americans-Faith-Freedom-Future.aspx accessed on 9/16/2012.

A descriptive approach captures the primary facts of a phenomenon while a normative approach is interested in what religion “ought to be” typically taking one’s own religion as standard against which all else is evaluated. A functional approach focuses on what religion does or tries to do and particularly whether or not it meets its adherents’ needs to face adversity, pain, death and so on. The essentialist approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the “essence that is common to all religions or is at their collective roots” what Mircea Eliade called “element of the sacred” and Rudolf Otto “the idea of the holy” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000, 5).

Creed is the “cognitive aspect”, code is guidelines for behavior, and cult consists in rituals relating adherents to the transcendent. The transcendent is defined broadly to include “spirits, gods, a personal God, and impersonal God, emptiness and so on” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000, 8). Conceptualizing transcendence in this way, Swidler and Mojzes argue, allows for inclusion of nontheistic faith traditions while excluding atheistic Marxism and secular humanism ideologies which some consider religions since they too provide to some a way to grasp the meaning of life.
In this definition, religion provides both the explanation of meaning and a *Way or How* to live in accordance with that meaning (Swidler and Mojzes 2000).

7 For example, in the established Church of England and in Germany there is “state supported system of church tax collection” (van Bijsterveld 2000, 990). This system differs from the French *république laïque* (secular republic). Here the state at once determines what is an official religion and limits its authority and activity then partners with it for education, charitable and spiritual services and hires religious officials of those sanctioned religions for public institutions such as military, prisons, and medical facilities (Chelini-Pont 2005; van Bijsterveld 2000). The State also provides substantial subsidies to private Christian and Jewish schools contracted by the government. In these schools, attended by 20 percent of French high school students, there are no restrictions on dress-code or religious texts and no concerns that this may not produce strong French identity. The state also provides separate accommodations in public schools for the dietary restrictions of its Muslim and Jewish students at a time when it also bans “ostentatious religious signs” pressing Muslim girls, in particular, to choose between an education and religious practice. Furthermore, the state pays the salaries of clergymen and owns and maintains churches built before 1905 (Asad 2006). Even in the USA, the state employs religious workers (chaplains) in the military and the correctional system. Congressional sessions typically open with prayers and, in 2005, some members of Congress created a “Congressional Prayer Caucus” see [http://forbes.house.gov/prayercaucus/](http://forbes.house.gov/prayercaucus/) accessed on 12/25/2012

8 In her book *Inside Gender Jihad* (2006), Amina Wadud, a Blackamerican Muslim and Islamic Studies professor details the feminist Muslim movement in which she is a significant protagonist. Wadud had grabbed international headlines and was a subject of great controversy among Muslims when in 2005 she became the first female to lead mixed Friday communal prayers. The activists, intellectuals, and scholars engaged in this gender jihad appeal to the egalitarian message of the Qur’an that, they argue, liberated women long ago but which has been eclipsed by the accumulated tradition of patriarchal interpretations and practices.

9 Some adopted Robert Redfield’s method of studying world religions by using a two tier system of orthodoxy (Great tradition) and heterodoxy (little tradition). In this model, Great tradition is followed by the urban elites residing at the center of the religio-cultural life of society. Also called textual or scriptural or high tradition, this orthodoxy is (re)produced institutionally (for example, in schools and places of worship) and assiduously inculcated in the next generation. Little tradition, on the other hand, is variously referred to as local or low tradition or popular religion, and is practiced presumably by the “unreflective” masses in a taken for granted unexamined fashion. The two traditions are interconnected and recursively influence each other (Lukens-Bull 1999).

10 The title *Islam Obscured* is itself a reply to Geertz’s *Islam Observed* which he based on his study in Indonesia. Varisco argues that Geertz’s particular definition of culture as “culture minus the social” (2005, 40) and religion as “hermeneutic in need of grounding in the nitty-gritty of daily life” (2005, 45) obscured more than they revealed.

11 On regular basis, during Friday sermons and study circles, Muslim worshipers are reminded of the numerous Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions that convey the message articulated in this one:

Say: “And whatever [wrong] any human being commits rests upon himself alone; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden. And, in time, unto your Sustainer you all must return: and then He will make you [truly] understand all that on which you were wont to differ” (Qur’an 6:163–164).

12 Modern day purity discourse is usually traced back to the late 18th century and the political and social turmoil that swept Muslim lands starting with the fall of Egypt to the French and
subsequently to the British. The fall of Egypt was followed by the fall of India under British control, the decline of the Ottomans and Persians. The imperial civilizing mission of the colonizers aimed to extract Egyptians and other Muslim societies in general from “backwardness” attributed to their religion. Local social elites enamored by the advancement of the Europe became the agents of change in Egypt and women and their bodies were the battle ground even though Western women did not enjoy more rights in Europe. Qasim Amin, an upper-middle class French educated Egyptian lawyer and thinker, wrote a book titled Liberation of Women the main thesis of which was that the degree to which Muslim societies can be deemed advanced or backward is indexed by the degree to which they shed native norms and practices represented by the veil and emulate Western societies (Ahmed 2011). He fused European views on the inferiority and backwardness of Islam presumably represented by the status and attire of women and the already underway debates about the need for the Arab societies to adopt and catch up the scientific, military and technical advancement in the West.

ʿAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) called for strict adherence to the example of the Prophet and the two subsequent generations and bypassed the centuries of scholarly heritage. He held the Ottoman Empire responsible for perceived cultural corruption and directed his polemics against it and against those engaged in purportedly heretical practices and norms (Abou El Fadl 2005). He attributed much of the corruption to the influences from Persia, Turkey and Greece. He was a rather minor figure who was chased out of his hometown when he admonished the town’s people to return to the “true Islam” and rid the religion of what he saw as accumulated corruptions such as saint veneration, mysticism and Shi’ism (Abou El Fadl 2005). ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s hostility extended to non-Muslims whom, he argued, one should neither emulate in habits of thought, dress or behavior nor befriend or aide. While ʿAbd al-Wahhab rejected much of the Muslim intellectual tradition, he selectively appropriated one particular scholar, 14th century Ibn Taymiyya and even then ignored that which did not advance his ideas (Abou El Fadl 2005). Though he appealed to the discursive tradition couching his rhetoric in religious terms, his discourse was foremost ethnocentric Arab nationalist that deemed everything that did not emerge from the Arabian Peninsula as a corrupt innovation (Abou El Fadl 2005). He was severely criticized by Muslim scholars far and near, including his brother. These scholars argued that his supposed precedent was not only unsubstantiated, but it flies in the face of the ethical percepts of the Qur’an and Prophet. His ideas could have been a passing trend were it not for his political pact with the Al-Saud family. The pact gave ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s ideology an official sanction that allowed its resurrection from obscurity in the early 20th century when the founder of modern day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adopted Wahhabi ideology. Saudi petrodollars then spread it across the Muslim world though not as Wahhabism but as the coopted more credible trend of Salafism (Abou El Fadl 2005).

Salafism is derived from the term salaf that means predecessors and applies to the Prophet, his companions, and the two successive generations. Following the example of the rightly guided salaf is foundational to Muslim understanding and practice. This gives “being salafi” both an appeal and a flexible meaning. The Modernist reformers conceptualized Salafism as the necessity for Muslims to engage the original canonical texts and reinterpret them in the context of contemporary challenges and not blindly adhering to interpretations of the subsequent generation of Muslims that came after the salaf (Abou El Fadl 2005, Ramadan 2004). Originally, Salafism and Wahhabism shared deference to this Salaf period, but they widely diverged beyond that since the founders of the former were modernist reformers and the founder of latter was advocating for a particular notion of Arab culture. However, Wahhabis began to claim the term Salafi for themselves and since the 1970s have conflated Wahhabism with Salafism such that they now have near exclusive claim to Salafism (Abou El Fadl 2005).

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was founded on the idea that reforming society starts with reforming individuals through religious and character education that becomes publicly visible through modes of dress and decorum and through and civic engagement. It attracted following from across Egyptian society drawing its leadership from the educated professional class. MB also
sought to reform society through political engagement but after its founder was assassinated in 1949 and it was prohibited by successive Egyptian regimes, its exiled members spread around the world. In the West, they founded many organizations and institutions.

They privilege aspects of a reconstructed 7th century Arabia customs. These customs are imagined and romanticized as more authentic since they were practices by the first two generation of Muslims. Members of this trend demonstrate their reverence in dress and some mannerisms. They ignore art/aesthetic and wish to bypass centuries of Muslim intellectual history, but they are nevertheless not “de-cultured”. After all they still speak their native languages, enjoy its food and many of its traditions, and they watch religious shows and listen to “Islamic” songs and engage science and technology.

The narrative of purification and challenging the inherited cultural practices and tradition is also central to Blackamericans’ journey to Islam. For example, the Nation of Islam’s strict physical, esthetic, dietary, and conduct discipline was the necessary tool to purify the interior and exterior of Black men and women from indignity and contamination. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of NOI, found Islamic rituals to be the method by which this purification could be achieved. In a 1957 article, he reminded his followers of the rules of purity set by Islam which he argued “dignifies the black man. It gives him the desire to be clean, internally and externally. . . . It heals both the physical and spiritual by teaching what to eat, when to eat, and what to think, and how to act” (Curtis 2002, 172).

“We narrate unto you (Muhammad) the best of narratives in that We have inspired in you this Qur’an, though aforetime you were of the heedless” (Qur’an 12:3) translated by Picktall accessed at http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/quran/verses/012-qmt.php on 12/31/2012

For example, Volume I of *Fiqh Us-Sunnah* (1985) is a compilation by As-Sayyid Sabiq of the four Sunni schools jurisprudence on purification, prayers and fasting showing places of scholarly consensus and divergence. The book is translated into English by Muhammad Saeed Dabas and Jamal al-Din M. Zarabozo and published by American Trust Publications, a division of the North American Islamic Trust in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.

One such book *Matharat al-Qulub* (Purification of the Hearts) has been popularized among English speaking Muslims by the translation by Muslim American scholar Hamza Yusuf (2004) who also made it to a lecture series and CD collection.

Hadith refers to narrations of what prophet Muhammad said, did, or approved of.

see Sahih Al-Bukhari 2.158 (walking between the hills of Safa and Marwa during Hajj), 3.221 (fasting Ashur’a), and 3.266 (engaging in market activities during Hajj) (M. M. Khan 1987).

23 Sahih Al Bukhari hadith number 4.572

Today’s Tea Party movement in the United States, for example, harkens back to the Boston Tea Party that sparked the American Revolution in protest of British rule. The current Tea Party came about in the midst of global economic crisis, American’s changing demographics and after the election of the first Black president whom the movement considers to be a socialist and a crypto-Muslim.

25 *Revival of the Religious Sciences* is divided into four parts each further subdivided into ten chapters. Because of this book and other critically important works, Al-Ghazali holds a high station among Muslim scholars and masses and is referred to as *hujjat al-islam* (the proof of Islam).
As noted earlier, the path to violence has politics at its foundation rather than piety and conservatism but there is a puritanical religious ideology and identity to which violent groups – even secular ones – appeal.

He identifies five levels of identity that he notes are not mutually exclusive but are in tension among Muslims of foreign descent in Europe. The levels are, an “original, well-bonded solidarity group” that is based on original hometown, an ethnic national identity based on culture and language, a “neo-ethnic” Muslim identity regardless of practice, a Muslim identity based on religion with no reference to ethnicity or culture, and an identity based on Western enculturation that gives rise to urban youth subculture (Roy 2004, 117).

In 1983, a husband and wife team frustrated by the lack of suitable education material for their own children established the IQRA International Education Foundation in Chicago to meet this need. IQRA’s Islamic studies curriculum consists of four strands: Qur’anic Studies, Sirah and Hadith (narrations about the prophet’s life, actions and statements), Aqidah, Fiqh and Akhlaq (creed, juristic thought, and ethics), and Islamic social studies (stories of prophets, Islamic history, and geography). IQRA’s publications are now used in many English speaking Muslim communities globally.  source www.iqrafoundation.com accessed 06/15/2012

Shia like Sunni Muslims pray the required five prayers but the Shia pray three times, combining the noon with afternoon prayers and the sunset with night prayers. Sunni Muslims combine these prayers mainly during travel or other difficult circumstances.

Religious conservatism does not translate to political conservatism. While the public image of Muslims is one of being very religious and socially conservative, they are the least likely after Jews to describe themselves as conservative and most likely after Jews to see themselves as liberal. The younger they are, the less likely they see themselves as conservative. The 2009 Gallup Muslim report showed that the young Muslim Americans surveyed were the least likely religious group to say they are politically conservative (20 percent) compared Protestants (42 percent), Catholics (29 percent), Jews (22 percent), and the general U.S. population (30 percent). The majority (39 percent) of young Muslim Americans said they were moderate and a significant number (28 percent) said they were liberal. This is compared to 35 percent and 19 percent respectively among Protestants. http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/153572/REPORT-Muslim-Americans-National-Portrait.aspx accessed on 6/30/2012

Asad (1993), for example, noted that universalizing the particularly of Western historical trajectory is problematic and betrays an ideological underpinning. There are different social structures, tastes, experiences, fields and attitudes that may (or not) be necessarily interconnected but which have come to be assumed to all be related just because they happened to be in the historical model of Europe.

For example, the Prophet is reproached in the Qur’an for being distracted from a poor blind man who came to learn more about his new faith and for attending to noblemen whose conversion would have provided political support for the nascent faith community. Furthermore, when deliberating community affairs, the Prophet’s companions always asked him if his position on a given matter was a revelation or his personal opinion. For example, during a battle strategy discussion, the companions asked the Prophet if the strategy he proposed was a revelation or his personal opinion because if it was the latter, they too had their ideas. He told them it was his opinion so a better alternative was proposed by a companion and it was accepted by the Prophet and community (Ramadan 2007).

The ethics of disagreement that guided these early scholars was captured by the statement of Al-Shafī‘ī, a 9th century scholar and the founder of one of the four Sunni juristic schools. He said “our opinion is correct with the possibility of being wrong and your opinion is wrong with the possibility of being correct.”

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In 2004 and in light of violence and political turmoil and an increase in groups engaging in takfir (declaring other Muslims as non-Muslims) a group consisting of the 200 most renowned Muslim scholars from 50 countries convened in Jordan and agreed on a then well publicized Amman message. Among other things, the message recognized eight juristic schools (Madhhab): the four Sunni schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i and Hanbali), two Shi‘i (Ja‘fari and Zaydi), an Ibadi school, and a Thahiri school. [http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=74 accessed on 9/25/2012]


This is not challenging authority but is an integral aspect of tradition where “[r]eason and argument are necessarily involved in traditional practice whenever people have to be taught about the point and proper performance of that practice, and whenever the teaching meets with doubt, indifference, or lack of understanding” (Asad 1986, 16).

Muslim Refusenik is how Manji describes herself. She says, “[t]hat doesn’t mean I refuse to be a Muslim; it simply means I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah” (2003,3).

Social scientists and other analysts do not think of the non-Western world and specifically of the “Muslim world” in the same way as the West. If they did, they might see how these Islamic movements are efforts to both render the Islamic tradition relevant to Muslim contemporary realities and as “attempts at formulating encounters with Western as well as Islamic history” (Asad 1996). Islamic reform and revival movements have been influenced by the post-Reformation Christianity and by the secular world it gave birth to. This is evident in these movements’ tendency to draw on particular modes of rationality from Western discourses and in their postures of measuring Islam, its laws and practices with a Western yardstick and showing it measures as well if not better. Grounded in modern reality, these movements use modern knowledge, technologies and techniques but they are also engaging an Islamic civilizational history and discursive tradition rich with debates and disagreements and a long established indigenous forms of reform, renewal and revival (Asad 1996).

by this he means “individual reappropriation of religion, a return to the inner self and a direct, unmediated connection to religion. The insistence on faith stresses the individual dimension of Islam in a non-Muslim environment. Faith is not supported by the social authority of religion” (Roy 2004, 185).
CHAPTER 6
THE “ISLAMIZATION OF AMERICA”?

Muslims of different political ideology and interpretive trends invoke the narrative of true/pure Islam to ground their ideas and actions in the Islamic tradition and to argue against all those whom they think defile that tradition. But there is another unlikely group that invokes the narrative of true/pure Islam and references the Islamic tradition through its own ideological framework. This group, or perhaps more fittingly this movement, consists of an alliance of neo-conservatives, right wing conservatives, Tea Party leaders and members, some political and religious leaders, and some new atheist icons, along with some feminists and (former) Muslims validators. Pamela Geller, one of the leading forces in this movement, was asked on a CNN program if she agreed with the statement that “the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 were practicing a perverted form of Islam, and that is not what is going to be practiced at this mosque”. She said “I will say that the Muslim terrorists were practicing pure Islam, original Islam” (Kaye 2010 emphasis added). The common thread to the discourse of this movement is that true Islam is a threat not only to the security of America but also to the very foundation of Western civilization. Backwardness, violent extremism, misogyny, intolerance of the other (religious or ethnic or otherwise) and opposition to freedom of thought and expression are not viewed as aberrant ideas of a fringe Muslim group but are purportedly rooted in the Islamic tradition. Muslims who argue otherwise are either engaged in Tuqia/Taqiyya (an allegedly Islamically-sanctioned lying), or they are reforming Islam to rid it of these dangerous and backward ideas.

In this chapter, I will explore how this strand in the pure/true Islam discourse has been used in the construction of a new narrative that warns of the potential “Islamization of America.” This latter narrative has become a strong instrument in the process of
Muslim racialization. This racialization extends to those who “look Muslim,” including Christian Arabs and South Asians of other faiths, especially those Sikh men who wear turbans as part of their religious tradition. This racialization process and its associated discourses have significant consequences for how Muslim Americans, and particularly their younger generations, see themselves, how they practice their faith, and how they engage their religious community and society. To situate the perspectives and responses of these younger Muslims to this narrative and to the movement that draws on it, it is first necessary to describe the movement and the narrative it weaves. “Stop the Islamization of America” is both the name of an organization and a powerful narrative that draws on old and new images and tropes.

While some argue that this is a legitimate critique of Muslims, critics of this narrative have called it racist and more commonly referred to it as “Islamophobia”. I will sketch a brief genealogy of this concept and how Islamophobia and legitimate debate and critique differ. I will also elaborate at some length on the racialization process in America by and through which Othering and belonging to the nation are defined and negotiated. I will then explore the perspectives of younger Muslim Americans as offered by project collaborators and as obtained from my fieldwork on the ground and online. I will give examples of the more assertive posture of younger Muslims and of converts as they at once respond to this narrative, critique their community, and assert their belonging.

“How Muslim Bashing Got Cool!”

Two noteworthy events occurred during the third week of June 2012. The chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, New York Republican
congressman Peter King, completed the fifth of a series of congressional hearings on radicalization within the American Muslim community. The first of these hearings, which Rep. King had called, began in March of 2011 under the title “The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and that Community’s Response.” The June hearing explored how the Muslim community was responding to radicalization. The three Muslim witnesses assessing this response were Dr. Zuhdi Jasser (a second generation Arizonan of Syrian descent), Asra Nomani (a 1.5 generation of Indian background journalist/author), and Dr. Qanta Ahmed (a British-Indian physician and author now living in New York). The three witnesses share a view that Islamism is rampant in the community from the leadership to the masses and that this ideology is the path to radicalization.

When, in early 2012, an Associated Press report revealed that the New York City Police Department (NYPD) was engaged in extensive surveillance of Muslim and Arab businesses, student groups and mosques, there was an intense outcry from Muslims, interfaith and civil liberties groups. These three witnesses, however, along with Rep. King were among the two dozen people demonstrating in support of the NYPD’s surveillance of the community. In their books and public engagements, Jasser and Nomani appear to be engaged in an existential battle against Islamist forces. Jasser wrote A Battle for the Soul of Islam: An American Muslim Patriot’s Fight to Save His Faith and Nomani wrote Standing Alone: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam. Needless to say, Muslim leaders and activists argue that these three are not credible witnesses because of their peripheral and polemical relationship with the community and their collaboration with known Islamophobes. To the general public, however, they are credible witnesses who speak to the fear of homegrown terrorism.
The second event in June involved Pamela Geller whose lecture on “Islamic Jew-Hatred: The Root Cause of the Failure to Achieve Peace” sponsored by the Los Angeles chapter of the Zionist Organization of America was canceled at the behest of the Southern California Interfaith Coalition (composed of Jews, Muslims, and Christians). Geller and her organization, “Stop the Islamization of America”, are listed by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as an anti-Muslim hate group. Profiling Geller, SPLC notes that Geller is “relentlessly shrill and coarse in her broad-brush denunciations of Islam and makes preposterous claims, such as that President Obama is the ‘love child’ of Malcolm X.” She has made common cause with racists in Europe and South Africa and her uncritical support of Israel has generated scathing criticism from liberal Jews3. This assessment notwithstanding, Geller, as I will show below, is a critical contributor to this narrative and a formidable shaper of public opinion in America on Islam and Muslims.

These two incidents represent two strands – state and public – of a discourse on a “Muslim problem” in America that has perilous policy and perceptional consequences. As noted earlier, public discourse shapes not only how one is seen and thought of by others but also profoundly shapes how one sees oneself and one’s community and fellow citizens. Public discourse, therefore, is critically important for one’s sense of both being and belonging. Participants in this project and Muslim Americans in general are acutely aware of the dominant narrative that frames them as a dangerous and degenerate Other. For example, less than 24 percent of those responding to the question “In your opinion, how do non-Muslim Americans view Muslim Americans?” thought they were seen as “same as any other American.” The rest thought Muslims were seen as outsiders and viewed with mistrust and suspicion.
This view is not limited to the children of immigrants. Eighty percent of the descendants of converts thought the same. Jack, a twenty-three year old Blackamerican from Chicagoland, says that fellow Americans see Muslims as “outsiders because they never knew we were in America until 9/11. We were basically sleeper Muslims who lived in America, but no one knew we were Muslim. So when people found out we were Muslim they associated 9/11 attacks with us.” A thirty year old Blackamerican woman from the Phoenix-valley says “most people treat me with respect as long as I reciprocate or initiate a courteous behavior; however, they do not believe I am indigenous to the United States. They view the scarf as a cultural identity instead of a religious identity and usually keep inquiring about my cultural background as if I’m not telling the entire truth.” White privilege does not shield converts to Islam and their children from becoming racialized and minoritized as Muslims. Lisa, a Whiteamerican twenty-six year old woman from Phoenix-valley reflects this new positionality. She says, “they [non-Muslim Americans] don’t really know what to think of us. We’re like the ‘other’ that some non-Muslims want to try and understand, but really don’t. I don’t think we are viewed as any other American to them. We are basically foreign to them no matter where we are from.” This assessment, however, is tempered by a widely held belief among Muslim Americans, no matter their generation or ethnic background, that fellow citizens who know Muslims are less likely to hold negative views. Muslims are, therefore, responsible for making themselves known to other Americans.

How Muslims think other Americans see them has also affected how they see themselves. Seventy-seven percent of participants, many of whom were young children in 2001, see or sense a change after 9/11 in how Muslims see themselves. Sirad, a thirty-five year old of woman mixed heritage (a Somali father and a Whiteamerican mother) sees this change as: “we are a lot more afraid. The ‘war on terror’ has made Muslims feel
insecure in their status here in America. I also feel the biggest thing we have to do with
the non-Muslim community is assure them that we are not radical fundamentalists and
distance ourselves from terror and extreme organizations.” Feeling the sting of an
examining gaze, hateful words and denigrating epithets; or the alienation of being
singled out for profiling and discrimination; or their fear for their safety and civil rights¹,
has led some Muslims to conceal their religion. For many more, however, this situation
prompted greater assertiveness in reclaiming their belonging both to America and Islam.
Those of immigrant background are, as put by a survey participant, now more “willing to
accept that they are American and [that they] should be more invested in the American
society.” These investments are civic, social, political and financial. Converts and their
children are also becoming more assertive in expending their cultural capital both within
a society that defines Islam as foreign and within a Muslim community that for long saw
the American-ness of converts as “cultural baggage” and a liability to be overcome by
adopting a “Muslim culture”. This new assertiveness is seen as a shared responsibility, as
articulated by thirty year old Mustafa, a male Chicagolander of Indian background:

I think for too long we felt that we just had to live in this country and practice our
faith freely and that was it. However, I think what many Muslims learned is that
unless we are actively engaging non-Muslims, having the difficult conversations
(not just talking about the Cubs game and the latest election) but having real
conversations, there is a risk that the void in real knowledge of Islam can be filled
by anti-Muslim opportunists or simply the common tendency towards irrational
stereotyping that we all possess to some degree or another but must actively work
against through education and open discussion. So I think we see ourselves as
having a greater responsibility than before.

The anti-Muslim opportunists of whom Mustafa speaks now have more effective
and far reaching strategies to engrain the notion of the “Muslim problem” in American
popular imagination. In what follows, I will give a detailed example of the life cycle of
this narrative and its main storytellers pointing out that it is not a new phenomenon but
one with both transatlantic links and deep American roots. I will examine the power of
the narrative in mobilizing masses, motivating politicians and marginalizing as well as mobilizing Muslims. Beyond rhetoric, this narrative has serious consequence for identity, liberty and life of the individual, the community and the nation. I will explore how Muslims, and particularly second generation Muslims, are responding to or engaging this narrative.

From the Margins to Mainstream

The rhetoric that was prevalent early on in radio talk shows has, in the years since 2001, crossed to mainstream entertainment shows. Jack Shaheen details how “TV producers have saturated viewers with Arab blackguards; they prowl law enforcement, intelligence agency and courtroom dramas.”5 It was, however, in 2010 when the rhetoric became national headlines and saturated public discourse. I was doing my fieldwork in Chicago in the summer of 2010 when the hot humid weather, steaming with an already charged public atmosphere, became thick with fear and boiled over with controversies surrounding a proposal to build a Muslim cultural center in Lower Manhattan, the winner of Miss USA beauty contest, and a Florida preacher’s threat to burn the Qur’an. The cultural center project was initially called The Cordoba House, in a nod to Muslim Spain’s legacy of multi-cultural and multi-religious tolerance. In an attempt at damage control, it was later renamed the Park51 Project, after it was dubbed by Gellner and a cadre of conservative activists as the “victory mosque on Ground Zero.” For more than two decades, Muslims have worshiped in lower Manhattan and they have outgrown their small mosque near this proposed site, two blocks away from site of World Trade Center. So when an old factory building in the area became available, a developer from the community teamed up with the imam to plan a cultural center with a mosque.
The project was proposed by “moderate Muslims” who were considered the “good” Muslims in the “Good Muslim-Bad Muslim” narrative. Sharif el-Gamal, the developer, is a second generation Muslim New Yorker of an Egyptian father and a Polish Catholic mother. El-Gamal did not grow up in a religious household but says that the “seeds of faith” were firmly planted in him and sprouted after 9/11 as he began to attend the mosque. He partnered with imam Faisal Abdul Rauf, a Sufi imam, author of What’s Right in Islam Is What’s Right in America, and founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA). Rauf’s ASMA organization, according to its website, is “the first Muslim organization committed to bringing American Muslims and non-Muslims together through programs in academia, policy, current affairs, and culture”. It is working to “[r]e-connect the Muslim World and the West for interfaith work.” The imam’s writings and work (interfaith, conflict resolution, public lectures) brought him to the attention of the State Department. The department saw in him a good representative of the “integration” of Muslims in American society and tapped him to join its public diplomacy efforts in the Muslim majority countries. Ironically, when the controversy about the proposed center broke out, he was scheduled for a State Department trip to the Persian Gulf Arab states to speak on religious diversity and tolerance in the United States. He was to “brin[g] a moderate perspective to foreign audiences on what it’s like to be a practicing Muslim in the United States”, according to a State Department official. Daisy Khan, the imam’s wife and cofounder of ASMA, is a member of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum advisory team. Those associated with the project, therefore, were non-controversial “good” Muslims.

The imam and the developer consulted with and modeled their proposed project after the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in New York. The new Muslim cultural center would house a swimming pool, a 9/11 memorial, a culinary school, an auditorium and an
exhibit; it would also offer educational, art/culture, and interfaith activities. The prayer space, allocated to accommodate the growing Muslim population in the area, would be in the basement floor. The architectural rendering of the project shows a 13-story building with a honeycomb façade. No dome, no minarets. So nothing would have identified the building from the outside as a mosque, which led an Associated Press reporter to note that the project building looks “modern and secular.” If this was a monument for anything, perhaps it would be one for progressive Islam complete with all the liberal markers demanded of a reformed Islam: a Sufi “moderate imam” and his wife who does not wear *hijab*, a secular developer, an interfaith partnership, gender equality, and an appreciation of “high culture.” The project received the approval of the Community Board and the support of the majority of Lower Manhattan residents. In early December of 2009, a New York Times’ article titled “Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero” positively framed the project. The article quoted the imam explaining that the location, where a piece of the 9/11 wreckage landed, was chosen specifically because his group “wanted to push back against the extremists” and to send “the opposite statement to what happened on 9/11.” The article noted that Mayor Bloomberg had no objection; it cited a Rabbi and the FBI as praising the imam and the mother of a 9/11 victim calling the project a “noble effort.” It also reported that the Jewish Community Center director applauded the effort as sharing JCC’s vision. A Few days later, Ms. Khan, the imam’s wife, was interviewed by Laura Ingraham, the host of “The O’Reilly Factor” on Fox News. Ingraham liked what Ms. Khan’s group was doing and thought no one would have a problem with the project, which she referred to as the “Ground zero mosque.” With this, the project was featured prominently in a leading newspaper and on Fox News, but it did not raise any concerns and there was nothing written about it for the next five
months. So what happened? How did a project so positively framed come to be the issue of the summer of 2010?

The day the Associated Press reported that the Community Board committee officially approved the project, the New York Post (henceforth the Post) ran an article titled “Panel Approves ‘WTC’ Mosque”\(^3\). On the same day, Pamela Geller posted on her blog “Monster Mosque Pushes Ahead in the Shadow of World Trade Center Islamic Death and Destruction”\(^4\). She saw this as nothing more than another example of the “territorial nature of Islam.” She summoned a history of Muslims converting the Temple in Jerusalem and the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Constantinople to mosques to prove her assertion of Islam’s “domination and expansionism”. Geller along with Robert Spencer—a well-known critic of Muslims and Islam and founder of Jihad Watch—had co-founded the “Stop the Islamization of America” (SIOA) organization in early 2010 at the behest of and in partnership with the Danish founders of “Stop the Islamization of Europe”. Two days after her blog, Geller called for SIOA’s first organized demonstration on the 29\(^{th}\) of the May to protest the “9/11 monster mosque” and to commemorate another time of a “Muslim siege”, the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans on May 29, 1453\(^5\).

This role catapulted Geller into the blogosphere and public discourse, as the machinery of a network that the Center for American Progress (CAP) dubbed Fear Inc. kicked into high gear. A few days after Geller’s piece, the Post’s Peyser wrote an article titled “Mosque Madness at Ground Zero” that opened with “A mosque rises over Ground Zero. And fed-up New Yorkers are crying, No!”\(^6\). She added that the opening day was planned to coincide with the 10\(^{th}\) anniversary of 9/11, though project planners never gave a date. She used Geller’s “monster mosque” phrase, attributing it to an unnamed “critic”. She informed her readers of a demonstration rally against the mosque planned “for June 6, D-Day” by “the human-rights group Stop Islamization of America”. Peyser then
quoted Geller, the director of this “human-right group”. In this article, Peyser’s framing of the issue was quite significant. She described New Yorkers as fed-up with Muslims and added how she and a “chorus of critics” all “feel as if they’ve received a swift kick in the teeth,” and as betrayed by the committee that so “stupidly” approved the project. She invoked Pearl Harbor and Auschwitz by quoting a committee member who likened the alleged insensitivity of Muslims to that of Japanese or Germans wishing to build at these historical sites of tragedy. The claim that the opening date was to coincide with the significant anniversary of 9/11, “the day a hole was punched in the city’s heart”, provided the climax to this very emotive and powerful story that summoned the worst tragedies in Americans’ collective memory. In doing so, Peyser portrays Geller and SIOA as the premier and only “human rights” group standing up to defend America.

With this piece Peyser wove a story that set up the terms of the debate and the frame of a narrative: the expansionist Muslims are coming to take over! Months earlier, both the New York Times and Fox News had featured the project in a neutral or even positive tone and nothing happened. But within days of Peyser and Geller’s portrayals, their phrases and arguments were repeated by conservative activists, politicians and pundits. The issue spread throughout media outlets (visual, print, and online) and the debates and demonstrations for and against the project saturated the public sphere. Rudy Giuliani, New York City’s former Mayor, called the project a “desecration.” This notion that Muslim presence near the sacred ground would be a desecration quickly became part of the narrative, even as some people pointed out that the nearby strip clubs and bars desecrate the hollowed grounds but no one rallied to remove them. President Obama weighed in during the White House Ramadan dinner to affirm Muslim belonging and right to build anywhere that the law allowed them. After being criticized and framed as supporting this proposed “desecration”, he later affirmed the legality and right to
build but questioned the wisdom of doing so. In a Twitter message, former vice-
atorial candidate, Sarah Palin called on “peaceful Muslims” to “pls refudiate (sic)”
the project. Describing them as “radical Islamists” on Fox News, former Speaker of the
House of Representatives Newt Gingrich likened the project team to Nazis trying to “put
up a sign next to the Holocaust museum in Washington”. 

This forceful opposition was met by strong support from New York Mayor
Bloomberg, civil liberties and interfaith groups, and ordinary citizens. However, their
support and the calls for reasonable debate had difficulty rising above the den of
detractors. A committed chorus of detractors stayed on message repeating the same
phrases and arguments and solidifying the narrative in the minds of the general public
by stirring their passions. They were very effective. Within three months, a Time
Magazine poll showed 61 percent of Americans opposed the project, 70 percent thought
building the center would be an insult to 9/11 victims, 43 percent had unfavorable views
of Muslims, and 46 percent saw Islam, more than other religions, to “encourage violence
against nonbelievers.”

This sentiment has resulted not only in the opposition of this
particular project but in the opposition to mosques in three Tennessee towns, New
York’s Staten Island, Illinois and Wisconsin.

The discourse became toxic and at time ridiculous, as exemplified by the reaction
to a young Lebanese American Muslim woman’s winning of the 2010 Miss America
pageant. It did not matter that she opposed the Park51 project or that Geller approved of
her for “going against everything Muslims want a woman to be,” because other right-
wing bloggers saw the young woman as a plant from Lebanon’s Hezbollah Islamist party
which purportedly “rigged” the contest so a “Muslima [Muslim female] would win”. Wajahat Ali, a second generation Muslim playwright and blogger, satirized the
degradation of the public discourse in a post he titled “How Miss USA Will Push the
Secret Muslim Agenda.” Paradoxically, the charged debate about the alleged threat from Muslims occurred just few months after a significant study by Stanford and Duke Universities made CNN headlines as “Study: Threat of Muslim-American terrorism in U.S. exaggerated.”

The drama of the Park51 project and of a Qur’an burning threat by a Florida preacher in the summer of 2010 was followed in the winter of 2011-12 by a controversy surrounding The Learning Channel’s (TLC) reality show “All American Muslims”, which followed the lives of five Muslim families in Dearborn Michigan. The normalcy of their lives contradicted expected images of fanaticism and anti-Americanism, and that troubled the born-again founder of the Florida-based Family Association (FFA). He saw it as “propaganda” that hides the “the Islamic agenda’s clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values”. He launched an email campaign to petition sponsors to pull out of advertising during the show and a few succumbed to pressures.

There was extensive media coverage of the controversy. The questions that present themselves are: was the backlash on the Park-51 project due to the “sensitivities” related to Ground Zero? Are the incidents mentioned here isolated tempests in a tea cup? Or is this Islamophobia, a phenomenon that is now becoming more bold and public?

Islamophobia: A Myth or a New Reality?

The negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in Western discourse and imagination dates back centuries, to the Crusades and colonialism, but the term Islamophobia has only gained currency in the post-9/11 environment. It has no agreed-upon definition and it is often used interchangeably with anti-Muslim racism, anti-Muslim prejudice, and intolerance of Muslims. The genealogy of the term Islamophobia
is uncertain, but it first appears 1961 in its French form *Islamophobie* in a critique of the orientalist approach to Islamic texts written by a French painter and convert to Islam, Alphonse Etienne Dinet. As if in a reply, the first English form appeared in 1976 by an Egyptian Dominican Islamicist, Georges Chahati Anawati, regarding his concern that a non-Muslim scholar of Islam is always at risk of being accused of Islamophobia by Muslims (Vakil 2008).

Edward Said used the term in *Orientalism Reconsidered* (1985), arguing that Islamophobia and anti-Semitism originate from the same sources, and in 1991 British Muslim sociologist, Tariq Mahmood, used the term in a book review (Richardson 2011). Through the early 1990s, British Muslims used “Islamophobia” to refer to prejudices they encountered. The concept entered public and policy parlance in a 1997 Runnymede Report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. The report acknowledged that Islamophobia as a term is “not ideal”, but that like xenophobia it could be a shorthand that refers to “dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Runnymede Trust 1997, 1). While recognizing the centuries-long history of this dislike or hate, the commission acknowledged a new, dangerous, and rising level of such sentiment and was concerned about its economic, social and public life consequences for Muslims. There was, the commission concluded, “a new reality which needs naming” (Runnymede Report 1997, 4). The report introduced both the concept and the phenomenon it was naming to public discourse. As importantly, it recognized and titled its report that “Islamophobia [is] a challenge for us all”. It is a challenge in that it threatens all citizens in pluralistic societies. Consequently, the report proposed concrete steps necessary to combat Islamophobia, including a public policy that moves towards an “ideal society” through “certain rules of engagement” for the media that protect free speech but combat bigotry, distortion and hate speech.
The report determined that the legal term of “racial violence” was no longer sufficient and needed to be expanded to “religious and racial violence”; additionally, inclusionary policies were needed for education and the culture at large. The “new reality” that the Runnymede commission found necessary to name only intensified after 9/11 and subsequent terrorist acts committed by violent Muslim extremists. Since then, there has been a significant backlash, including physical or verbal attacks and political or economic marginalization, against Muslim or Muslim-looking individuals, businesses and community institutions.28

The terrorist acts do instill fear in people; therefore, one could argue that Islamophobia is not hatred of Muslims but a real and justified fear of them, and that some people may voice or act on these fears. Researchers are attempting to differentiate such genuine anxiety and fear from Islamophobia. A Center for American Progress (CAP) report, titled Fear Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America (W. Ali et al. 2011), examined what it calls the “Islamophobia echo chamber.” It defined Islamophobia as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from America’s social, political, and civic life” (W. Ali et al. 2011, 9). The authors detailed a network of “experts” and academics, think tanks and grassroots groups, the funders who finance them, and the media outlets that disseminate their output. The report identified the top seven funding agencies that together gave nearly $43 million to these think tanks, including Middle East Forum, Clarion Fund, and the Investigative Project on Terrorism. These funds provide the lifeline for a group of “experts” on all things related to Islam, including Daniel Pipes at the Middle East Forum and Robert Spencer of Jihad Watch and Stop Islamization of America. Pipes is sought out by the media and by government officials. He was
appointed by then President Bush to the board of the U.S. Institute of Peace against fierce criticism from academic and civic groups. Pipes created the website Campus-watch.org for students to report professors of Middle East and Islamic Studies and those critical of Israel or the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Pipes had left academia to dedicate his time to his activist and expert roles.

Funders enable the research of these alleged experts and scholars and the production and dissemination of their findings to public institutions and the media. But there is nothing like the testimony of “native” insiders to make this work credible to the public. These insider witnesses to the problems with Islam and Muslims include Arabs (regardless of faith) and current or former Muslims who confirm the tropes of Muslim backwardness and danger and present themselves as warriors committed to bring the values of Western Enlightenment to the backward world of Islam. These native informants are what CAP’s report called the “validators” or what Columbia Professor Hamid Dabashi calls a new “pedigree of comprador intellectuals” (2006, N.P). They include Jasser, the Arizona physician mentioned earlier, and Walid Phares a Lebanese Christian. It is, however, female insiders like Somali-Dutch and former Muslim Ayan Hirsi Ali who provide the best corroboration.

The rhetoric—made credible by these scholars, validators, religious leaders, and politicians—reaches the public through grassroots organizations and media outlets such as Fox News and is then picked up by CNN and others. Whether it is out of genuine belief or political stratagem, conservative politicians embrace this discourse echoing the exact arguments and phrases and in the process provide an aura of official sanction. Political candidates who see in Muslims a wedge issue for elections pander to a populist impulse. The following example illustrates the workings of the network and its attempts at the political marginalization of Muslims. In 2008 Robert Spencer, one of the
network’s expert, wrote a book on *Stealth Islam* and the term entered the network’s narrative. In June of 2011, Walid Shoebat, one of the Arab validators, was interviewed by Frontpage, an online conservative magazine founded and edited by David Horowitz, another such expert. In the interview, Shoebat cited Huma Abedin, a second generation Muslim woman of Pakistani background, as an example of the Muslim infiltration of government. Abedin has been Secretary of State Clinton’s aide since the latter was the first lady in the 1990s. Shoebat cited Abedin’s marriage to a Jewish congressman as part of strategy to conceal her links to Islamists who purportedly made special dispensations for her to marry a non-Muslim. In July 2012, Republican Congresswoman and 2012 presidential hopeful Michelle Bachmann and four Republican congressmen sent a letter to five federal agencies. The letter warned the agencies that Islamists have infiltrated the highest levels of the Obama administration and cited Abedin’s position as evidence.

Religiously or politically conservative individuals were early vocal contributors to this narrative. Over time, well-known liberal and atheist thinkers have contributed by arguing that Islam in its essence is violent, misogynist and irreconcilable with the West, giving the narrative further academic and intellectual cover. They start by arguing that “Islamophobia”, put in quotation to dispute its existence, is a myth created by Muslims to silence critical discourse on Islam and Muslims. Leading this charge and thread in the narrative are Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens, two prominent new atheists. While these thinkers are critical of all religions, they reserve a distinct contempt for Islam. For example, Sam Harris argues that in the “gradations to the evil that is done in name of God”, Islam holds an especial status because terrorism and intolerance are basic doctrinal teachings. Consequently, Islam presents the world with a global and unique problem. He acknowledges the existence of “some moderate Muslims who have decided to overlook the irrecusable militancy of their religion”; but even they, he theorizes,
cannot deny that theirs is a religion of conquest where “all infidels” are ultimately to convert or be killed. He says that we must stop “deluding ourselves with euphemisms and pandering to the religious sensitivities of Muslims” and to “admit that we are not at war with ‘terrorism’; we are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran.” He concludes that “[a]ll civilized nations must unite in condemnation of a theology that now threatens to destabilize much of the earth.”37

For better or worse, narratives and the media powerfully affect and shape public opinion. In covering religion in general, reporters usually use what Silk called “topoi”—themes (for example, religions’ clash with modernity and clergy/leaders moral shortcomings) through which stories could be framed and anchored (Silk 1995). Reporters serve as “global storytellers” through whose constructions and framing, people find out about lifeways, define theirs and others’ identities, and evaluate the authenticity of prior reports. Media constructions also shape audiences’ perceptions of “the quality of the culture in terms of its aesthetic and spiritual vitality, and the significance of faith as a formative and deliberative motivational force for social good” (Badaracco 2004, 3). Today’s multiple and concurrent voices in multi-modality media compress time and space and bring global conflicts and discourses to people’s living room and reporters play a significant role in making this data digestible. Media, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions and thoughts on political issues regarding “both the cultural identity of God and the spiritual basis upon which a national identity is imagined” (Badaracco 2004, 6). Consequently, the media could be considered an educator that provides an important public curriculum (Badaracco 2004; de Vries and Weber 2001).

In the case of Islam, the topoi the media draws on include misogyny, violence, and fanaticism and the image painted in the minds of viewers is reflected to Muslims in the gaze and/or in words of many of their fellow citizens. Entertainment and news media
seem to have a feedback-loop effect on how they influence perceptions which then get reproduced in this media. These images create mental frames in the minds of audiences where Saddam Hussain or Osama Bin Laden stand in for Arab and Muslim. The images also give the creators of popular culture a plausible deniability of stereotypes; they can argue that the Arabs and Muslims in film are not ones they manufactured but the ones on the evening news. The racial stereotypes of Blacks, Asian and Latino/a, and in this case Muslims and the associated narratives and images attest to the reality that the entertainment industry not only recycles but also exploits the images from the news media.

According to Pew Research there has been a significant increase in the number of people who think Islam, more than any other religion, advocates violence. In 2002, 25 percent of those surveyed held that view while 51 percent did not; by 2011, however, the numbers were 40 and 42 percent respectively. The percentage varies by political affiliation. More than two thirds of Republicans and Tea Party-leaning individuals hold that view compared to a third of Democrats, illustrating the impact of the anti-Muslim narrative prevalent on conservative media.

Those espousing this discourse do not advocate violence against Muslims but their rhetoric, not unlike that of radical Muslim imams and ideologues, inspires some to act to stop the alleged threat of a Muslim takeover. Post 9/11 fear had silenced dissent and political criticism as thousands of Muslim men were required to register, many were deported, and countless others were detained for extended periods. The absence of dissent enabled the passage of the Patriot Act and rationalized profiling of Muslims without debates. Yet, while anti-Muslim crimes spiked by 1600% immediately after 9/11 according to FBI crime statistics, by 2002 they had dropped dramatically to one fifth of that. This drop was in part due to President Bush’s televised statements of the need to
differentiate the terrorists from all Muslims and Islam. Violent incidents, however, picked up again in 2010. For example, at the height of the Park51 debate, a young man in Manhattan slashed the throat of a cab driver when he found out the driver was a Muslim. The joint Council on American Islamic Relations and the University of California-Berkeley report of 2010 on Islamophobia lists forty incidents of opposition to mosques, violence, vandalism and threats compared to only sixteen such incidents in 2009. Reviewing the decade since 9/11, the Southern Poverty Law Center draws a link between anti-Islam propaganda and the increase in anti-Muslim or Muslim-looking attacks. During the 2010 controversies, for example, a fire was set to a rural grocery store owned by a Sikh family mistaken for Muslims as indicated by the graffiti of “9/11 Go Home”; a Bronx imam received a partially-burnt Qur’an; a dry cleaning business owned by a Christian Arab was set ablaze with a swastika and a “fuck Arab” message. Since 9/11 several Sikh men mistaken for Muslims have been killed in Arizona and California, and in August of 2012 six were killed and many more were injured in a Wisconsin Sikh Temple massacre. Ironically, two Arab Christian men who traveled to join the rally against the Park51 project were overheard speaking Arabic and were accosted by a crowd shouting “go home” and had to be rescued by the police.

As the Runnymede report acknowledged, Islamophobia is not an ideal term; it is a problematic one for some Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The most common criticism of the term Islamophobia is that phobia implies irrationality and makes this label an instrument to silence all criticism of Islam and Muslims. The late Christopher Hitchens, a British American journalist and one of the influential new atheists, wrote: “the fake term Islamophobia is so dangerous: It insinuates that any reservations about Islam must ipso facto be ‘phobic.’ A phobia is an irrational fear or dislike. Islamic preaching very often manifests precisely this feature, which is why suspicion of it is by no
means irrational”⁴⁴. Here, he echoes the “Stop the Islamization of Europe” organization’s motto: “Racism is the lowest form of human stupidity, but Islamophobia is the height of common sense.”⁴⁵

The findings on the political roots of terrorism noted earlier notwithstanding, Muslim violent extremists have instilled fear in the general public and there is genuine anxiety and suspicion of Muslims that should not be dismissed. These acts raise the question of whether or not there is something in Islam and Muslim cultures that leads people to commit these violent acts. What distinguishes Islamophobia from a legitimate question? The Runnymede Report creates space for the legitimate criticism of Islam and Muslims by creating an “open versus closed” view of Islam with eight characteristics, including seeing Islam as monolithic and static vs. diverse and dynamic, and seeing Islam as Other and separate vs. similar and interdependent. It is not the critique of Islam and Muslims, undertaken by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, that is problematic, but the demonization and marginalization. The “closed view” is not merely an academic debate but has real life consequences where rights, property and lives are endangered when the fine line that separates rhetoric and actions is crossed. Critical debates are essential to democracy and freedom of speech is sacrosanct to the American public, though the latter has never been absolute. In pluralistic societies robust debates and open dialogue are crucial to civil society and, here, the choice need not be between demonizing or full embrace of all that the Other believes and practices; a middle ground of critical and respectful engagement is possible⁴⁶.

I also have reservations about the term Islamophobia; I find the suffix phobia to be problematic (whether the prefix is Islam, homo, or xeno) because it connotes a medicalized irrationality and implies an affliction that potentially absolves anyone acting upon this phobia of any responsibility. Unlike terms like racism, sexism or anti-
Semitism, phobia seems to diminish the seriousness of the discourses and actions they inspire. The label of Islamophobia could indeed be used by some to silence critique of Islam or Muslims by both Muslims and non-Muslims, but concerns about silencing critiques do not make terms like racism or anti-Semitism or sexism “fake.” Some who dislike the term Islamophobia have proposed “Anti-Muslim racism”, but because Muslims are not of a specific race, this word too is contested. One could argue, however, that since race is a social construct and it has come to mean color, nationality, or ethnicity; religion too could be added to that list (Richardson 2011). However inadequate it might be, Islamophobia has come to describe a range of negative, marginalizing and at times dangerous sentiments, discourses, and behaviors towards Muslim and Muslim-looking people and towards Islam.

**Racialization in “Post-Racial” America**

Many scholars theorize that the foundation of race and racism and its persistence for centuries is inextricable from capitalist labor (Brodkin 1998; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; Horseman 1997; Roediger 2005). It is critical to note, however, that these racial ideologies had from the start a religious underpinning that divided the Christian colonialists from the “heathen” natives and Blacks. Tocqueville’s observation in 1835 of the tri-segmentation of America across racial lines into Indian, Negro, and European is frequently referenced. But less known is Reeves Kennedy’s coinage of the term “triple melting pot” in 1944, which segmented American society across religious lines into Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious groups (Rumbaut 1999).

In the United States, religious institutions have always played an important role in incorporating immigrants into society. Religion has often worked as a conduit and as a
space for immigrant groups to overcome internal diversity in language and regional origins. For example, nineteenth century immigrants from Italy viewed themselves as Sicilian, Neapolitan and Calabrese since Italy was not yet a nation. At church, however, they worshiped, socialized and fought discrimination and marginalization together as Italians (Rodriguez 2004). Creating a sense of community among these diverse people, who shared a national origin, churches and temples, overtime played a homogenizing role in inserting these groups into the segmented structure of Catholics or Protestants or Jews. While segmentation across religious lines has long existed, American society organized more along racial lines (Black, White, and Indian) and later added new ethnic labels as immigration brought groups that did not neatly fit the racial triad.

Pan-ethnic labels such as African, Latino/a, Arab, Asian, and South Asian have come to designate internally diverse groups in American society and have been appropriated by the members of these groups. “Muslim American” seems destined to become such a label. Each of these labels emerged through/from a homogenizing racializing process that had also produced groups like the Irish, the Italians and the Jews, though these latter groups eventually became White and have since enjoyed its privileges. The Irish, for example, were the first non-Anglo and non-Protestant group to arrive in America. They faced such resentment and fear from old stock Americans that a political party, the Know Nothings, was formed against them and overt discrimination was displayed in “No Irish Need Apply” signs at businesses. Eventually, however, they were the first to move toward whiteness and were later followed by Italians. Since the Irish were considered “niggers turned inside out” and the Italians were referred to as “black guineas,” becoming White involved a double-move of seeking proximity to whiteness and distance from blackness in which religious institutions played a critical
role (Ignatiev 1995). This double-move remains the path of those aspiring to achieve whiteness.

Religion played, and continues to play, a crucial role in the integration of new immigrants into American society. But the much celebrated wall of separation between church and state, which protects the religious freedom of people, emerged from competing groups and a contentious history. The founding and evolution of America’s public education and many of its Ivy League universities are rooted in religion and ethnic differences as is much of the long standing “culture war”47. Now, as in the past, the growing number of non-Protestant and non-Christian immigrants and nativist sentiments towards these new immigrants fuel those fears (see Eck 2001; Huntington 2004; and Leonard 2005b).

With the election of the first Black president in 2008, however, any talk about racism collides with the new narrative of a post-racial era in which America has presumably transcended race; race, therefore, should not be talked about or taken into consideration. Those calling attention to inequalities are accused of “playing the race card” to divide Americans and are themselves said to be racist. To Sumi Cho, a legal and ethnic studies scholar, post-racialism “in its current iteration is a twenty-first-century ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action” (Cho 2009, 1594). In this climate, calling attention to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism is dismissed as a myth because, anyway, Islam is a religion not a race or ethnicity. Anyone pointing out the difference between long established critique of Islam and the legitimate criticism of Muslims and today’s rhetoric as noted earlier is merely playing the race card to silence critics.
Categorizing and sorting all things, including people, into defined sets is inherent to the human brain’s ability to organize information. But the attributes of such categorizations and the meaning (good, bad or neutral) assigned to the sets are socially constructed and learned. The process of conflating color/race, religion, gender and sexuality is essential to the racialization process of constructing dangerous and undesirable Others (internal or external). It dates back to the origin story the nation tells itself about itself as an “Anglo-Protestant” nation. Princeton professor Samuel Huntington, who popularized the notion of the Clash of Civilizations, confirms this point in his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004). Gravely concerned by the post-1965 demographic changes resulting from immigration and by cosmopolitan liberals advocating multiculturalism, Huntington argued that America must act urgently to recover its identity. To do so “Americans should recommit themselves to the Anglo-Protestant culture, traditions, and values that for three and a half centuries have been embraced by Americans of all races, ethnicities, and religions and that have been the source of their liberty, unity, power, prosperity, and moral leadership as a force for good in the world” (Huntington 2004, Xvii). The presence of Latino/Hispanics, Asians and Muslims is a threat to America’s identity; but where the Mexican culture merely “retards” the assimilation of Mexicans (Huntington 2004, 188), the culture of Muslims and particularly Arab Muslims, Huntington says, makes them inassimilable. He claims that Muslim minorities have proved to be “‘indigestible’ by non-Muslim societies” and considering the “nature of Muslim culture and its differences from American culture” their assimilation in America is even more problematic and unlikely.
Like the terms Asian, Latino/a, and Blacks, the internal diversity in color, culture and national origin of Muslims is erased while their Muslim-ness is magnified as the maker of their otherness in the racialization process.

In their work on the formation of race in the United States, sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant introduced the concept of racialization “to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one” (2004, 14). In constructing the racial other, this process draws on already existing images and discourses. Omi and Winant (2006) note that race is foremost a sociohistorical process where both the category and meaning index a social relation in a particular historical moment. Yet, the meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed. We use the term racial formation to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meaning. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as the central axis of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader categories or conception [2006, 16].

Omi and Winant argue that the apparent “common sense” nature of the prevailing racial order attests to the critical role of racial formation in constructing the meaning of race and identity. Our preconceived notions of what each racial group looks and behaves like serve as our compass for who a person is. The most obvious markers we give to racial categories (for example, skin color or appearance) also carry assumptions about personal disposition including temperament, intellectual and athletic abilities and about sexual and aesthetic preferences. Subsequently, we become confused when people do not act “Muslim”, or “Black” or “White” or “Latino/a”. The associated attributes may differ with time but a “system of racial meaning and stereotypes, of racial ideology” has endured in American culture (Omi and Winant 2006, 13). This system made diverse
people brought from Africa and diverse groups of Native Americans tribes into “Blacks” and “Indians” respectively and constructed diverse Europeans into “Whites” in contradistinction. With time, it added Jews, Hispanics, Asians and now Muslims. Such constructions arise from contending political and economic projects where scapegoats are needed to deflect responsibly and divide those who are struggling. Asians are raced as disloyal foreigners, Blacks as criminals, Arab and Muslim as backward/terrorists and Latinos as illegals. The images and associated discourses with the latter three groups have defined the political landscape, particularly in this “post-racial” Obama era. Rather than seeing race as essence or mere illusion, Omi and Winant argue it is critically important that race be understood as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meaning constantly being transformed by political struggle” (2006, 15).

This instability and transformation of the meaning does not necessarily lead to deep structural changes over time. In her influential book, *The New Jim Crow* (2012), Michelle Alexander argues that America has not so much transcended its race problem as it has just “redesigned it”. She notes that in a purportedly post-racial society, the change from the era of Jim Crow was not so much structural as it was linguistic. In today’s “colorblind” society it is not acceptable to overtly discriminate or express social disdain based on race. Instead, we use the criminal justice system and public discourse to label people of color as criminals, extremists, or illegals; then, we “engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind” (Alexander 2012, 2). This, Alexander argues, has created a new caste system, where people of color permanently and without recourse lose their rights. Blacks and Latino/as form the great majority of the steady stream of young people from the schoolyard to the prison courtyard and since prisoners lose, among other things, their voting rights they are permanently disenfranchised. Racist beliefs that were the foundation for past discrimination have since been replaced by a “racism lite”
that is “kinder and gentler” but that is no less effective than Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo. The defining elements of this new form are:

1) [the] increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices 2) the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’ 3) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality 4) the incorporation of ‘safe minorities’ (e.g., Clarence Thomas, Condoleezza Rice, or Colin Powell [and Obama]) to signify the nonracialism of polity; 5) the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of Jim Crow period of race relations. [Bonilla-Silva 2003, 272]

But among Whites too, there exists gradations and inequalities based on class, urban or rural residence, and education that unevenly distribute the privilege of whiteness; the epithets of “white trash” and “rednecks” index this hierarchy. Whiteness is, therefore, “importantly inflected by the markings of class” (Hartigan 2003, 96). Post-racial intellectuals argue for decentering race and for universal justice but in doing so, Cho notes, they engage in a false universalism that restores White normativity and leaves things unchanged (Cho 2009). When the “war on drugs” is seen only as a Black and Brown problem, immigration seen only as a Brown problem, and terrorism only as a Muslim problem, profiling and surveillance become an acceptable necessity to protect society. The criminal Black, the illegal Brown, and the violent Muslim are to accept that the loss of their civil rights and liberties are a small price to pay for collective safety. So long as the entrenched public perception and consciousness are unchallenged, the legal or discursive criminalization and mass incarceration of people of color will continue and the underlying racial order will remain unchallenged and unchanged (Alexander 2012). Additionally, if the challenges and subsequent changes were not substantial, then the system will remain in a state that Omi and Winant call “unstable equilibrium.” In this case, it only morphs into another form as “convict leasing replaced slavery” or “it will be reborn, just as mass incarceration replaced Jim Crow” (Alexander 2012, 234-5). Legal challenges to Jim Crow did not end it until there was mass movement to raise public
consciousness and create consensus about the perniciousness of this system. Legal cases such as Brown vs. Board of Education then legitimated the demands of activists, invigorated a social movement and, at the same time, provoked a backlash (Alexander 2012). The system and the problems continue in another form.

Racialization: a path to belonging or a strategy of Othering?

Though post-9/11 hyper-patriotism and slogans of “United We Stand” saturated the public sphere and deemed dissent or critique not only unpatriotic but a betrayal, race was significant in the different ways people reacted to the shock and the shared grief for the human tragedy. As the brown Middle Easterner became the primary public enemy, as the numbers of detained Arab and Muslim men approached thousands, and as the public was being prepared for war, minorities recognized the signs of the making of a new “problem people.” Japanese Americans, recalling their internment experience, recognized the hysteria and spoke out and stood by Muslims; Black and Brown comedians in urban clubs gave voice to the recognition as expressed by comedian Ian Edwards: “Black people, we have been delivered. Finally, we got a new nigger. The Middle Easterner is the new nigger” (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 60). Anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey was intrigued to explore how and why Blackamerican comics and their mostly Black and Brown audience were able to laugh after this tragic event, while White comedians were expressing their grief on television and found it difficult to tell jokes.

Jacobs-Huey noted that the minority comics and their audiences understand the shifting grounds of American-ness where minorities’ belonging appears provisional. These comics condemn racial profiling and the “simplistic and ahistorical accounts of
U.S.–Middle East conflict that conveniently absolve America from culpability in past and present tragedies" (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 64). She found a prevalent theme of “Arabs as the new Niggers” that satirizes the reprieve Blackamericans experienced as discrimination was now focused on the “Middle Eastern” and Blacks were seen as real Americans and allies in the war on terrorism (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 64). But it was not only comics who drew this comparison. Legal scholar Jonathan Stubbs asked if on 9/11, Muslim Americans have come to occupy the “Bottom Rung of America’s Race Ladder” becoming “America’s New N.....s?” (Stubbs 2003).

As volatile geopolitics in the Middle East and related media coverage and popular culture shape the public image of the Middle Eastern, many Arabs and Persians have attempted to escape demonization by engaging in what Iranian American scholar John Tehranian (2009) referred to as “covering”. Covering strategies include association, appearance and affiliation that allow one to be misidentified. Their phenotypical ambiguity, when compared to the exaggerated features of stereotypical Middle Eastern in popular imagination, enables many Arabs and Persians to pass for Southern European, Indian or Latino. Arab and Persian Jews also play up the conflation of ethnicity and religion by claiming their Jewishness to cover their national origins (Tehranian 2009). This enabled them to perform whiteness and reap its benefits at the individual level, since passing for White shelters one from discrimination in the short term.

To escape being racialized as violent and backward, Middle Eastern Americans covered their backgrounds and shunned organized activism for a long time. Their “Faustian pact with whiteness,” as Tehranian puts it, forestalled their efforts to fight discrimination and the erosion of their civil rights or to change the public discourse that racializes them as inferior and inassimilable aliens (2009, 20). This marginalization is
ultimately experienced at the individual level. These “invisible citizens” became more visible with each crisis since 1980s. They rose to hyper “visible subjects” (Jamal and Naber 2008) after 9/11 as Arabs (regardless of faith) and Muslims from diverse backgrounds were collapsed into the “terrorist fundamentalist Muslim”. In this racialization process, as Omi and Winant had pointed out, the brown or black skin carry cognitive and moral assumptions. Here, as Moallem noted, Islamic fundamentalism becomes shorthand for this Muslim or Middle Eastern other’s singularity “in its irrationally, morally inferior, and barbaric masculinity and its passive, victimized, and submissive femininity” (Naber 2008, 2).

In its efforts to avert terrorist acts, the Homeland Security Agency asks Americans if they “see something, [to] say something.” The “something” is any “suspicious activity” such as unattended packages. As to what or who is construed as suspicious, the public relies on mental images and frames that have been constituted through centuries-old tropes and through the images on news footage or fictional dramas. Jack Shaheen (2001) studies portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in films from 1896 onward. He concluded that today’s images do not qualitatively differ from the “celluloid Arab” except that this Arab man is more dangerous and, I would add, his womenfolk are more oppressed. The Arabs and Muslims represented on the screen (news or fiction) and in public discourse are not ordinary people whom one would want as next door neighbors. This portrayal is not necessarily a conscious agenda that constructs or perpetuates negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims but is the product of shared mental frames.

In the racial binary of American society, only the belonging of Blacks and Whites is never questioned. Blackamericans may occupy the bottom rung of the racial order but their American-ness is assumed. Are, then, those in-between Black and White doomed to
a liminal state of questionable membership? Sherman Jackson (2008) argues that race is a critical marker and a path to authentic belongingness to America. That being the case, he contends that Muslims—immigrants in particular—must overcome a “racial agnosia” which proclaims there is no race in Islam, dismisses racism within the community and society, and overlooks their own racial identity. If they hope to belong and claim a place in society, Muslims have to grasp the work that “race” does in this society and abandon use of the simplistic proclamation that “Islam does not do race” to cover their own prejudices. Failure to do so, Jackson argues, only privileges whiteness, assigns Muslims the race category of a foreign Other, and perpetuates Islamophobia, which is racism by another name (Jackson 2008, 80). The Muslim-ness of Blackamericans does not strip them of their authentically American status, as evident by public views on the NOI and the ever growing numbers of Blackamerican embracing Islam. This, he notes, is because Blackness is “indigenized, identity-in-difference” that tempers and manages the nativist tendency that always threatens to malign non-whites.

Immigrant Muslims, many of whom are legally White, do not have this status. Though they are socially not White, they remain “unraced” in a society where belonging is race based. As non-White, immigrants’ only hope for belonging, therefore, rests on realizing that whiteness is not “the signature of authentic American-ness” and recognizing that blackness presents other possibilities for being authentically American (Jackson 2008, 84). This will involve doing away with the “undifferentiated America and undifferentiated Islam” frameworks that erase race; it involves embracing race and the necessity of Blackness to the racial order. Islamically, race can perhaps do the work that tribe or clan did in the Prophet’s time (Jackson 2008, 84). Here then, neither the universalism of post-racial America nor colorblind Islam would be in the best interest of Muslims, whether immigrants or not. This is because it has always been race, not
religion, that is “the core of America’s perduring pursuit of redemption and innocence”
to atone for and redress the injustices of racial differences. Those who wish to remain
“unraced’ risk their eligibility for authentic belonging or for benefiting for America’s
perpetual quest for redemption (Jackson 2008, 85).

Jackson’s insights are critically important and touch on the greatest intra-
community rift, between immigrants and converts, which I will discuss further in the
next chapter. I would, however, argue here that the issue is not so much that immigrants,
Muslims or not, are “unraced,” because as noted above they all eventually become
racialized. The critical issue is that these immigrants could never be Black or White as
demanded by an American racial ideology that marks authenticity only in this binary.
This binary system even rendered native peoples forever absent from the discussion.
Now as in the past, African and European immigrants easily blend into the Black or
White racial binary and their offspring are not likely to be asked of their origins.
Immigrants from the Middle East/North African, South and East Asia, and Latino/as are
on a different trajectory. They fought for inclusion in whiteness for citizenship and its
privileges when citizenship was legally restricted to Whites, and they were (de)classified
as Whites more than once. They were, however, socially always non-White and maligned
as Arabs, Turks, Persians, Hindu, Orientals, and Mexicans. Perhaps only the
descendants of early Arab Christians have become fully White, as their Anglicized names
(examples include Senators Spencer Abraham and John Sununu, and renowned
journalist Helen Thomas) do not betray their Arab background. But even they are at risk
of losing their whiteness and belonging if they dare express unpopular opinions,
especially about America’s foreign policy, as exemplified by the case of Helen Thomas52.

As citizenship laws dropped the race requirement, and as immigrants became
cognizant of their racialized identities and the power that lies in numbers, they began to
organize and create coalitions to be recognized as groups in society and on the U.S. census forms. Between 1970 and 1990, the terms Asians and Latinos/Hispanics entered both the census and public discourse. Political crises in the Middle East and the U.S. role in the region have punctuated the group construction projects of Arabs, Persians and others from the region. Their pursuit for group designation in the U.S. census began in the 1990s but remains unfulfilled, in part, because of the social invisibility of Middle Easterners as individuals. It takes organization and resources – both material and cultural – to challenge racism and its consequences. Arab and Persian Americans have been organizing in earnest since the 1990s to push for group designation, but their project became a higher priority in the post-9/11 era and as the banner has been taken by their younger, American-born offspring. Determined to have the U.S. Census Bureau create Arab and Persian American categories in official documents, younger Arab and Persian Americans launched a “check it right, you ain’t White” campaign for the 2010 census. They used social media and YouTube to urge Arabs and Persians to own their ethnic background by checking “other” and writing their ancestry. Their work is in progress.

**Interrogating Whiteness, Revising Tradition, and Asserting Belonging**

Many Muslims and other minorities are beginning to realize that passing for white may serve them well in the short term, but in the long run, it is to their individual and collective determinant. Many of this project’s collaborators of Middle Eastern or South Asian parentage grew up marked from childhood by their strange names or clothing. They might also have been aware of their olive complexion and its difference from both Blacks and Whites and might have sensed that they occupied a racially
ambiguous in-betweeness in the U.S. color spectrum. Immigrant parents might not have only courted whiteness but might have also thought of themselves as White in the racial ladder of America, but members of the second generation, regardless of ethnic background or class, know they are not nor are they seen as White. As noted in an earlier chapter, Brown and Black children become aware of their color difference very early whether in the neighborhood playground or in the classroom.

With these experiences and growing up amidst the discourse of multiculturalism, these younger Muslims embrace their ethnic difference. Of the 246 survey participants, only five listed White or Caucasian as their ethnic category; only two of the five were of immigrant background. The remaining 241 listed Asian, South-Asian, Black, African American, Arab, or their families’ country of origin as their ethnic category. Where earlier immigrants or older generations might have concealed their ethnic identity, their descendants are socialized in American culture and racial ideas are imprinted in them from childhood. In a nation founded on racial polarity and where immigrants fought to be “white by law,” it is paradoxical, then, that the children and grandchildren of these immigrants learn and internalize that they are non-White minorities in a post-civil right era and in a presumably post-racial society (Rumbaut 2008).

In the post-9/11 era, Muslims have more fully become a raced group. The conflation of ethnicity and religion has implications for identity and perceptions. Where some attempt to hide their religious and ethnic background, many are asserting both and all the complexities that entails but not without trepidation. Almost a quarter of eighteen to twenty-five year old participants are only slightly optimistic or not optimistic at all about the future of Muslims in America. This cohort came of age in a post-9/11 world in which their Muslim-ness presents a public problem. Salwa, a twenty-five year old of Pakistani background who describes herself as a “queer Muslim woman of color,” thinks
that Muslims will always be seen as outsiders. This, she notes, is because Muslims are stereotyped as Arab/brown and people of color in this country are “not catered to and are ‘othered.’” The survey did not inquire about sexual orientation but, in comments lines, Salwa created a space to assert the multifaceted nature of her identity as a queer, Muslim, women, and an American person of color:

Muslims are isolating each other...we are not immune to sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism and other oppressions. We are a part of perpetuating these destructive things every day. Since 9/11 Muslims have, understandably, cast ourselves as victims (which we are in SO many ways) but unfortunately this means that we have ignored the ways that we contribute to hate in the world as well. I know that I would be much stronger presence in my Muslim community if I knew that there were internal efforts being made to combat sexism and homophobia amongst ourselves. Instead, I have been isolated and left out in the dark because of my other identities. In this way, I believe that we are screwing ourselves over - in the long run. The United States (just as any other imperialistic force) is going to succeed in their divide and conquer techniques. They pit us against each other and then we have no hope.

In the process, Salwa challenges multiple narratives among Muslims and in society that deny or erase the complexity of who she is. Perhaps because of the multiple ways she feels she is marginalized, she is one of those who are not optimistic about the future. Salwa’s statements above, like those of other participants in this project, reflect the double critique that many American born and/or raised Muslims feel comfortable with and compelled to articulate. Their critique of and within the community often invokes the pure versus cultural Islam narrative discussed earlier. While they hold the media accountable for showing Muslims only when “some bad, very bad things” happen, they also hold those Muslims who behave badly or violently responsible for providing the media with material. Participants see Muslims as partially responsible for contributing to their public image as outsiders when some wear foreign-looking clothes in public and when converts take on Arabic names.

Participants are nuanced in their evaluation of other Americans’ perceptions and attitudes; these younger Muslims believe that most of those who view Muslims as
suspicious outsiders are not doing so out of malice. Rather, it is out of “ignorance” of Islam/Muslims and partially because of media misinformation. More importantly, however, it is because of the lack of contacts with Muslims as friends or neighbors. Participants’ peer experiences inform their conclusion that other Americans who know Muslims do not buy into the media image and are able to see terrorists as misguided and criminal individuals. Participants conclude that the responsibility for reaching out to fellow citizens falls squarely on Muslim shoulders. But “ignorance” and the absence of malice does not make the hurt and frustration any less, as expressed by Hiyam, a nineteen year old women of Palestinian parentage. At the height of the Park51 drama, Hiyam says Muslims are now more than ever seen as outsiders who cannot be trusted because of all that is on the news. Yet what bothers her most is not so much the “prejudice or racism that [she] might be faced with” but “the fact that people have it in them to think in such an ignorant and illogical manner.” She and others argue that education and engagement are the antidote for this ignorance.

Though the Muslim community has been more proactive in educating the public and responding to controversies, it was unprepared for the Park51 drama. The cultural center team (developer, the imam, and Ms. Khan) were the public face of the project and were taken aback by the controversy and the avalanche of criticism that painted them as “radical Muslims.” But no one was more surprised than the Muslim leadership and activists who found themselves having to defend a project about which they knew only what the media reported. El-Gamal, the developer, is not known outside of his immediate community. The imam is better known among and works more closely with non-Muslims, and he did not have much contact with Muslim leaders. Muslim activists and leaders defended the project publically on the basis that Muslims should have the right to build in Lower Manhattan and elsewhere. But as they were pushing back against
those who conflate Islam and Muslims with the violent extremists, they were privately angry at the project team and particularly at the imam for not informing or consulting other Muslims. They criticized the team for being out of touch with public sentiment and the political discourse on Islam in an election year.

To the public, however, they had to present a united front. The head of CAIR-Chicago, a chapter of the national Muslim civil rights organization, and second generation Muslim of Egyptian background, was among the many Muslim leaders and activists who took to the airways, cyberspace, and print to “represent” and to “defend” Muslims. In a Huffington Post’s article, he writes “the whole brouhaha about the ‘Mosque at Ground Zero’ is frankly bogus. It has little to do with sacred ground, or sensitive hearts. It does, however, have everything to do with the exploitation of the sacred and the sensitive for the furtherance of the sacrilegious and the insensitive: the phenomenon of Muslim-bashing that is ravaging our nation today”53. Leaders of major Muslim organizations met with the developer who fielded their questions and addressed their concerns. Many of these organizations appointed their younger staff and activists to handle the media. Young converts and second generation Muslim American activists and academics like Reza Aslan became the public face of the Muslim community.

In the midst of the Park51 controversy came the Qur’an burning threat in Florida, and not long after these incidents came the controversy around the TLC’s “All American Muslims”. While the Qur’an burning threat became an international incident, Muslim American leaders and scholars advised their community not to respond to the provocation. They tapped into their interfaith network for public support. Christian and Jewish religious leaders were alarmed by the rhetoric and spoke up against Anti-Muslim racism. The Islamic Society of North America along with twenty representatives from prominent Christian and Jewish religious organizations created a Shoulder-to-Shoulder
campaign with the objective of “standing with American Muslims [and] upholding American values”\textsuperscript{54}. Responding to the TLC controversy, a coalition of various Arab and Muslim organizations, interfaith groups, and activists from diverse backgrounds launched a counter-campaign appealing to the public and to the companies which canceled their advertising contracts. Music mogul Russell Simmons offered to support the show by compensating TLC for any lost advertising revenue. Late night comedy shows, and particularly The Daily Show’s Jon Stewart and his second-generation Muslim “correspondent” on Comedy Central, perhaps better than anyone else Muslim or not did much to educate Americans by highlighting the contradictions, misinformation and the absurdity of some of the rhetoric and statements by pundits and politicians.

Muslim American civil rights organization and activists are documenting hate crimes and discrimination incidents. They are also engaged in defining the term Islamophobia and doing research on this phenomenon. In 2008, The University of California-Berkeley’s Center for Race & Gender (CRG) created an “Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project” to provide a forum for scholars, activists and faith leaders to discuss timely issues. CRG joined efforts with the Muslim civil rights organization, Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and issued a report titled \textit{Islamophobia and its Impact in the United States: January 2009 – December 2010: Old Hate, New Target}. The report defines Islamophobia and clarifies that the label does not apply to those who disagree with Muslims, or those who condemn crimes committed by Muslims, or those who conduct critical studies on Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia is reserved for those individual and entities “that produce and package materials, ideas or rhetoric about Islam in order to promote a skewed view of the faith and to induce fear, hate or prejudice in those who receive the materials” (CRG and CAIR 2010, 11).
Generational Differences: Different Trajectories and Strategies

Participants in this project identify generational differences in how Americans of other faiths view Muslims. They think that younger Americans, like those in their social networks, view being Muslim as just another facet of being an individual and not a cause for concern. During the Park51 controversy, Shareefa, the twenty-nine years old Blackamerican quoted earlier, recalls an incident that touched her. Her Facebook male friend whom she has known since elementary school responded to negative comments about Muslims on his Facebook page. He wrote “I don’t know why people are against Islam. It’s not Islam who bombed us on September 11th. It was crazy people, you know, Muslims should be allowed to practice their faith.” Shareefa says he was “just completely defending Islam” and that meant a lot to her.

When Sara’s father was telling her about the difficulties of being Muslim in the work place, she told him that will change with her generation. Where her parents’ generation has to educate coworkers, Sara thinks her generation does not find it necessary to do that because “it’s not a factor that’s going to make anyone shirk away.” If anything, finding out a friend is Muslim is “going to make them more interested.” Sara and her generation’s Muslim-ness is a point that leads them and their non-Muslim friends to conversation about “how is Ramadan?” and perhaps an invitation to the annual Fast-a-thon held by MSA chapters on campuses across the nation to raise funds for charity. The 2011 Pew study on the views of Americans on Islam, cited earlier, confirms participants’ assessment of their non-Muslim peers. The study found that nearly six in ten (58 percent) of those age 18-30 years rejected the notion that Islam is more violent than other religions, compared to only 31 percent who agree that it is.
Besides their views on religion, this cohort is also more accepting of racial diversity and views immigrations positively (Pew Center 2010).56

These generational differences also inform how Muslims tackle Islamophobic narratives. Many immigrant leaders or activists see combating Islamophobia is best done through the legal system and through courting politicians and civic leaders. But those who grew up in this society draw on their knowledge of its history and psychology and contend that such a strategy is only one of many paths to belonging and is perhaps the slowest. Reactions to the controversies of the past four years including the Park51 project illustrate the divergent strategies employed by the different groups. Perhaps none is more illustrative than the approach of two members of the project’s team, imam Rauf and developer El-Gamal. To show that they were not opposed to a mosque but to the location, opponents of Park51 project asked Muslims to show sensitivity by building at another location. Overwhelmed and unaccustomed to the negative publicity, the imam, a first generation immigrant, conceded to relocate the project if another property became available. But El-Gamal, a second generation developer, rejected the idea; he admonished the imam saying that he had “no authority or control over the project or board of directors” and subsequently relieved him of leading prayers in the planned center.57 El-Gamal was not dissuaded by the controversy or the many threats he and his family received. He is determined to proceed as planned because, he says, he wants to make the world better place for his young daughters. Additionally, he feels a “responsibility to reclaim who we are” from the “criminals [who] have taken control over the narrative” and the image of Muslims. He wants people to know Muslims and to know that wherever an “Islamic facility is built, it cleans up a neighborhood” and “it becomes a beacon of light.”58 He speaks back both to violent Muslims and to the
opponents of his project who suggested that the Islamic center will desecrate hallowed grounds and will be an insult to Americans.

Since 9/11, and particularly in the past four years, young converts and second and subsequent generations of Muslims leaders, activists or academics seem to be everywhere on television, radio, and in op-eds and blogs. They are not repeating statements about how “Islam is a religion of peace”; instead, they are deconstructing critics’ arguments, pointing out racist narratives, and invoking the law and historical memory. For example, Intisar Rabb, a second generation Blackamerican Muslim and a Boston College professor of constitutional and Islamic law debated Arizona Republican Congressman Trent Franks and author David Gaubatz on Boston Public Radio’s popular show On Point. Franks, who co-chairs the International Religious Freedom Caucus in Congress, and Gaubatz advocate the narrative of a “stealth” Muslim movement taking over America through “creeping Shariah”. The two oppose the Park51 project seeing it as the “victory mosque” of the terrorists. Rabb, made more credible by her academic credentials, cited her expertise in Islamic and American laws to argue that fears of “creeping Shariah” are unfounded. She pointed out the political use of Muslims and Islam as a wedge issue for the midterm election of 2010. She then challenged Franks’ framing of the term “Cordoba” as a nod to Islam’s victory over Christianity in Spain. She invoked historical records to reframe Cordoba and Muslim Spain’s spirit of convivencia as a celebrated period for interfaith co-existence and the thriving of art, philosophy and science.

In the past few years, the most visible spokespersons of CAIR, the Muslim American civil right organization mentioned earlier, have been its media savvy, American-born younger leaders in its New York City, Chicago, Michigan, and Los Angeles chapters. These new spokespersons are mostly men. But a few Muslim women
have also taken a lead. For example, Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) has a female Director of Policy & Program, Edina Lekovic. Lekovic, a second generation Muslim of Montenegrin parentage, appears on major television networks and radio and speaks at Muslim conferences on how to tackle Islamophobia by deconstructing its narratives. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), a Michigan based think tank, was co-founded by second generation Muslims. ISPU created within it a Center for the Study of American Muslims headed by Zareena Grewal, a second generation woman of Indian background. Grewal is a Yale University historical anthropologist who studies American Muslims. ISPU generates reports and policy briefs on hot-button issues such as Islamophobia, radicalization, and Sharia’h and on social trends like Muslim political and civic engagement as well as foreign policy issues.

According to its website, the objective of the organization is to provide trustworthy, empirically researched briefs to policy makers and experts and to make reports available to Muslims and to the general public.

Reza Aslan, a second generation Muslim American of Iranian background and a professor of religion, wrote No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam after 9/11 because he wanted to change the narrative that locks Islam between the extremes of radical Muslims and ex-Muslims. His stated objective was to show the dynamism and diversity of Islam’s interpretative tradition (Aslan 2005). His book was reviewed and well received in the media and since then Aslan has become a public figure; he is now a sought after authority for analysis of issues relating to Islam and Muslims here and abroad. Aslan’s perfect American accented English, his metrosexual look, and his calm but commanding demeanor belies the public image of a committed Muslim defending Islam and Muslims. His image better fits (ex)Muslim validators of the Islamophobia narrative. Consequently, his appearance on CNN with Jasser (one such
validator) and his deconstruction of the latter’s arguments provided a more credible
counterpoint than a stereotypically foreign sounding Muslim or turbaned and bearded
imam could have provided. The video was widely circulated among Muslims and many
project participants recounted how happy they were that Jasser met his match.

Changing Hearts and Minds

Younger Muslim Americans of all backgrounds know that it takes more than
laws, debates and reports to change hearts and minds. Aslan, for example, recognizes the
power of storytelling to provide a counter-narrative. He co-founded BoomGen Studios, a
“transmedia storytelling factory,” to both produce and consult on entertainment works
related to Muslims. Additionally, following in the footsteps of Richard Pryor, George
Lopez, and Margaret Cho, multiethnic Muslim and non-Muslim comedy groups like the
Axis of Evil, Sultans of Satire, Allah Made Me Funny, along with many solo comedians
(men and women) employ comedy and satire to critique, entertain, and educate both
Muslims and non-Muslims. I will return the topic of art in chapter 8, but at this juncture
it is important to point out that the activist role this art form serves does not diminish its
being foremost a creative endeavor of self-expression that affirms the complexity of the
identities of its practitioners. Some of these artists partner with other minority
comedians in acts like Arab-ish in Chicago or DISoriented in California. These groups
are multiethnic and frequently multifaith; group members are conscious of their
racialized identity as ethnic and/or religious minorities and are in dialogue with the
dominant narratives. For example, performing at a Los Angeles church, Sultans of
Satire’s Mike Batayeh called out to a Blackamerican woman in the audience saying:
except for the first time in American history, you guys are not public enemy No. 1.” The woman shouted back laughing: “We appreciate it.”

This comedic exchange engages the theme of the Arab the new N....r noted earlier. Rather than hiding their faith or limiting their humor to the ethnic, female comedians also make their Muslim-ness a central feature of their acts. Zahra Noorbakhsh’s All Atheists Are Muslim and Mona Shaikh MuslimsDoItBetter exemplify this trend.

These younger generations of Muslim activists attempt to respond to anti-Muslim narratives or negative stereotyping in creative ways. For example, in the summer of 2010, National Public Radio reporter and Fox News commentator, Juan Williams, added to the already charged public discourse with his statements on television that when boarding a plane, he worries whenever he sees “people in Muslim garb and identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims”.

Citing his books on the Civil Rights movement to prove he is not a bigot did little to protect him from the charge of racism. But while accusations of racism and views on the dangers of political correctness were being exchanged, the idea that there is a characteristic “Muslim garb” struck a chord with a young Muslim woman who chose to deconstruct this visual stereotype with images illustrating the diversity of Muslims and what they wear. She created a blog of “Pictures of Muslims Wearing Things: Muslims Dressed in their Garb” featuring famous and ordinary Muslims in “garbs”: police uniforms, sports jerseys and shorts, evening gowns, jeans, with and without headscarf or caps, and in ethnic clothing from around the world. Pictures are submitted by readers with a caption. One image shows a Muslim woman wearing a military uniform with a hat over her headscarf and a caption “Wafa is a Muslim, Zumba lover, cancer survivor, and Lieutenant Commander of the Canadian Armed Forces.” Another has the caption “Muslim guitarist Usman Khalid Kashmiri
enjoys rocking out wearing faux-hawks and skinny ties.” The site received coverage from other blogs and major media like Washington Post65 and The Atlantic66.

The repeated negative portrayals of Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist and a sexual deviant prompted Tarek el Messidi, a second generation Tennessean now living in Ohio, to create a Celebrate Mercy (CM) project as Facebook page and a YouTube channel showing Prophet Muhammad the way Muslims see him. CM has more than a thousand volunteers from around the world and more than 160,000 Facebook fans while its YouTube videos have, as of late 2012, been viewed more than 300,000 times. When the American ambassador to Libya was killed during demonstrations against the Muslim Innocence67 film, el Messidi started a ten days long Facebook and Twitter “MercyMail Campaign” to send one thousand letters of condolences to the ambassador’s family. Instead, he compiled over 7500 letters from around the world and the message of the campaign “respond to an evil deed with a good one” was tweeted to millions more by celebrities like Deepak Chopra and Cat Stevens (Yusuf Islam). The campaign generated national and international media coverage further publicizing the effort and it prompted the ambassador’s sister to meet with el Messidi68. This was not el Messidi’s first creative effort to counter the negative narrative. Shortly after 9/11, he and his then college roommate Sean Blevins created a Ramadan Fast-A-Thon at his college where Muslims and non-Muslims break their fast together at a dinner event organized by the Muslim Student Association. The project was intended to educate, to breakdown stereotypes and barriers, and to raise funds for charity. El Messidi and his partner then created a manual for the project and it has since been adopted by MSA-national and it is now an annual event in over 300 campuses69.

To counteract anti-Muslim websites like Jihadwatch.com that amplify the Islamophobia narrative, a group of mostly young Muslim bloggers and their friends
created loonwatch.com and WhatIfTheyWereMuslim.com websites. The creators describe the first as “a blogzine run by a motley group of hate-allergic bloggers to monitor and expose the web’s plethora of anti-Muslim loons, wackos, and conspiracy theorists.” The second features stories of violence, racism, and hateful rhetoric committed or produced by non-Muslims. The sites objective is to point out that, unlike the case with Muslims, the religion of these individuals or groups is not maligned in the process. To avoid being attacked by the well-funded Islamophobia network, the identity of creators and bloggers is concealed and this itself has become a subject of much speculation.

Since blackness is authentically American and essential for the nation’s need for redemption, Blackamerican Muslims can more effectively challenge Anti-Muslim rhetoric. At the height of the Park51 affair, a coalition of Blackamerican Muslim leaders, imams, and activists representing diverse interpretive tendencies and ideologies, including NOI’s Farrakhan, held a press conference at the National Press Club. Though not attended by mainstream press, it was webcast and publicized online in ethnic media. These Muslims invoked the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow to remind America of its propensity to construct problem people. Imam Zaid Shakir, co-founder of Zaytuna College and an influential scholar listed by project participants, asserted that Park51 opposition is a “symptom of a greater disease” of fear mongering and bigotry. It is but one manifestation and similar, he said, to the nooses hung in a school in Louisiana or the families destroyed when parents are arrested in immigration raids at work or on the streets in Arizona. He reminded the nation that “when people start to burn books, it’s not a great leap for them to start burning people” and when “nooses are allowed to be hung unchallenged publically […] it’s not long before strange fruit” start hanging on Southern and Northern trees” (Shakir 2010).
At the same event, Mahdi Bray, one of the few Blackamericans heading a mostly immigrant organization (the Muslim American Society), reminds people that anti-Muslim bigotry is not a new thing; it is the “same toxic soup of hatred and bigotry, just served in a different bowl.” He says that it is bad enough that he suffers the indignities of driving while Black, he now has to also endure indignities of flying while Muslim. He said he is not remaining passive and that “this is not a climate in which we want to operate nor will we allow ourselves to operate in it” (Bray 2010). This Blackamerican Muslim coalition called on the country to reject anti-Muslim racism. The strong language and the powerful images invoked at this press conference could not be said or painted as credibly or effectively by immigrant Muslims. Evident from these excerpts is the cultural capital these Muslims possess and are willing to expend as necessary. As Jackson notes, Blackamericans of all faiths know the grammar and semiotics of white privilege and fear; they know how to be authentically American without being white; they know how to survive – even fight! – under circumstances far more severe than those spawned by 9/11; they know that while the efforts of a Martin Luther King Jr. may heighten the dominant culture’s awareness of its own psychological predisposition, this is far less likely to succeed in the absence of a Malcolm X. [Jackson 2008, 85].

**Conclusion**

The need for and meaning of the term Islamophobia remains contested. As the Runnymede Report and critics noted, it may not be the best term; nevertheless, it describes a new reality of heightened fear which puts faith and freedom at risk. The consequences for Muslims and non-Muslims individuals and societies alike are great. A determined and well-funded network of people on both sides of the Atlantic collaborates in an increasingly successful effort to normalize a racist discourse and agenda to presumably “Stop the Islamization” of America and Europe. They are effectively
capitalizing on public fear, the rhetoric and terrorist acts of Muslim extremists, and on ambitious populist politicians looking for wedge issues for political gains.

Muslims of divergent backgrounds and even “Muslim-looking” people have been affected by Islamophobia and the “war on terrorism”. But the degree of this impact varies by one’s socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status. Recent immigrants (legal or not) are more vulnerable due to their limited material and cultural resources. Most of this project’s participants are of middle class background and their views and responses are no doubt shaped by that. However, even participants from a working class background are, like their middle class counterparts, American born or raised with an ethnically or religiously-diverse social network and are socially and civically engaged. They are, therefore, demographically different from the young South Asian working class young people whom Sunaina Maira had studied.

Maira’s research participants are from the New England area and arrived in the U.S. during 1994–2000. They are minimally to moderately fluent in English. These participants and their parents work too many hours in low-paying jobs to be involved in Muslim or ethnic organizations. Their engagement with popular culture is primarily through their work which defines and limits their social network and leisure activities to other immigrants. These recent and often undocumented immigrants may not have the opportunities to be part of organizations or to employ traditional activism or political vocabulary. Nevertheless, like the participants in my project, they speak their minds on racism, on Islamophobia, and on the “war on terror” that threatens Muslims here and abroad. Their backgrounds and the Othering discourses they encounter make them “grapple with an ethics of belonging” (Maira 2010, 115). But, like my collaborators, they too are defiantly asserting their Muslim and ethnic identity and are not afraid to criticize America’s foreign policy and this society of which they are members. Personal
experiences along and with the complexity of belonging to a nation-state and at the same
time to a local and (trans)national ummah uniquely position younger generations of Muslims regardless of background. Citizenship demands dissent and national and transnational loyalties are not contradictory because they all draw on universal principles of justice and equality. Even the non-citizens studied by Maira freely appropriated aspects of citizenship models as needed to assert their belonging.

Both in Maira’s project and mine, religion promoted rather than hindered a sense of belonging and a concern for the betterment of their society among younger generations of Muslims, even among those who are not citizens (Maira 2008; and Maira 2010). This complicates simplistic conceptualizations of citizenship in nation-states and narratives of identity crisis and of “us and them”. Muslim civic engagement, assertiveness and visibility in the public sphere along with demands for equality and rights, including for religious accommodations in the work place, worry many. Some see this engagement and visibility as a threat to Western secular values. Others see it as a sign of a sinister agenda and a stealth Muslim movement, but these Muslims see it as not just a religious obligation but also as a citizenship right. As Rosaldo and Flores (1997) noted among Latino/as and like America’s other minorities, the identity of Muslim Americans is constructed in and through discrimination and marginalization and through their struggle in the space between demanding and negotiating. Through this process, their belonging is achieved as they work to realize full legal and cultural citizenship.

The charged atmosphere in the past four years enabled notions of “creeping Sharia’h”, “Stealth Muslims,” and “a victory mosque” to enter public discourse and imagination. But it also pushed Blackamerican and younger Muslims forward to shape the face of Muslims and Islam in America. While immigrant Muslims still control the
majority of national organizations, many of them are making room for their younger members to take the microphone and to stand before the camera. Blackamerican Muslims are also more assertively taking or creating opportunities to speak for themselves and the community. Social media and creative methods democratize the process of representing Muslims; this influences, however minimally, public discourse as mainstream media highlights these individual and these efforts that would not otherwise be noticed.
"How Islam-Bashing Got Cool: President Bush no longer seems able to restrain anti-Islamic rhetoric" is the full title of Amy Caldwell’s article on webzine Beliefnet. She noted that in a period of six weeks after 9/11 “a well-known conservative columnist suggested that Muslims get ‘some sort of hobby other than slaughtering infidels’, that the head of a conservative group suggested that American Muslims should leave the country, and evangelist Franklin Graham described Islam as inherently violent”. Civic leaders were not alone in engaging in this discourse. Some high ranking officials such as Deputy Undersecretary for Intelligence and Army Lt. General Boykin also contributed. The positions of authority these individuals hold gives their anti-Muslim rhetoric an aura of sanctioned bigotry.

Committee on Homeland Security’s “Hearing on the Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and that Community’s Response”

A 2009 Gallup report on Muslim Americans showed that they are the least likely religious group to feel safe walking alone at night or to be satisfied with their cities. There was no significant difference between young and older Muslims’ views on both issues. Though they remain the least satisfied religious group with their local cities, they are also the most optimistic religious group about the future, according to a 2011 Gallup report. For the 2009 findings see http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/153572/REPORT-Muslim-Americans-National-Portrait.aspx and for the 2011 finding see http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/148805/Muslim-Americans-Faith-Freedom-Future.aspx accessed on 9/25/2012


"The Real Man Behind the NYC Islamic Center" CNN’s Fareed Zakaria interview with Sharif El-Gamal on Zakaria’s program GPS. Video accessed on 9/25/2012 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU9oHD6U3MQ&feature=related

He wrote this book in response to Irshad Manji’s book The Trouble with Islam. Manji’s publisher says that in this book Manji “uneartns the troubling cornerstones of mainstream Islam today: tribal insularity, deep-seated anti-Semitism, and an uncritical acceptance of the Koran as the final, and therefore superior, manifesto of God” (Manji 2005, back cover)

ASMA’s website http://www.asmasociety.org/about/b_rauf.html accessed on 9/25/2012


He satirizes the debate in this Salon.com article in a fictionalized leaked memo that “confirms a nefarious plot to infiltrate America using the one weapon we can’t resist: Total Hotness.”
“Study: Threat of Muslim-American terrorism in U.S. Exaggerated.” 1/6/2010. The findings of this joint study by Duke and Stanford University included a stronger sense among Muslims of anti-Muslim bias and the presence of self-policing and programs within the community to combat radicalization. The study outlined recommendations including outreach from social service agencies, enhancing civil rights enforcements, religious literacy, and improving relations between law enforcement and the community.


In his seminal monogram Orientalism (1979) and later in Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World (1981), Edward Said closely examines the origins and implications of the images and imaginations.

Runnymede Trust is an independent research and social policy agency. The commission on British Muslim and Islamophobia that generated this report was headed by Professor Gordon Conway along with eighteen members multi-ethnic and multi-religious.


This prompted the United Nations in 2004 to hold a daylong seminar on Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding. In his opening remarks, then UN Secretary General Kofi Anan conveyed how current events have resulted in Muslims feeling wounded, misunderstood, and fearful for their lives and liberty. He urged that stereotypes engrained in the minds of masses and the media and the monolithic representation of Muslims must be “unlearned.”


Nearly 80 percent of that total was given in 2008 to the Clarion Fund. Clarion Fund distributed the film Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West to over 28 million voters in swing states during the presidential election, at a time when the claim that then-candidate Obama’s was a crypto-Muslim was circulating, making Islam and Muslims an election wedge issue (W. Ali et al. 2011).

Christopher Hitchens, a critic of Islam, argued that Pipes is not a man of peace but a “person who confuses scholarship with propaganda and who pursues petty vendettas with scant regard for objectivity.” See his editorial “Pipes the Propagandist: Bush’s nominee doesn’t belong at the U.S. Institute for Peace” Aug. 11, 2003.


The offending faculty is labeled “Islamist” if they are of Muslim or Arab background (for example, Colombia University’s Rashid Khalili or UCLA’s Abou El Fadl) or dubbed enemy sympathizing leftists (for example, Georgetown’s John Esposito) and self-hating Jews (for example DePaul’s Norman Finkelstein). These scholars are blacklisted on Pipes’ Campus-watch.com website. If the scholars are not yet tenured, Pipes’ group engages in a campaign to subvert tenure processes in their universities through public pressure and threats of cutting funds.
But long before the expertise and authority that earned him an appointment at USIP, Pipes’ writings on Islam and Muslims were problematic. In 1985, Edward Said penned a scathing review of Pipes’ work for the

intellectually scandalous generalizing that allows Pipes to speak of Islam’s anomie, its sense of inferiority, its defensiveness, as if Islam were one simple thing, and as if the quality of his either absent or impressionistic evidence were of the most secondary importance […] I doubt that any expert anywhere in the world would speak today of Judaism of Christianity with quite that combination of force and freedom that Pipes allows himself about Islam [1985, 96-97].

The metaphorical wall of separation between church and state had long failed to stop American politicians from what Gaddy (2004) called “God talk” in the nation’s public sphere (see also Koopman 2001; Simon 2002). Unlike European secularism, American political discourse has always included God talk, but whereas the religious discourses of yesterdays’ leaders was general, theistic and thus more inclusive, today’s politicians derive from a specifically Christian tradition and push a “specific partisan or sectarian point of view” (Gaddy 2004, 54). The paradox is that just when America has become most religiously diverse, the rhetoric has turned particularistic. Perhaps that should not be surprising as this diversity threatens the dominant group. But this instrumentalization of religion for particularistic agendas advances neither religion nor public policy or civil society. It tarnishes religion itself; it also distracts citizens from critically evaluating the substance of policy and the qualifications and integrity of politicians (Gaddy 2004).

For example, 2012 Republic presidential candidate Herman Cain said he would never have Muslim Americans in his administration. After strong criticism, he said he would hire them if they would “take a special oath to show loyalty” and demonstrate they give priority allegiance to the constitution. Scott Keyes. “Herman Cain Would Require Muslim Appointees To Take A Special Loyalty Oath.” 6/8/2011. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia_chapter3.pdf accessed on 7/13/2012


Unlike news reporters whose work is based on “if it bleeds it leads”, however, film and literature creators have an ethical imperative “not to advance the news media’s sins of omission and commission, not to tar an entire group of people on the basis of the crimes and the alleged crimes of a few” (Shaheen 2003, 189).


“9/11 Anniversary Sparks Hate Crimes Against Muslims”. Intelligence Report. Winter 2011. 

A 2004 documentary film, “Mistaken Identity: Sikhs in America”, reported 295 attacks against Sikhs across the United States in the weeks following 9/11. The first of such victims was Balbir Singh, a gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona, who was killed on September 15, 2001. 


Hitchens, Christopher. “A Test of Tolerance The ‘Ground Zero mosque’ debate is about tolerance—and a whole lot more.” 8/23/2010 


True multiculturalism, to those who advocate it, demands mutual respect of all traditions and true liberal education can be the vehicle. It could be one where a place at the table is made for everyone with mutual respect and the knowledge that agreement on all issues is impossible in a diverse and democratic society. Asad points out that the "liberal claim that societies must be 'open' implies that majorities do not have an absolute right to remain undisturbed. Even in a democracy, the majority may have to learn to reorient itself” (2006, 3).

Many of today’s polemics about religion in the public sphere stem from the historical loss of “their schools” that evangelicals feel (Fraser 1999, 34).

Rather than the notions of conversion (trying to be what one is not) and passing (remaining what one is by hiding), Tehranian draws on Yoshino’s concept of “covering of disfavored identities” where “based on pressures to conform to social norms enforced by the dominant race and culture, a rational distaste for ostracism and social opprobrium can lead individuals to engage in the purposeful act of toning down traits that identify them with a stigmatized group” (2009,21).

Tehranian points out how the racial identity of famous Middle Eastern actors who adhere to social norms fades into whiteness but the infamous who transgress these norms become the Middle Eastern other. This only reinforces the stereotypes created in popular culture from prime-time shows to film. For example, in the Disney film Aladdin, all the protagonists are Arab, but only the villains are racialized with thick accent and “exaggerated stereotypical features...facial hair and prominent hooked noses”. On the other hand, Aladdin, Princess Jasmine, and the other benevolent characters exhibit the fewest of these qualities; in fact, their “physiognomy is quintessentially European” and they have no accent (2009, 19).


A particularly alarming pre-9/11 film, The Siege (1998), consolidates the images and articulates the current narrative. It depicts an Arab immigrant who conspires with an Arab car mechanic and Arab college students and their teacher to blow up the New York City’s FBI building as well as a bus and a theater. In the process, they kill FBI agents and hundreds of others. As a result, Marshall Law is declared and all young Arab men including the son of the Arab Christian FBI
agent investigating the case are rounded up. The tagline for this movie is “An enemy they can’t see. A nation under siege. A crisis they can’t control.” The Siege movie: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133952/ synopsis accessed 11/04/2012.

52 In the summer of 2010, a Rabbi asked then 89 year-old Thomas on video if she had any comments on Israel and she replied Israelis should get “the hell out of Palestine. Remember these people are occupied”. When he asked where they should go, she said “back to Poland, Germany and United States where they came from”. She was denounced and forced to issue an apology and to retire. Her legacy of being one of America’s premier journalists who had a seat reserved at the Whitehouse press room was forever tarnished and she suddenly became an Arab. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQcQdWBqtl4 accessed on 11/15/2012.


60 Robert Spencer, Geller’s co-founder of SIOA, coined the term and expounds on his theory in his book “Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam Is Subverting America Without Guns or Bombs”.

61 Part of the CNN “Mosque at Ground Zero- Growing Controversy” interview of the two could be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOp4O9FwzRw accessed on 11/15/2012


63 In the full segment, Juan Williams was arguing that these are his feelings but that the acts of violent Muslims should not be used to smear all Muslims just like violent Christians are not generalized to Christianity. The circulated clip left that out. FoxNews: “When I see people in Muslim garb.” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2eqJl1lFJQ Accessed on 11/15/2012.

“Blog surfaces to counter Juan Williams’s notions of ‘Muslim garb’’. 
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/blog-post/2010/10/juan_williams_muslims_wear_thi.html
accessed on 11/15/2012


This was an amateurish film made by a Christian Egyptian American man who was on probation already for other offenses. The film depicted Prophet Muhammad in a degrading manner. The film had no traction until it was dubbed in Arabic and posted on Arabic websites. Demonstrations ensued in some Muslim majority countries. It was initially thought that the ambassador’s murder was related to the reaction to the film, but it was later revealed this was the act of extremists who took advantage of the demonstration and the unstable situation in post-revolution Libya.

The organization and event’s Facebook page

El Messidi’s bio on his website could be accessed at


He was referring to the Qur’an burning controversy and to the nooses hung in a school by students. The strange fruit is a reference to historical events where lynched Black bodies were hung of trees. The “strange fruit” phrase is the name of Billy Holiday’s 1936 famous song which openly confronted racial hatred. Atlantic Record’s co-founder Ahmet Ertegun considered this song “a declaration of war ... the beginning of the civil rights movement.”
http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/margolick-fruit.html accessed on 11/15/2012
CHAPTER 7
CRAFTING AN AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY

The preceding three chapters covered in depth current narratives pertaining to identity formation, faith vis-à-vis culture, and the public discourse on Islam as these narratives relate to second-generation Muslim Americans. However, these are not disconnected themes. In fact, there is great overlap as they all shape and are shaped by Muslim Americans’ being and belonging and are of particular significance for the younger generations represented here, however tentatively, by the participants in this project. Culture-talk is the scaffold that holds together all three narratives: purportedly cultural conflict underlies identity crisis, culture contaminates the purity of the faith, and an alien Muslim culture threatens America. Culture-talk also runs through this chapter and the next, which will bring together issues of being and belonging and illustrate the (co)constructed and contested nature of identity and belonging. The narrative that ties these two chapters together is one of a communal imperative, a call for building the community and creating a “Muslim American culture.” The stories that are woven into this narrative are ones about the challenges and opportunities of intra-Muslim diversity and about the need for a common culture that fosters a locally rooted identity. In the next chapter, I will examine what inspires the call for creating a culture, what the call means, and what the institutions and products of this culture are. In this chapter, however, I will focus on the state of community-building efforts. I will consider how disparate groups may become a community and what are the obstacles to overcome and the opportunities and strength to draw on in this community-building effort. I will analyze my collaborators’ narratives and Muslim public discourse to shed light on intra-Muslim relations across race, ethnicity, age, and gender lines and on what may be involved in these community crafting efforts.
As the different groups of Muslim America struggle to assert their belonging, to define two critical aspects of their identity (Islam and America), and to counter hegemonic public discourse(s) that define them as dangerous internal and/or external Others, their challenges may seem to be on multiple fronts. These challenges are, however, facets of but one complex process. For, in as much as Muslim Americans succeed in practicing an Islam that remains normative, yet grounded in its social-cultural context and relevant for believers whose specificity can provide a unique contribution to addressing societal challenges, they – as other minorities before them have– will normalize their presence and belonging. Granted, America’s racial legacy perpetuates white privilege and the normativity of whiteness as the archetypical American against whom all others are ethno-racialized and hyphenated. However, as noted earlier, whiteness has no exclusivity on belonging; for people of color, however, belonging is not without cost. Muslim Americans, internally diverse and divided as they are, stand as an interesting test case for the national narrative that maintains that the path to belonging is paved with suffering innumerable socially sanctioned indignities of racism. Facing demonizing public discourses and the erosion of civil liberties, Muslim Americans frequently invoke the nation’s treatment of the designated internal Other of different eras (Indians, Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Irish, Latino/a, and Asian). History, Muslims tell themselves, shows it is their moment to persevere and to do the difficult but necessary work on the path to belonging. This task involves: 1) accepting and asserting that this is home, 2) managing internal diversity and divisions in order to create a coalition-based community and a political identity that speaks for the group, 3) forming alliances with other minoritized groups, 4) asserting a positive presence through care for others and concern for social justice at home and aboard, 5) and, critically important, presenting their own social and cultural contributions.
As noted earlier, America’s unique history homogenized disparate peoples and made them into a group. For example, diverse tribes from Africa became “Blacks”; North American tribes became “Indians”; those from Europe became Catholics, Jews and eventually Whites; and later, diverse groups came to be seen as Asians or Latino/as (or Hispanics). While anti-immigrant nativist sentiment remains today and “model minority” status of Asians is used to further marginalize Blackamericans, the physiognomy of Asian Americans marks them as perpetual foreigners. Similarly, brown skin, ethnic features, and foreign-sounding names mark immigrant Muslims; as noted earlier, clothing and names also mark Black and White convert (wo)men. No matter how many generations they have been here, these Muslims, like Asian Americans, are always asked “where are you from?” and the naming of their American hometowns is usually followed by “where are you really from?”. This “ineradicable foreignness,” as Asian American anthropologist Dorinne Kondo put it, is based on an outward appearance (features, clothing, and so on) that exclude members of these groups from the benefits of being authentically and fully American. Consequently, for Muslims, as it is for Asians and Latino/as, “the narrative and performative production of home, community, and identity is a particularly urgent issue” (Kondo 1996, 98). This is ever more pressing in the aftermath of 9/11 where (not) belonging has significant consequences for life and liberty.

In August 2012, a White supremacist killed six and injured many in a Wisconsin Sikh temple. Post-9/11, Sikh men’s turbans signal a foreignness that makes them visible targets of anti-Muslim hate that maintains that “they all look the same.” In this tragedy, the public shock and condemnation of the crime was curiously and alarmingly punctuated by a concerted effort to point out a “mistaken identity” and to clarify that Sikhs are not Muslims. This theme begs the question asked by Muslims and others:
would the crime have been less heinous if it had happened at a mosque? Following this shooting, a mosque was burnt in Missouri, another was shot with a pellet rifle while people prayed in Chicago, paintball guns were fired at a mosque in Oklahoma City, and a homemade bomb filled with acid was thrown on a Muslim school in Lombard, Illinois (Beinart 2012). These incidents were reported but there was no public outrage or visits by politicians to these communities. Muslim leaders and activists along with interfaith groups gathered in solidarity with the Sikh community as Bloggers, activists, and others decried the narrative of “mistaken identity” and deconstructed its implications. The response under such circumstances and in the specificity of the socio-cultural and historical context of the United States—which lumps diverse people together—has been the emergence of a political identity where violence and discrimination against one Muslim (Asian, Latino/a, Black) is an act against all in the group. The collective identity of Muslims, as in groups before them, becomes “a coalitional identity par excellence” (Kondo 1996, 98). The narrative construction of home, community, and their identity, along with telling their stories, safeguarding their civil liberties and asserting their presence, therefore, are seen by Muslim Americans as the imperative of the current chapter of their, and the nation’s, history.

**E Pluribus Unum: The Making of the American Muslim Umma**

As discussed in chapter 3, immigrants and converts co-authored the first chapters of contemporary Muslim history in America. But in the second half of the twentieth century the members of the native and predominantly Blackamerican community and the members of the large immigrant community(ies) at best ignored each other or gazed at each other with mistrust and mutual resentment. They viewed one another through
prisms distorted by race, class and culture and through mental frames constructed by legacies of slavery, and colonialism, and racialized society. While all these elements existed earlier in their history, the socio-political context and their demographics could then have been a catalyst in their collaboration. However, in times of increased immigration, ethnic groups were more likely to associate and create organizations with people from back home than they were to find common cause with other American minorities.

The term community, like all other social concepts, eludes definition. Additionally, in a globalizing world and in pluralistic societies, the “essential” shared elements (geographical co-location and regular face-to-face interactions on the bases of shared lineage or history) that used to define a community are no longer tenable. Now, communities are formed primarily out of a shared sense of identity, values, memory and often political destiny. A community now more than ever is defined as much from without as it from within; community, therefore, is socially constructed. It is the product of work, of struggle; it is inherently unstable, contextual; it has to be constantly reevaluated in relation to critical political priorities; and it is the product of interpretation, interpretation based on an attention to history, to the concrete, to what Foucault (1980) has called subjugated knowledges [Mohanty 2003,104].

Nevertheless, community is not invented nor is it merely circumstantial and utilitarian; rather, it is constituted in and through mutually irreducible shared experiences, history and memory where the individual and collective are also always embedded in a matrix of power difference and competing tendencies.

America’s motto of *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one) applies not only to the formation of the nation from diverse people, but also to the homogenizing process that lumps diverse people into an ethnic, racial and/or religious “community.” As noted in the previous chapter, the racialization process in America shapes group consciousness
and results in the construction of “communities” and “ethnic groups.” While throughout human history, people have always differentiated themselves in various ways, it is worth noting here that the concepts of race and ethnicity are rooted in the social engineering project of modernity that defines itself relative to an opposite Other and is part of modern European and American history (Norval 1996; Roediger 2005).

In constructing a community, Muslim Americans have models from their dual heritage. They have the American model of “out of many, one” and an Islamic model based on the concept of the ummah that creates unity in diversity without sacrificing the specificity of the constituent groups. Ummah can allow for both celebrating ethnic/cultural variation and respecting sectarian differences and for making solidarity and mutual support a duty. Karim notes that the ummah concept “signifies both a common heritage and new modes of Muslim identity, unity and difference, exchange and conflict, and intra-Muslim networks and interfaith alliances” (2008, 12). This idea of unity in diversity draws on a core maxim in Muslim discursive tradition that juxtaposes the multiplicity of creation and the unicity (Tawhid) of the Creator. Consequently, in the United States, a new American ummah is taking shape, formed both by this shared Muslim heritage and by divergent ethnic traditions and inspired by other American minorities. Muslim American thinkers are proposing an organizing model that manages diversity within a unified political and cultural identity, while maintaining and capitalizing on the specificities of the various groups. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah (2004) uses the analogy of a peacock tail, Jackson (2008) proposes the function that the concept of tribe had served during the Prophet’s time, and Karim (2008) envisions a “network epistemology.” Such models sustain individual and group specificity, while knitting them through common faith ideals (beliefs), a communal religious language and practice, and a shared history (American and Islamic), all the while recognizing the authenticity of
multiple lifeworlds. The late imam W. D. Muhammad, the son of the NOI founder and a prominent Muslim American leader, proclaimed in 1994 at an ISNA-Canada convention that “someday we’ll see Muslims in the US not separated by the color of their skin or national origin or ethnic life or cultural preferences, [but] united as God had intended for us to be, united as one Ummah” and a “model community for all people” (Mohammed 1994). Since then a confluence of processes and circumstances seem to position Muslims in America at a historical juncture where a new kind of group consciousness and collective identity has been evolving.

The category of “Muslim American” or “American Muslim” itself is an unstable and still emerging one. While Islam in America has deep history, its adherents were typically referred to by their race as “Black Muslims” or by their country of origin. A Lexis/Nexis database search returns the earliest use of the terms “Muslim American” or “American Muslim” to be twice in 1970s and then as increasing in frequency in the 1980s. However, it was conflicts (the first Iraq war, the Oklahoma bombing, and of course 9/11) that solidified the term as a category describing Muslims of various backgrounds in America. Though now used frequently by politicians, the media, and by Muslim leaders and activists, most Muslims in America themselves are not quite sure to whom the term refers. As noted in previous studies (for example, M. Ali 2011) and as confirmed in this one, Muslims unequivocally assert their belonging to both Islam and America. Yet, because of the diversity of their origins and the recent coinage of the term, they seem uncertain of whom the category “Muslim American” includes. In this project, nearly 69 percent of the participants identified “Muslim Americans” as including “All Muslims in the US”, and a few more specified the term refers to Muslims who are U.S. citizens. A minority (10 percent) limited the term to only those born in the U.S. Some, however, did not quite know who is meant and stated so.
In an earlier study that I conducted among Arizona Muslims (M. Ali 2011), I included questions aimed to draw out the meaning of the terms American Muslim and Muslim American and whether or not the two terms differed. The responses to these questions fell into five themes, ordered here by the frequency of their occurrence: the terms meant the same and were interchangeable; the terms meant the same, but Muslim American is preferred for putting one’s relationship with God first; both terms exclusively apply to converts and their children; American Muslim is reserved for converts and their children, while Muslim American indicates immigrants only or all Muslims in America regardless of origin; and Muslim American is a category within American society (analogous to Catholic Americans) and American Muslim is a category within the global community (analogous to American Catholics or Egyptian Muslims).

In daily interactions, within and outside the community, distinctions are made on ethnic bases and people do not refer to themselves as Muslim Americans for reasons articulated by twenty-one year old Shukri. He said, “I do consider myself a Muslim. I do consider myself an American, however, I consider myself an Arab American and not a Muslim American because Muslim is a religion and American is a cultural background. They are two different things.” Because these terms are not commonly reflected upon, some participants seemed to have realized from the question the diverse ways that the term could be understood. Thirty year old survey participant Hanadi expresses this new insight when she said, “this is a very fascinating question. I never thought about how there could be multiple definitions. I prefer to be inclusive and at the same time I recognize that the more inclusive you are the harder it is to generalize the thoughts, feelings, values, and dreams that the group ‘Muslim Americans’ possess.”

Like other ethnic terms (Hispanic, Latino/a, Asian), the terms Muslim American and American Muslim were first introduced from the outside. Because those of
immigrant background make up the majority, Muslims in America are often discussed in terms of assimilation and integration. Consequently, the term *Muslim American* often conjures up images of recent immigrants and in doing so marginalizes the large and growing population of native converts and their descendants. It also erases the long history of Islam in America and raises questions about Islam’s authenticity as American religion. This, along with intra-Muslim politics, prompted the coinage of the notion of *indigenous Muslims* which I will discuss shortly. Yet, while these terms are gaining currency and *Muslim American* is becoming an ethnicized political identity, the meaning of these terms and who they include or exclude are in flux.

Ethnogenesis has its roots in relations of inequality, and the politics of ethnicity is rooted in marginality. Ethnicity had always had a cultural connotation; it is made through “inter-reference” between two or more co-existing cultural groups which are defined against each other. Far from being invented by a group’s own elite, the names and the conditions of ethnic identity are typically provided by the dominant group (Hutcheon 1998; Wilmsen 1996). But the ethnicized group does not passively join in this process. Ethnicity arises as a definition from outside within a hegemonic context, but it is appropriated, redefined and at times acquiesced to by members of the group (Comaroff 1996; Eder 2004; Jonsson 2010; Pieterse 1996; Tsuda 2003). Therefore, though differences exist, the boundaries of the community in the Muslim American *ummah* are being gradually drawn and are becoming clearer. The terms, Muslim American and American Muslim gain salience with use across ethno-racial lines when referring to collective challenges and opportunities. The terms index rising consciousness among diverse Muslim groups who are realizing that no matter their internal differences and conflicts, they are seen as one group, and at this point in American history, they are a “problem people.”
The challenges Muslims face in the post-9/11 environment, from eroding civil rights to social and cultural Othering, have pushed many of them, particularly the leaders and activists and especially the younger ones, to recognize a shared socio-political destiny. If they are to thrive individually and collectively, and if Islam is to have a future in America, they must regroup, resolve conflicts and manage diversity (ethnic, racial, sectarian, generational, gender, class) and leverage their resources (material, human, cultural). This is essential not only for their community’s protection and prosperity but is also seen as a faith imperative to contribute in a positive and distinctive way to society and to international affairs.

Managing Difference and Diversity

The singularity of Muslim Americans, within their society and in the global ummah, in their ethno-racial and sectarian diversity and with the usual economic, gender and generational differences, complicate their interactions and the potential construction and collaboration as a “community.” Assessing their impressions of the relationships between immigrants and converts, a majority (66 percent) of participants deemed these relations to be good, but the proportion of those who thought these groups have barely acceptable or poor relations was significant (34 percent). The quality of the relationship between the two groups is determined by their levels of interactions and how they view and treat each other. Project participants overwhelmingly (85 percent) noted that the two groups typically pray in the same mosque but they socialize together less often (54 percent). They sometimes work together on projects (48 percent) but less often (37 percent) govern together. Over a quarter (28 percent), however, thought that the two groups have little or no interactions
at all. As for the presence of converts in the local community or in mosque leadership, a majority of respondents (54 percent) sees little or no involvement. This view was more prevalent among male participants, perhaps because men are more likely to be involved in and acknowledgeable of mosque leadership. Differences in how religion is understood or practiced may be a factor in the degree of interaction and the quality of the relationships between immigrants and converts, but it is not a significant one. While a majority (74 percent) of participants noted some differences, most of them said that the difference were minor.

One of the most frequent complaints about immigrants is articulated by this son of a Blackamerican father and an Indian immigrant mother who self identifies as an African American. According to Adam,

immigrant Muslims see themselves as the guardians of the true Islam; so while they welcome converts, they patronize converts and sort of type-cast them into certain roles. Moreover, no matter the time the convert puts in or the scholarly learning the convert attains, the immigrants seem to always look down upon the converts.

In assessing relations between immigrants and converts, an interesting gender difference emerged between the two field sites. While, at both sites, a majority of men and women assessed the relations to be overall good, in the Phoenix-valley area women were less likely than men (56 percent compared to 73 percent) to say so, while the reverse was true in Chicagoland (75 percent compared to 58 percent). In other words, in the Phoenix-valley more women thought the relationship is barely acceptable or poor and in Chicagoland more men shared that view. Part of the reason may be that, comparatively, participants from the Phoenix-valley were more likely to pray in mosques that had Blackamericans and Whiteamericans because the Muslim community is smaller and residentially dispersed. This might be the basis for the men’s more positive assessment. The more critical assessment of the women in the Phoenix-valley could be
the result of their activities beyond Friday prayers. Here, women make up the majority of community activists and event organizers, and they are the founders/leaders of most organizations, though they are not always on mosque boards. Additionally, during the fieldwork period of this project in Phoenix-valley, there were lectures, workshops, and Black History Month seminars that highlighted the difficulties of the immigrants-converts relationship and the importance of honest discussion and reconciliation. In Chicagoland, ethnic Muslim spaces are more defined due to Chicago’s segregated neighborhoods. But Muslim women there, as noted in Karim (2008), tend to cross ethnic boundaries and in this project were twice as likely to pray at a mosque that included Blacks and Whites. I frequently heard younger women “mosque hopping” to sample the activities in different mosques. The gender difference in their assessments could be due to these experiences.

Members of younger generations are critical of the community as a whole but they are most critical of their own ethnic group. Musa, the Blackamerican Chicagoan quoted earlier, says that the Blackamerican Muslim leadership, especially in the inner city, lacks vision. Rather than working together and forming coalitions to address the serious challenges of life there, they are too focused on individual endeavors. He understands the fact that these challenges make people prioritize their families’ needs and leave little resources to help maintain the storefront mosques where the community prays. But he does not excuse anyone; instead, he proposes that if everyone gave a dollar and if leaders thought beyond “my little mosque,” the funds could be invested in social entrepreneurial projects. Investing in halal restaurants, barbershops, and grocery stores patronized by members would build a business and a community network around the mosque. This would in turn support the mosque and relieve individuals of the burden of being the sole source of mosque income. This could potentially not only solve the
funding problems of mosques and community centers but might also decrease unemployment, limit food deserts, and economically empower the community. Musa’s recognizes that there is precedent for his proposed model in what the Nation of Islam had implemented. He says: “people can hate the NOI as much as they want and I mean we already know we don’t agree with their aqeeda [creed], but they did some things that were unheard of in the Black community” that contributed to economic self-sufficiency.

Immigrants’ offspring are critical of the focus on ethnicity that they see in their mosques and among their families. The passionate critique of Saba, a twenty-two year old Chicagoan of Pakistani background, captures a sentiment I heard time and again. She and others are empathetic and understand that immigrants came from homogenous communities. In the U.S., however, things have to change.

within the Muslim community, we seem to be so in our own world. We don’t seem to go outside of the masjids. We seem to just stay in our little bubble. And I’ve noticed this especially in the Chicago...The ethnic groups are the ones that are just in their own bubbles and people in the Muslim community have forgotten that Islam...is beautiful because it’s so diverse in color. And since when did you decide that this is the Desi masjid [mosque] or this is the Arab masjid [and say] “don’t go there, only the Black community goes there, or only the Nigerian community goes there”. It’s like dude, this is Islam! When did you decide that Islam was only for Arabs or Islam was only for Pakistanis or it was only for Indians or it was only for Bengalis!

Saba works for Muslim organizations and sees the inconsistency between the rhetoric about the importance of inclusion and the reality of ethnic enclaves. She observes and detests how mosque groups criticize others for not being inclusive, when attendees at their mosques are predominately from one or two ethnic groups and their neighborhoods are ethnic enclaves. Saba cannot understand how “irrelevant” reasons like differences in ethnicity or even hometown origins prevent people from “doing work for the deen.” She draws on the Islamic discursive tradition, citing the immigration of the Prophet and Qur’anic verses to argue for diversity as a divine plan. She then exhorts Muslims to jettison this limiting mentality and to get on with the necessary work of living
up to Islamic ideals. When I asked her if the views of her peers differ from the people she describes, she explained that there will always be some who grow up with and internalize such views, but that she and the majority of young people have grown up with diverse people and see difference as normal and as something to embrace:

We are really lucky because we don’t have that mentality. We’re able to do our work and to engage ourselves in a way that we don’t think about that. In fact, we learn from each other. Like my Arab friends, they know Urdu because their friends are Pakistani. And I know friends that are Pakistani and they’re learning Arabic because guess what, their friends are Arabs. I know the Black Muslim brothers that are always saying salaam to me, they’ve learned Urdu too. Guess what, because we’re all learning from each other. Hello, if anything, this should be a positive thing. We should quit arguing over each ethnic group and help each other. Because we have to get the work of the deen done! And you’re not going to get the work of the deen done when you’re sitting around arguing over “we’re not going to let the Fellahis [peasants] come in, we’re not gonna let the Somalis come in.” That’s so stupid if you think about it. And you could ask any kid now, they’ll think it’s dumb because they’re interacting with students in their classroom who are different than them. Why do we have to have that internal conflict in the Ummah? Subhanallah!! [the last word is an Arabic term that glorifies God but one also used to express both amazement and exasperation as Saba does here]

The critique of the young and the more assertive positions of converts, along with the changing socio-political environment post-9/11, have prompted community self-reflection and efforts towards rapprochement.

“Immigrants” and “Indigenous”: What’s in a Name?

As I discussed in chapter 3, a theme of ostensibly parallel historical trajectories of immigrants and converts has dominated the story of Muslims in America. In reality, however, these are intertwined stories in a larger narrative of the history of Islam in American. The reader may recall, from the introductory chapter, the vignette from the MANA conference about the friction and fissures between immigrants and converts. At this conference, Blackamerican speakers addressed the need to reclaim the agenda and
the discourse of Islam in America from the immigrant face it has come to have. They called for restoring Islam in the U.S. to its indigenous and authentically American roots. The term indigenous Muslim is gaining currency among activists and leaders at the national level, but the general Muslim population seems unaware of it. More frequently used by those of convert background and contested by some of all backgrounds, “indigenous Muslims” refers to Blackamericans, Whiteamericans and Latino/as, all in contrast to Muslims of Middle Eastern, Asian, and African immigrant background. Interestingly, it does not seem to exclude Latino/as and Europeans of immigrant background who convert to Islam. Since immigrants privilege their cultures of origins where culture and religious norms cannot be easily disaggregated, converts – if they hope to be good Muslims – are always under pressure to become Arab or Pakistani or whatever group is predominate in the local mosque. Thus, indigenous is a conscious and assertive move to turn a liability into an asset and, in post 9/11 America, to brandish cultural capital.

While the term indigenous is used more frequently in Muslim conferences and lectures, it is not a familiar one to the grassroots. Sixty percent of the participants never heard of the term or is not sure what it means, while nearly 20 percent thinks it refers to “all those Muslims who are born in the U.S. regardless of their background.” Another 10 percent thinks it refers to “any Muslims (immigrant or not) who thinks of the USA as home.” Less than 8 percent identified the term with the meaning its users intend to convey, essentially to describe “only converts/reverts and their children.” Though it might have been used earlier, the term “indigenous Muslims” entered Muslim public sphere after the 2000 presidential election and the associated efforts to build a Muslim voting bloc. Instead of resulting in a bloc vote, however, the efforts split the community
into those who wanted Muslims to support then-candidate Bush for his proposed foreign policy and those who wanted to support candidate Gore for his focus on domestic issues.

Those arguing for a domestically-focused Muslim political agenda were led by prominent convert imams and activists who subsequently created the Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA). At its founding, MANA was an organization for indigenous Muslims, and indigenous was defined as all those who think of America as home, regardless of their background. Since then, however, indigenous is the preferred term by many converts to reclaim their belonging to America and the cultural capital that entails. As natives to this land, they argue, the right to define both the face of Islam and the agenda of Muslims in American belongs to them. Not surprisingly, some immigrants and their offspring take issue with the term and its exclusionary implications, but they are not alone in their criticism. Malik, a third generation Blackamerican Muslim, thinks indigenous is “really more of a racial category than anything. [It] generally means African American, sometimes Hispanics, and rarely Whites.” Safia, a Blackamerican female, conveys the problematics of the concept even for those, like her, who use it. She uses it when she needs “to distinguish” the different groups, but she does not like it because except for those whose “lands were stolen by the first settlers”, “barely anyone would be considered indigenous.” If it must be used, Safia thinks, it only makes sense when it refers to some “who can’t easily trace their heritage to another country because of centuries of settlement” in the U.S. To her, this means only Blackamericans and Whiteamericans.

The term indigenous gained wider use after the publication of Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection (2005) by Blackamerican Muslim religious scholar and academic, Sherman Jackson. Jackson examines the history of Islam in America, juxtaposes an “Immigrant Islam” with an indigenous one, and
analyzes the immigrant–indigenous community divide as he aims to make a case for the “Third Resurrection”1 of Blackamerican Muslims. This would be an era where Blackamericans emerge from the impasse resulting from the encounter between “Blackamerican Islam” and “Immigrant Islam.” The difference is not theological but lies in the fact that the former is shaped by a protest-based “Black Religion” that rejects the oppression of white supremacy, while the latter defines Islam through the lens of “Post-colonial Religion” and in opposition to the West. “Immigrant Islam” “universaliz[es] the particular” of the Muslim world and sees danger in the behaviors, cultural norms and institutions of the West, all the while internalizing its prejudices and striving to achieve or appropriate its successes (Jackson 2005). These two root ideologies and Immigrant Islam’s monopoly on religious authority positioned Blackamerican Muslims in a liminal state, neither fully Black nor fully American, and informed their self-definition. In this new era of the Third Resurrection, they will be able to self-authenticate their identity and agenda through mastery, engagement, and appropriation of Sunni Islam’s discursive tradition and become subjects, rather than the objects, of this tradition (Jackson 2005).

Jackson’s book generated some discontent among immigrants who felt vilified as authoritarian and stigmatized as foreign/outsiders; many apparently shared their sentiments with the author, who was surprised by the reaction. Many Blackamerican activists and leaders, on the other hand, felt vindicated by the critique of immigrants and empowered by the book. Subsequently they have taken as their own the agenda for an indigenous Islam, as the title of the MANA conference suggests. Professor Jackson was the keynote speaker at this conference. At a 2011 Islam in America Conference at DePaul University, a spirited exchange that reflected the contested nature of these terms took place between Professor Jackson and Dr. Rami Nashashibi. Nashashibi, one of the few non-Black speakers at that first MANA conference, is a sociologist of Palestinian descent
and a prominent community activist whose work on social justice in the inner-city bridges communities. Nashashibi said that he understands Jackson’s intent to expound on the forces and experiences that shaped Islam in America. He even sees a utility of the concepts for “agitating for race consciousness” among Muslims who, even in their second and third generations, may not escape and might have internalized racist attitudes. Nashashibi points out, however, that the “binary construction” of the terms is, nevertheless, problematic on several levels. First, using indigeneity, which is a specific anthropological concept, makes Muslims “look very unsophisticated and crude”; second, the immigrant–indigenous binary erases the real-life complexities of people who blur the boundaries and equates immigrants with suburbs and Blacks with inner-city poverty and problems; and third, the divide invokes a nativist discourse that historically co-opted Blacks and pitted them against immigrants and ultimately only served White supremacist interests. [fieldnotes].

Responding to this critique, Jackson unequivocally argued that understanding his immigrant–indigenous juxtaposition as a racial or ethnic divide is “a fundamental misreading” of his book. The aim of what he wrote, he added, was to define an ideological prism, a point of departure, a way of looking at the world. Do we look at Islam in America through the prism of experiences, histories, narratives that are indigenous to Islam or do we continue to superimpose upon those who are born here understandings that are shaped by histories, experiences, narratives that were born elsewhere. That was the divide. [fieldnotes].

To illustrate his point, he notes that some Blackamericans are on the immigrant side of this divide because, more than someone born elsewhere, they espouse an immigrant mentality that privileges and wishes to impose those imported experiences and norms. As for the particularly social science understanding of indigeneity, Jackson does not feel beholden or bound by those understandings nor does he feel the need to shun the term because of a post-colonial critique that see indigeneity as “a nasty colonial repost.” Here,
he draws on the Islamic discursive tradition to point out how this tradition itself has made distinctions between those who were there already in a particular place (for example Al-ansar or ahal-e-dar) and those who came later (for example, Al-Muhajerreen or al-ajaneb) without an implied exclusion (fieldnotes).

In this book, Jackson does indeed make an explicit distinction between “Immigrant Islam” and immigrants, particularly those from second and subsequent generations. The Third Resurrection, he notes, fights the hegemonic ideas of Immigrant Islam but not immigrant people. He does concede, however, that since there is not yet an American alternative, “most immigrant Muslims are likely to remain at least provisional supporters of Immigrant Islam” if for no other reason than “preserving their sense of authenticity, identity, and ownership” (Jackson 2005, 13). This distinction in the book, however, gets blurred because as he analyzes and discusses Blackamerican–immigrant relations, the two groups seem to be divided precisely because they embody the respective (Indigenous or Immigrant) ideological prisms. To the reader—whether immigrant or not— the author’s use of “Immigrant” with an upper case “I” for the ideas and lower case “i” for immigrant people, and the hedging evident in “likely to remain at least provisional”, get lost. In this reading process, people not just ideas seem to be the problem. Subsequently, converts and their offspring—including those who internalize the ideological prism of “Immigrant Islam” and accuse immigrants who do not of betraying true Islam—assert their indigenousness. All immigrants and their offspring are then lumped together and are viewed as representatives of the hegemonic ideology of “Immigrant Islam.”

To some outsiders, Muslims’ use of indigeneity would indeed appear “unsophisticated and crude”, as Nashashibi points out. However, the contested nature of the term both inside and outside of anthropology and among Muslims reveals the work
“indigeneity” does as a potent tool in the politics of belonging and power. In introducing the edited collection on *Indigenous Experiences Today*, de la Cadena and Starn (2007) note that understanding indigeneity requires recognizing that it is first and foremost a “relational field.” It “emerges only within larger social fields of difference and sameness; it acquires its ‘positive’ meaning not from some essential properties of its own, but through its relation to what it is not, to what it exceeds or lacks.” Additionally, it is “at once historically contingent and encompassing” of all of us—indigenous or not. After all, as Mahmood Mamdani noted, native and settler necessarily and mutually construct and define each other (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 4-5). Furthermore, as Mary Louise Pratt argues in the same volume, indigeneity is about “prior-ity in time and place.” It is about who was where first before whom, and thus it is “relational and retrospective”. A group claims indigenous or native status “by virtue of the recognition that someone else arrived in a place and found them or their ancestors ‘already’ there.” Indigeneity, Pratt notes, is not a condition but a force and a process that begins, not ends, with securing the label; a “nonteleological process of becoming, self-creation, and self-determination, the living out of a collective being in time and place” (Pratt 2007, 399–400). This is the work the label “indigenous Muslim” does in Muslim America.

Discussion of indigenousness always involves a relationship with the state, which may at first appears irrelevant to the claims of Muslim converts. But state policies and policing loom large in this case also, as should be evident from this dissertation. Consequently, with the above conceptualization of indigeneity and the looming presence of the state in Muslim lives, the converts’ claim of indigenousness at this historical moment may be divisive, but it is neither crude nor unsophisticated. It is at once a process and a force for self-definition, reclamation of authenticity vis-à-vis those immigrant Muslims who long expected converts to shed their American-ness, and a
political gesture toward state policies and a society that ignores the existence of converts. But as noted above, indigenousness entails a settler (a colonizing outsider) who usurps the rights and resources of an indigenous native. This is where, in my opinion, the problem and danger of this term lie. To immigrant Muslims, whose self-definition and self-understanding as the oppressed indigenous subjects of the colonial West have shaped the very “Immigrant Islam” prism that Jackson argues against, to be seen as the oppressive colonizing settler is not an insult but an injury that jars the foundation of their self-understanding. Therefore, the argument of indigenousness as being a “colonial repost” cannot be easily dismissed. For it is not merely an intellectual post-colonial critique and a discursive exercise; it is one foundational to the identities of both immigrants and converts and it remains at the heart of the issues and the divide that Jackson addressed in his book. The terms that define immigrants and converts will continue to be contested and will no doubt shape their relationship. But as the American-born descendants of the two groups take the helm of the religious and political leadership of the community, the point of labels might become moot.

Prejudices, Privileges, and Power

Bridging the ethno-racial Muslim divide is critical if the community is to leverage its numbers and resources for solving its critical local and national issues and for playing any significant role internationally. Success or failure in this effort will also have a determining role in the future of Islam in America (Jackson 2005; M. Khan 2002). There are several causes for the intra-community fractures, but one root cause may be attributed to the respective historical experiences of the two largest groups (immigrants
and Blackamerican), which have served as the greatest impediment to unity and collaboration. One could sum up this obstacle as the incoherence resulting from the encounter between the formerly enslaved and the formerly colonized, each group having had differing experiences that have shaped their respective identities and their agendas. In this context, until the late 1990s, immigrants had given priority to the political and social struggles of the Muslim world over domestic issues. Furthermore, the Muslim world has been—and in many ways continues to be—viewed as the point of reference and repository for religious knowledge, etiquette and esthetics, and gender norms and behavior. The historical association of Blackamerican Islam with the Nation of Islam and its ostensibly syncretistic, heretical and race-based theology has long exacerbated the situation by shaping immigrant views of Blackamerican Muslims. In result, immigrants maintain scholarly religious interpretive authority and determined what is or is not Islamic. Consequently, as Jackson (2005) points out, unlike everywhere else Islam spread, this delayed the transfer of this authority to native-born hands and the development of a locally-grounded Islam cloaked in an American cultural garb. This monopoly of religious authority, combined with the resources available to affluent immigrants, enabled them to create and lead national institutions and thereby help to shape the “foreign” face of Islam in the U.S. It has also led to a sense of marginalization among converts, most of whom are Blackamericans.

Another factor in the intra-community divide is what Lawrence (2002) calls racialized class prejudice whereby, from early American history until today, new immigrants encountering the privilege of whiteness strive to simultaneously align themselves with the White and distance themselves from the Black side of the racial divide (also see Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 2005). While even poor immigrants have this tendency, the post-1965 Muslim immigrants, who were predominantly well-educated
urbanites or university students, were more likely to do so. Engaging in the covering strategies discussed earlier, they settled comfortably into the American middle class, buying wholeheartedly into the notion of American meritocracy. They became blind to the plight of countless other Americans and particularly the many Indianamericans and Blackamericans who occupy the bottom rungs of the racial ladder and who have long been economically and politically marginalized by structural and social racism. The myth of meritocracy and model minorities are based on the assumption of a level playing field and ample opportunities; if one only works hard enough, everyone can achieve the American dream. Those who do not achieve the dream are, purportedly, just not applying themselves enough. In this thinking, successful Blackamericans and other minorities are the exception that proves the rule of meritocracy and accessibility of the American dream for all. The election of Obama as the first Black president is now taken as a case in point. This thinking is particularly internalized by many first-generation middle class immigrants who see their own success as evidence.

On the south side of Chicago, as in other urban areas, class, ethnicity and religion encounter each other to construct the lens through which different groups gauge and gaze at each other. For example, many of the corner stores in the largely Blackamerican urban neighborhood of south Chicago are owned by Arabs, many of whom are Muslims. In spite of Islam’s prohibition on trading in alcohol and gambling products regardless of the religious background of the buyer, these stores sell these products. To Blackamericans of all backgrounds, these merchants are racists exploiting their community and contributing to its destruction. To Muslim Blackamericans, these Arab Muslim liquor store owners are bigots, immoral, and religious hypocrites who engage in illicit businesses and then attend mosques as observant Muslims. In and around these interactions at the corner store is where stereotypes are (re)constructed: poor, violent,
drug and alcohol using Blacks and moneygrubbing, irreligious, racist Arabs. The term these Arab store owners use for Blacks is *abd* which literally means slave and which some Arab groups use to refer to Black people in general. Though *abd* prefixes the most common Muslims names (for example, Abd-Allah, Abdul-Rahaman) as an honorific that means slave of God, used alone and in the American context, this word is derogatory and leaves potent psychic residue. Musa remembers such encounters at the corner store and with his mostly Palestinian and Syrian American friends and classmates in an Islamic school in a Chicago suburb. He says,

I was twelve, I was amongst a lot of Arabs and there were few Pakistani, maybe one or two, few African Americans in school. The first Arabic word I learned was *abeed* [plural of *abd*], it was just common terminology among the kids. At that time, when they told me what it meant, they were forward with anything, they defined it for me, and told me it means, they laughed before they defined, but they told me it meant slave... So when I was young, I was walking to these stores and I would hear that word and I would know what they are talking about.

Musa does not think color-based racism inspires the use of the term *abd* because in America it does not refer to Black immigrants; those are, instead, referred to by their national origins as Sudanese, Somalis or Nigerian, for example. *Abd* is reserved, Musa notes, for “people who are born in this country, Black African Americans” and reflects a particular bigotry that stems from that particular history. Musa’s observation is confirmed by Jihan. The daughter of Indian immigrants, she elaborates on the nuances of this distinction from the point of view of the middle-class immigrants and the intersectionality of class, color and culture. At this intersection, being professional, being member of the ethnic group, being White, or being of an “Eastern” (Arab, Asian, or African) background improves one’s position in the community. In this hierarchy, a Blackamerican doctor will be more likely to be welcomed than a Bosnian or Ghanaian or Indian taxi driver, but a Ghanaian doctor is more likely to have a better status in the community than the Blackamerican doctor because of his “Eastern” culture. The degree
of cultural differences fades into the background when the person is a White professional or a business owner. Jihan explain that

there’s very much racism there. But it’s not because of race, right, because the Somali is the same color as the African-American. It’s a stigma associated with African-Americans. I think [it is] the same preconceived notions that people have about African-Americans in the United States. That they’re from the ghetto and that they’re, you know, loud and that they’re not educated and, they’re lazy and that they’re, you know, all of those things.

The various groups of Muslims decry intra-Muslim fissures regardless of their causes, but they do little to mend them because any one group often does not see itself as part of the problem. While working on this project, I had several discussions that reveal the depth of the angst among converts and of the bafflement of immigrants. In these discussions, inevitably immigrants were faulted for many things. Their reasons for immigration, for example, were attributed to their search for wealth and the *dunyia* (this world) rather than a desire to work for God and his *deen* (religion). Desires to pursue education or to flee oppression (economic, political, or religious) indeed motived Muslims to immigrate, but these immigrants do not see themselves as chasing after *dunyia*. Instead, they respond by locating their reasons squarely in the Islamic tradition and with reference to its founding narrative of escaping oppression. While some immigrants pursue their American dream fulltime, many are able to balance that pursuit with “Islamic work” and worship. The response of immigrants to this critique from converts, however, misses what is implied in the criticism; namely, that immigrants have reaped benefits paid for in life, limb and liberty by Blacks. Rather than appreciating these sacrifices and doing their part for social justice, immigrants are seen as having aligned themselves with Whites and further contributing to the oppression. If they are concerned at all, converts say, it is not for the wellbeing of their brethren across town but
for problems of Muslims across the ocean, to whom they send aid and single out in communal prayers.

Along with this critique and apart from the struggle over religious authority, convert grievances also include the erasure of Blackamericans from the history of Islam in America. Immigrants often talk as though Islam immigrated in the 1960s rather having deep native roots. A prominent female Blackamerican Muslim convert concludes that the problem between the two groups is largely due to cultural differences and mistrust, further complicated by differences in how immigrants and Blackamerican converts view the history and present role the NOI. In Black communities, she notes, there is a fluidity that enables one to easily cross religious and sectarian borders without sanctions, while immigrants draw more rigid boundaries and do not understand this fluidity among Blackamerican Muslims. Regarding cultural differences, she posits the existence of a “cult of womanhood” among Blackamericans in general that makes it difficult to engage immigrants. We, she notes, “don’t have the hang-ups about men that you [immigrant women] have.” She adds that Blackamerican women have “no interest” in immigrants except for “can she teach me how to cook that, can she show me how to pronounce that Arabic word, or why are they like that?” (fieldnotes). She and another female academic both reiterated that immigrants, without exception, have a sense of superiority towards Blackamericans, whom they see as “ghetto.” Immigrants privilege their own history and discount Blackamerican Muslim history; subsequently, they draw on these privileged perspectives to frame all issues. She and other female converts, however, are also critical of male converts who, the “cult of womanhood” notwithstanding, dominate the leadership of Blackamerican mosques and organizations. These men, women note, neither want to work with women nor ask for their opinions (fieldnotes). Nevertheless, like their immigrant counterparts and as in other faith
communities, women do much of the work of religious communities without the benefit of leadership positions. The angst and distrust are palpable, and stereotypes abound on both sides of the immigrant-convert divide. Here, as is the case with the other narratives considered in this dissertation, culture is invoked and carries the explanatory load for every behavior, idea and individual discretion.

Because most converts are Black, discussions about immigrant-convert relations are frequently framed in terms of race or racism. In a youth workshop in a mosque in Phoenix-valley, a guest speaker talked about the racism he faced as a biracial child in America. After he converted, he said, the treatment he received among Muslims was no better. A Black female convert and community leader among immigrants and their offspring, also shared her experiences with the attendees. She often feels excluded when socializing with immigrants, who converse in their native languages without translating to include her “They know I don’t understand and most of them speak English but don’t [in the group].” She adds that “converts have to prove [their Muslim-ness], have to be authenticated,” and all this “hurts [her] heart.” She struggled to hold back tears as she said that. To deconstruct perceptions, the workshop outlined the problematics of Black images shaped by rap music and popular culture and addressed how young people of all races, trying to be cool, feel free to use the “N word”, ignorant of its potent symbolism and history. The guest speaker reminded people that racism is incompatible with Islam. He cited the Prophet’s strong reprimand of one of his companions, who belittled the background of the great companion Bilal, the first Black Muslim. Racism is also seen by Black and White converts and by some of immigrant backgrounds in the way White converts are welcomed in the community and fronted as spokespeople.

Immigrant Muslims are not immune from the bigotry that they bring with them and/or they internalize in their new home, but it would be too simplistic to attribute all
inter-ethnic tensions to it. Muhammad, a Blackamerican academic, imam and activist who works and socializes across the immigrant–convert divide, concluded that racism exists among some immigrants, but it is not so pervasive. The causes for the division, he believes, are more complicated. But because of Black history in America, he theorized, racism is foremost on Blackamerican minds and negative interactions are generally seen through that lens. Being one of a few Blackamericans working in predominantly immigrant organizations, he advocates for involving more Blacks in its leadership. He was told that Blackamerican Muslims are more than welcome to join as voting members and to run for positions like everyone else. He recognized that on this issue, the crux of the matter is a misunderstanding. Because of their historical exclusion from society, Blackamericans are not likely to apply like “everyone else.” Because the playing field has never been level, a corrective process is necessary. At the societal level, Affirmative Action serves as this corrective. Within the Muslim community, there needs to be an equivalent— a “special invitation” extended to Blackamerican Muslims so they are not fighting to get in but instead are welcomed, wanted, and valued. Not sharing the same historical memory, immigrants are relatively oblivious to this Blackamerican need.

Experiences and social contexts shape individual and collective identity and the frames of reference on which we draw to understand our world. This was obvious as the various groups were talking about (though rarely to) each other. Blackamericans saw immigrants as racist newcomers incapable of fully understanding or belonging to America. While White converts are typically better received, they too complain of the cultural chauvinism of immigrants who expect them to abandon their American ways.

Because immigrants have assumed religious authority and defined the public face of Islam, converts see immigrants like guests who take over the home of their host rather than sitting back and showing due deference. “How would they feel if we went to Egypt
or Pakistan and tried to teach and lead them?" was a common refrain I heard from converts. Interestingly enough, however, such sentiment was rarely expressed by the children of converts. Immigrants, on the other hand, may laud the courage and the knowledge converts acquired through their spiritual quest while all the while pressuring them to become an Arab, South Asian, or African and not realizing the problematics of cultural apostasy. On the other hand, converts do not appreciate the disorienting experience of immigration. Immigrants feel the need to hold on and value all that is from back home in order not to lose something of themselves. To immigrants, wanting converts to dress and act like them is a form of inclusion, an adoption of sort. Additionally, immigrants left their home countries and embarked on an uncertain journey to make better lives for themselves and their families. This being their priority, they aim to join those who are successful in society and see no good reason to “rock the boat” by advocating for social justice for other marginalized people, after all, these people seem to them to be much better off than many others “back home”.

In their conceptualization of Islam in America, immigrants are blamed for not acknowledging the contributions and belonging of converts, and until recently, immigrants glossed over race as a social construct and neglected its real life consequences. When I asked Muhammad if the offspring of both groups hold the same views as their parents, he said they do not. He travels extensively and on every campus eager young people from diverse backgrounds surround him and other Blackamerican scholars. He noted, “even in society, older generations see everything through that [race] lens but for younger people that is not even on their radar.” He cited how diverse young people mobilized to elect Obama while older generations were debating whether he was too Black or not Black enough. The participants in this project are fully aware of these intra-community problems. They see the prejudices of the older generations and
acknowledge that they may also have “subconsciously” shaped the ideas and actions of their own generation, though participants contend that such prejudices are much less prevalent among them.

**Rapprochement Through Recognition and Acknowledgment**

As Muslim Americans see how Islam dominates headlines that are associated with conflict, fear and violence, and as they lament their conditions at home and abroad, a common refrain among them is, “Verily, God will not change the condition of a people until they change that which is in their inner selves” (Qur'an 13:11). There is much that separates immigrants and converts, but what should bring them together is greater and is both a matter of religious idealism and American pragmatism to which current events provide a catalyst. For decades, divisions across and within ethnic groups simmered under the surface and were only discussed among group members. As noted earlier, disagreements on forming a Muslim voting bloc during the 2000 election brought these divisions to the surface, but the events of the past decade pushed them to the foreground with even greater urgency. Many immigrant leaders and activists at the national and local level realized that U.S. born Muslims – and especially converts – are better and more credible spokespersons for the Muslim community because of their linguistic and cultural competence. While realizing and relishing the important role they could play, some of these new representatives felt used by immigrants who ignored them for years. This was articulated by Jackson, a Blackamerican from Arizona who had converted to Islam twenty years prior. According to him, “brothers in the masjid, in Tempe [immigrant majority] were intelligent enough to know that the questions about Muslims should be answered by American Muslims rather than by a foreigner.” Being
“foreigners,” he contends, immigrants do not understand the “psyche of America” (M. Ali 2011, 373). The task of educating fellow Americans, then, is best done by “American Muslims”, those of non-immigrant heritage. Naeema, a second generation Blackamerican female from Chicagoland argues that rather than a genuine inclusion and rapprochement there is a “convergence of interests” whereby “indigenous” Muslims get their due recognition and immigrants have more credible native spokespersons.

Speaking on the reasons for the foreign face of Islam in public, Shareefa, the second generation Blackamerican female from the Phoenix-valley quoted earlier, theorizes that both media and Muslims perpetuated the image of Muslims as foreigners who “just got here 30 years ago.” She asserts that Islam had a Blackamerican face until about thirty years ago, when geopolitics sent media reporters looking for the perspectives of Muslim immigrants on foreign events. Instead of responding “no, we’re descendants of Malcolm X,” they spoke as foreigners. Prior to this shift, Shareefa postulates, everybody knew Muslims because they had family members who were “Moozlems” or saw Muslim places of worship and Muslim entrepreneurs selling bean pies and perfumes.

The theme of the 2008 MANA conference, mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, was Forging an American Muslim Agenda. The conference started with an airing of grievances and quickly moved on to such urgent issues as training imams and developing mosques, establishing social service centers, and creating community re-entry programs for incarcerated Muslims. It also included the first organized effort for a “National Campaign for Healing and Reconciliation.” Representatives from the major Muslim organizations and the leaders of different factions within Blackamerican Islam attended the session. The goal was to heal the many historical and cultural differences that have prevented us from living up to the command of Allah, differences within the African American Muslim
community; differences among the indigenous Muslims–African Americans, Hispanics, White Americans and second generation Muslims; and differences between the immigrant and indigenous communities⁶.

According to the campaign statement, this is the path to actualizing the “wonderful image of our unity”, an image of the ummah described by the Prophet as a single body that responds with fever and sleeplessness when one part of it is afflicted⁷. The campaign was ambitious and outlined work at the national and local levels. The various leaders were to take the idea back to their respective organizations for their roles and contributions.

Two Blackamerican women from Arizona attending the session heeded the call and organized a diversity workshop for Black History Month in 2010, with Altaf Hussain, a member of MANA board, and imam Amin Nathari as invited speakers. The speakers were both second generation Muslims; Hussain is the son of Indian immigrants and Nathari is the son of Blackamerican converts. Hussain is very active in both immigrant and convert organizations. He serves on the boards of ISNA (a predominantly immigrant organization) and MANA (a Blackamerican organization) and is a national speaker popular with younger Muslims. Nathari is an author, national speaker and commentator. In the workshop, Nathari toured the history of Islam in America from the 1960s onward, focusing on the Blackamerican experience, while Hussain focused on the immigrants, starting in the late 1800s. The two converged on the present state and future prospects and aspirations and laid out a plan to acknowledge grievances and contributions; to recognize and reclaim all strands of the history of Islam in America as the heritage of the Muslim collective; and to create inclusive communities and do the intra-faith work with no less dedication than the inter-faith work. Though the formal work of the campaign at the national level has yet to begin, this agenda for change resonated with many, as was evident in conversations long after the event.
The discussion on reconciliation that MANA began was picked up two years later by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the largest national but mostly immigrant organization of Muslim Americans. Timing it to fall on M. L. King holiday weekend to amplify its message for managing and celebrating diversity, ISNA convened a “Diversity Forum” in Detroit in 2011 to address immigrant–convert, sectarian, generation and gender divides. Blackamerican and immigrant leaders, along with activists and scholars, some of whom were speakers of the 2008 MANA conference, presented their assessments and outlined a path forward. The offspring of converts and immigrants along with young converts were everywhere organizing, moderating, entertaining and presenting. The event concluded with acknowledgements of problems and a plan to work at the national and local level. The forum reconvened in June of 2012 in Detroit with a representative set of speakers, but from the online program what was once framed as a national agenda now appears to be a local Michigan project.

Claiming History and Healing the ‘Hood

The dominant thread in MANA and ISNA’s forums and similar efforts in the past decade is that the first step towards reconciliation is recognition and acknowledgement. As noted previously, recognition is critical for individual (and group) identity. Philosopher Charles Taylor argued that

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. [1994, 25]

The suffering of Blacks in America is a deep and slow-healing wound in the body of the nation. But there is a sense among converts and their offspring that their marginalization
by Muslim immigrants, who are their brethren in faith, is even more injurious. To many Blacks – Muslim or not – immigrants reap the benefits of the Civil Rights movement and Black struggle only to look down upon Blacks as they climb the socio-economic ladder, internalizing and reflecting back racist attitudes and actions. Furthermore, Black converts sought in Islam a new identity that would emancipate them from what they saw as Christianity’s complicity in their oppression. So when Muslim immigrants marginalize Blackamericans and their historical contribution to Islam, immigrants not only commit injustice but do so at their own and their community’s peril. Recognizing this shared fate, the various speakers at the MANA and ISNA’s sessions discussed the importance of acknowledging the problems within the community, including racist tendencies, and of recognizing the history and contributions of Blackamerican Muslims as part of the collective heritage of Muslim America. Muslims in post-9/11 America realize that reconciliation of the different segments of their community and reclamation of their history is necessary for their survival and future aspirations. Shareefa sums up this point:

So if Muslims don’t claim and hold onto the history of the African American Muslim, and I mean all of the indigenous people, but we know the history, most of them were African Muslims. But then we did have Caucasian converts centuries ago as well. We have to claim all of that and own it so that we can take claim to this society as opposed to saying “we’re American.” I mean, I know the naturalization process. I appreciate that. I respect it, but it’s kind of disingenuous; it sounds like some people may claim their American-ness out of convenience. Sometimes they’re American, most of the time they’re Palestinian, you know. And that, we hear that, Muslims hear it [is disingenuous]. You know non-Muslims hear it. And that only shoots us in the foot.

The importance of knowing the history of America and of Islam has become a dominant storyline in crafting an “American Muslim” identity and community. Prominent scholars and converts like sheikh Hamza Yusuf and imam Zaid Shakir put together research-based power point presentations titled *Islam’s Contribution to Civilization* and the *Historical Roots of Islam in America*. Presented at national and
regional conferences, the message is that Islam is rooted in America both through its
civilizational contributions to knowledge and to culture and through its “North
American chapter” that starts with Pre-Columbian contacts and spans every chapter of
American history to the present day. The audiences are then reminded to claim this
history as their own, no matter their background, just like all Muslims claim Islam’s long
history and large heritage; this is but another chapter, they are told, in the history of the
ummah.

This reclamation of history is to be accompanied by critical assessment of the
community, including recognition of prejudices. The children of immigrants
acknowledge the prejudices that they see among their elders and sometimes among their
peers. Maryam, a twenty-four year old Chicagoan of Pakistani parentage, said she and
her husband discussed the reasons for prejudices and concluded it is lack of positive
interactions. She noted that immigrant interaction with Blacks too often occurs in
situations where Blacks are disadvantaged or distressed and the immigrant is in position
of social power, such as in clinics as patients and doctors, or at the immigrant-owned
corner store, or as recipients of assistance from immigrants for mosque funding, or as
when immigrants deliver goods and/or services in the south side of Chicago. These are
not situations where normal friendships can develop and more meaningful exchanges
can occur. Maryam and her peers see diversity as an asset spiritually but also socially and
politically. Zakiyah, a thirty-three year old woman of African parentage, makes the same
point, arguing the Muslims represent every ethnic and racial group in America as well as
all of the socio-economic levels and geographical locales. Consequently,
“demographically the Muslims are the most diverse and probably the most
representative of America,” and the task then is how to reflect that institutionally, from
leadership to membership and to allocation of resources. This, Zakiyah argues, should
not only be across ethnic and racial lines but also needs to happen across sectarian lines (between and within Sunni and Shia groups) which now happens even less.

To bridge the gap, addressing ethno-racial tensions, particularly those created due to economic injustice in inner cities, is a necessary place to start. For example, in 2006, some members of a NOI splinter group became fed up with the influence they saw as contributing to the destruction of their community and vandalized some Arab-owned liquor stores in West Oakland, California. In response, the community, headed by imam Zaid Shakir,9 organized to remove any religious or economic cover from the ownership of these stores and highlighted their exploitative and destructive (social and spiritual) effects. This led to a campaign to assist the owners to “get out” of the liquor business and, through grants and loans, to switch into food markets. A similar effort is carried out in Chicago by a coalition of organizations, activists, and state institutions. In reclaiming history to change the present and shape the future, the Inner City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) created a Muslim Run project that recalls the Black Owned campaigns of the NOI that aimed at transforming neighborhoods. With a pledge and a grant funded in part by the Muslim community, liquor store owners are transitioning to ownership of food markets. But Nashashibi, the sociologist mentioned earlier and also IMAN’s founder and executive, points out that “Muslim Run” is not only about not selling alcohol; it is about principled business practices that respect, engage and empower their neighborhoods.10

Create Families and Craft a Community

Time and again in interviews and discussions, participants advocated for opportunities for positive and instructive interactions, from cross racial/ethnic/sectarian
imam exchange programs, to twining of mosques and communities (especially pairing the inner city and suburb), to “tell me your story” gatherings. In a discussion I had with a group of second generation Muslims of immigrant backgrounds and young converts, the sentiment was the same. Though this particular group was mostly Shia, it also had Sunni members and their social networks included both Sunni and Shia. As to differences, they said that intra-community differences should just be that—different ways of being Muslim. Sectarian and ethnic differences do not matter to them because being a young person of color and member of an ethnic and a religious minority group is difficult enough. These younger people do not see distinguishing themselves across sectarian lines as important or useful. Zakiyah notes, and this was echoed by Sunni Muslims across the different ethno-racial lines,

the average American Joe doesn’t care if So-and-So is Bohra [Shia] and So-and-So is Ithna’asheri [Shia] and So-and-So is Maliki Sunni. To him we are all the same. We pose the exact same threat and we may pose the exact same solution. And so why not get our house in order here? And you know, it’s happening! A lot of people from my generation marry across sectarian lines. And for some people that’s the solution.

Marriage also serves as a portal for discussions of color, race, gender and religion and “long after religion has faded as the cornerstone of social protest against racism in the US, Muslim youth in American mosques revive it in debates” about such issues (Grewal 2009, 323). Where parents prefer their children to marry not only within their ethnic group but specifically from their hometowns of origin, younger Muslims see a larger pool of potential marriage partners from which to choose. But even within the hometown or ethnic group, the preference for many parents is for “fair” or whiter skin, especially for women. This politics of color hues and the preferences for lighter skin color along with the advantages it entails are well documented among African Americans (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992), Asians and Asian Americans (Rondilla and Spickard 2007) and other groups, as noted in the collection edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn
Stratification by skin hue is not new, but the preference of lightness and the social, political and economic advantages it entails are the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Its meaning, therefore, cannot be retroactively imposed on pre-modern social constructions of difference based on color (Grewal 2009, Jackson 2005). In the modern era, lighter color and associated meanings and status served an intermediary function in the Black and White color regimens of power and powerlessness. Among Middle Easterners and South Asians, whiteness is both “coveted and disparaged” (Grewal 2009, 238), for while such people may pass for white and enjoy its privileges, they also frequently refer to whiteness in disparaging terms, rejecting it and distinguishing themselves from “White people.”

While they would like to preserve some of the language and cultural elements they grew up with, many young Muslims’ criteria for a potential spouse is, “as long as the person is Muslim,” and if there is personal compatibility, color and ethnicity do not matter. They use religious discourse and arguments to make their case to parents (Karim 2008, Naber 2005, Grewal 2009). Rather than drawing on secular anti-racist reasons and sensibilities, their arguments emerge from a discursive traditions that both they and their parents hold authoritative and on a colonial history that their parents experienced and remember, all of which make younger people’s “moral claims [more] persuasive” (Grewal 2009, 325). Nevertheless, cross-ethnic marriages still mostly take place between south Asian, Arab, and White Muslims and occur less frequently between Blacks and South Asians or Arabs. Immigrants and converts may disagree on the kind and degree of differences that divide them, but they agree on the seriousness of the gender and generational gaps that affect all groups.
Gender norms and family expectations vary within as much as across ethnic groups and socio-economic class and they are based on difference in cultural, religious interpretation, and ideological leaning. After jihad and violence, the issue of “Muslim women” dominates the discourse on Muslims and Islam. Public discourse shapes and seeps into both Muslim discourses and the individual’s inner speech in (im)perceptible ways. The issue of “women in Islam,” their space at the mosque and their place in the community are debated in the community. The ever-present matter of the headscarf and its meaning as symbol of oppression and an act of cultural aggression or a symbol of liberation and an act of faith and self-fashioning are deliberated in Muslim public spheres and private lives.

Some survey questions aimed at eliciting participants’ assessment of women’s space in the mosque and their role in the community. On the issue of space, the great majority (78 percent) considered space for women in the mosque to be good or very good. Of those who thought it was barely acceptable or poor, interesting trends were noticeable. Most of those who did not approve of the space were men who thought it was inadequate; hijabi women were as likely as non-hijabi women to deem the space unacceptable. A majority (74 percent) of participants thought women were frequently involved in community affairs. Women are the majority of Islamic school teachers and often school principals; they serve on committees and organization boards but less frequently on mosque boards.
Participants in the Phoenix-valley were more likely (62 percent) to say women served on mosque boards than those in Chicagoland (52 percent). Women in the Phoenix-valley were also as likely to give lectures or presentations to women only (46 percent) or to mixed groups (44 percent). In Chicagoland, however, women spoke before mixed groups only 28 percent of the time. This difference reflects the impact and activities of a handful of women activists and founders of organizations in Arizona who do speak on social services, interfaith work, and civic engagements and present Islam’s teachings on these issues. In addition to activists and organization founders, Chicagoland has Muslim female professors of Islamic studies who give public lectures locally and nationally, but their work seems eclipsed by prominent male leaders and activists, which Phoenix-valley does not have. In the Phoenix-valley, participants were able to name one or two female leaders/activists but, besides imams, they had more difficulty identifying male leaders. On the other hand, in Chicagoland, even activists (both men and women) who are well informed had difficulty identifying women leaders or activists. To some degree, this might be because the Chicagoland area has “super star” male leaders/activists, including the leaders of IMAN, CAIR-Chicago, Interfaith Youth Core and CIOGC. The first three leaders are frequently on local or national media and command a lot of attention. At the national level, most participants from both sites could only name Dr. Ingrid Matteson, ISNA’s former president as an example of a female Muslim leader. The consensus was that women are very involved and do a lot of the work in the community, but they are not in the spotlight.

While controversial issues such as women leading mixed prayers steal the headlines, most Muslim women are more concerned about having better access, space, and roles in the mosque and community. They refuse to enter the mosque from the backdoor, and the majority of them dislike the dividers that conceal the imam and other
speakers from female worshippers. Some places have solved these issues with closed circuit TV that allows women to view the speaker, but when women are involved in mosque construction plans, they add a parallel space or mezzanine that gives them both privacy and a view of the happenings in the men’s section. The struggle over the divider, for example, periodically erupts in two Arizona mosques with vocal men and women arguing for and against the dividers. Imams at both mosques draw on the tradition of the Prophet to argue against the divider but mosque politics often trump their religious authority.

In a panel on gender relations during a 2010 annual conference of a national organization held in Phoenix-valley, imam Suhaib Webb—the Al-Azhar graduate convert scholar quoted earlier—passionately and from scholarly sources argued for doing away with dividers. He asserted that dividers were belatedly introduced by Muslims in reaction to specific challenges at a particular historical moment and were not intended to be for all times and places. A first generation immigrant Arab woman interrupted him to argue for the dividers because, she said, today’s women do not dress as modestly as did the Prophet’s contemporaries. Visibly perturbed by both the interruption and the challenge to his historical knowledge and religious authority, Webb replied “people say they want a scholar’s opinion but then when they don’t like it, they might be thinking this is a ‘White guy’ but I can give you text, chapter and page and line.” He rattled off detailed references, but she still tried to interject until he emphatically said “khalto [aunty] let me finish!”, and proceeded to reaffirm his scholarly position on the issue. Typically, talks on gender issues focus on women’s role and the guidelines for interactions between the sexes. But in this workshop, men issues were also discussed. Imam Webb said,

Do we understand terms like equality? Because if we understand them in modern terms we may be talking about something that doesn’t exist in Islam: Equality is before God but [there are] differences in roles and responsibilities. Brothers are picked on and [as speaker, to] get women to clap for you, men are demonized. We
lost John Wayne for [Homer] Simpson but we have to address that. There is great apathy among men for Islamic work, lack of confidence, not equipped to be husband, our community doesn’t talk about sex. We need mentorship and preparing ourselves for marriage. [fieldnotes]

The “Muslim Woman” as Spokesperson

As the converts and second generation immigrants were fronted to become spokespersons for Islam in America post-9/11, women too were deemed by community leaders as more credible speakers to the larger society, but only if they “represent” the community well through their words, actions, and dress. Hijab is a requirement for this more visible role even though the majority of Muslim women in America do not wear the hijab. A female speaker on the same panel as imam Webb said that

we needed something like 9/11 to get us to defend Islam and prove to the West we treat women equally. So we see women being pushed to the front lines but ‘giving women a voice’ is lip service. It only changes when you brothers – I’m sorry—think what women say is worthwhile because she is a human being (fieldnotes).

Though it is interesting that she had to apologize for her criticism of men even as she was arguing that women’s thoughts are noteworthy, her statement opened a space for a spirited discussion on the critical role of Muslim women in their community and society at large.

Women and their bodies are essential to dueling ideologies and, often, to wars. Since 9/11, a cottage industry emerged in the West to churn out books, blogs and film/TV images of Muslim women, Islam, and the hijab. This has had profound effects both on how Muslims are seen and how they see themselves individually and collectively. The increased public interest in these issues has led to heightened activity by Muslim women, as some speak back to dominant narratives in word and action. This development led Harvard academic Leila Ahmed to conclude that “[i]n consequence,
Islamic feminism in America is more lively today than at any other time in my own lifetime” (2011, 15). However, while in recent years some Muslim women working on gender justice have promoted an “Islamic feminism,” many of the young women I encountered saw no contradiction or a need to qualify their gender justice stances by labeling them Islamic even as they drew on Islamic religious discourse and history to argue their points. For example, Iman, a thirty-two year women of Syrian descent, said that as a feminist teenager, she argued with her parents to let her wear the headscarf and jilbab, and she won those arguments. She later decided to wear a face-veil which they also opposed and which she wore anyway only to take off later—ironically, while she was in Saudi Arabia. She convinced her parents of her need for college education and rejected the proposals of immigrant men in favor of those from American-born Muslims with whom, she said, she shared cultural experiences. As she explained her arguments and thinking, Iman effortlessly wove feminist and Islamic discourses to ground her reasoning without having to defend or qualify either.

As a product of liberal humanism and enlightened modernity, mainstream feminism challenged the public–private dichotomy but came on the side of secularism the in secular–religious divide. It saw in religion a patriarchal ideology with only negative impacts on women, who presumably suffered from false consciousness for embracing it. Consequently, religion has seldom been included in the various qualifiers of gender (i.e. class, race, ethnicity) even though it cuts across and “often complicates these other categories rather than reinscribing them” (Castelli 2001, 6). Muslim American as a pan–ethnic category exemplifies this complicating effect. Post–feminism and third wave feminism, on the other hand, open a space within which one could explore these complexities. These later trends are more comfortable with contradictions and allow women, such as Iman to define feminism for themselves, reflecting their own
identities and setting their agenda based on issues that matter to them. Within the community, as they challenge male monopoly of authority and community space, however, Muslim women ground their arguments in the Islamic discursive tradition and the example of the Prophet and his companions.

**Bridging the Generational Gap**

Gender issues matter to all women but younger ones also share with their male counterparts generational-based challenges, many of which they also share with their generational cohort in the wider society. Participants identified their parents as their primary source of Islamic education but at the same time noted differences in understandings, interpretation and practice, and the sources of their knowledge. Additionally, and as noted earlier, to younger generations of Muslims credible religious authority is grounded both in canonical texts and in context and cultural competence. Knowing the socio-cultural, political and historical specificity and the challenges encountered by young people in general and Muslims in particular is paramount in shoring up the credibility of one’s leadership and/or scholarship. Those with a knowledge and an ability to discuss the challenges young Muslims encounter but who also recognizes the authenticity of being both Muslim and American are better positioned to win the hearts and minds of these younger Muslims, especially those of immigrant background. Fostering an “American Muslim identity” has become almost a mantra for leaders, activists and scholars alike since 2001. This discourse began more than a decade earlier as noted by Manar, now in her late thirties, who relates her first experience at Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) in seventh grade:

I still had not chosen Islam for myself but I remember that one weekend I happened to go to an ISNA convention and I was put in a MYNA program. I later
understood why that one weekend left such a mark and it was because for the first time in my life, I was introduced to an Islam that was American. Islam was always something that I associated with being Arab or a culture though I was not thinking in these terms, but a culture that was not mine. And then I was thinking this is cool! This is mine. They are Rapping! They're totally Rapping! And then there were these women who were wearing hijab, in this very American stylish ways but they were so modest and I looked up to them and they were not wearing jalabeeb. And then I remember them having debates about real open issues, I thought, wow, its Ok to talk, they were debating hijab, they were debating God, and I just thought wow, we could talk about things. There were mock debates but the purpose was to get critical thinking going and I really appreciated that. And then the fact that these young teenagers and early college students were the ones holding the mic and running the show made me feel like that this faith was so relevant to me. And there was also another component for me. I saw a future because I now saw brothers who I could see myself marrying and I saw myself wanting to have a Muslim family. Now it was something I could see myself having a future and actually want it in my future. Now Islam became for me!

Manar’s profound realization that this is the Islam that belongs to her and is not merely part of her parents’ Arab culture, gives us glimpses into what resonated with and defined it for her. It was not a particular doctrinal teaching or theological reasoning but the cultural markers of Rap, dress, debates and critical thinking and the fact that young people were facilitating and experiencing this with her. At home, Islam had Arab sights and sounds and belonged to her parents, but at this event, that same Islam now looked more like her, at home in America without having to deny her cultural roots. How much have things changed since the 1990s?

An overwhelming majority (83 percent) of participants reported that local organizations and centers are led mostly by men born and raised overseas. Participants concede that those willing and able to take the responsibility should always lead, but the problems arise when leaders enforce their ethnic norms, which may not only contradict “pure/true Islam” but also clashes with the cultural practices of other groups. There are several reasons for the near absence of members of younger generations from mosque leadership. One such reason, as theorized by Fahmi, a twenty-one year old of Chinese background, has to do with religious authority having long had an Eastern face. But
when these leaders, Fahmi notes, do “not understand the nuances of American culture” or are not “efficient as managers,” then “they drive away American Muslims, especially youth, who otherwise may have eventually taken over the reins.” There are signs that members of younger generations are gradually getting more involved. Knowledge of the religious tradition determines who assumes the role of the imam or teacher, but material resources and social/cultural capital within the local community determines who leads mosques. Organizations are usually led by founders and likeminded people and here is where younger Muslims and women are taking charge of shaping the agenda and the image within the community and beyond. These organizations are started by those who remained connected to the community and those who return after having children for whom they wanted to provide a more suitable and engaging environment. These organizations or activities outside the mosque are started to either avoid power struggles with the mosque leadership or after a group failed in swaying, or parted ways with, the leadership.

Activities such as ThinkDot, Boy and Girl Scouts, after school programs, the Webb Foundation and IMAN in Chicagoland exemplify these parallel efforts. Members of second and subsequent generations want their children to have different experiences in the Islamic weekend school because they “all lived it” but did not like it. They disliked the “fear-based” education where parents are so fearful that their children will go astray that they instill in them the fear of wrath of God and focus too much on what is haram (illicit), leaving a lasting and negative imprint on children. Additionally, they do not want their children exposed to politics and ideological battles. They instead want them to learn more about the mercy of God and “the peaceful side of Islam” and to focus on character education. They prefer to equip them with a “moral compass,” rather than
instilling fear-based practice where you worry, as one young mother put it, that “God is just keeping track of all your mistakes.”

Unlike immigrant parents, converts parents have experienced the challenges of growing up in the U.S. but they too may not fully appreciate the challenges of growing up Muslim in America. The NOI excelled in creating programs for younger people and institutions that mentored them, but these institutions did not fully transition with the community as it embraced the less hierarchical Sunni Islam. As noted earlier, unlike immigrant majority mosques which are typically led by boards, Blackamerican mosques are headed by an imam who, at his discretion, may delegate tasks to community elders and/or activists. In response to my question about how second generation Muslims interact with the imam and other leaders in her local Blackamerican community, Naeemah replied “they get squashed! I mean just again those same leaders that are vying for power they don’t want anybody to have limelight and so that’s one of the battles we’re having right now.” The battle she is referring to is a small school she, her husband, and few second-generation couples are trying to start in their area.

These struggles with leadership notwithstanding, members of younger generations are involved in the activities and affairs of their communities. Nearly 61 percent of the survey participants said they participated in one or more of the following activities: Friday communal prayers (79 percent), halaqa (study circles) (38 percent), Muslims lectures/conferences (66 percent), and interfaith work and events (35 percent). Only 10 percent of project participants were not involved in any of these activities. In general, however, the majority of all Muslim Americans does not participate in any of these activities, whether they be very observant or only attend Eid prayers. Involved though they may be, participants felt they “do all the work” but have no say in decision-making or in setting the goals of organizations. An oft-voiced sentiment is that
younger Muslims are just waiting for the “uncles” to “pass on” by either dying off or becoming too feeble to lead. Yet, many first generation leaders claim to hold on to their positions because members of the younger generations are not willing or able to take the helm. It takes time, energy and financial resources that younger Muslims who are building their careers and families do not or cannot allocate to the demands of leadership.

The age and background of leaders are not an issue if they are perceived to have the pulse of the community and especially the pulse of the younger generations. While a significant number (46 percent) of those surveyed thought that the imams were knowledgeable of their issues, the majority either did not think so (37 percent) or did not know (18 percent). Asiyya, a twenty year old female of Pakistani background, captures the sentiment of many when she notes that some imams understand the situation of young people, but the majority cannot relate because they had different childhood experiences. Because issues like dating, drinking and more recently radicalization are often talked about in general terms in the community, younger Muslims think that their elders are too uncomfortable and/or ill equipped to “sit down” and have a frank discussion about these issues and others, like addiction or depression. Imams and leaders may solicit input and assistance from the younger generation to address these issues but participants at both sites were split on whether or not that was the case in their area. Chicagoland’s COIGC, the Muslim umbrella organization, did have a staff position for coordinating youth programs. In a day-long leadership workshop I attended, youth leaders representing numerous organizations voiced the aforementioned frustrations and assessment.

The post-9/11 discourse on Islam and Muslims has brought community attention to ethno-racial and gender issues, but it has also brought greater focus on younger
Muslims. How fear of radicalization shaped this new focus was discussed in earlier chapters, but that concern is not the only driving force behind the new attention. Younger generations are more vocal in demanding a leadership role and attention to their issues. For example, the 2010 conference in the Phoenix-valley with the gender relations panel referred to earlier was organized by second generation activists and reflected the issues that mattered to them. In addition to religious knowledge and a gender panel, the conference featured frank discussions about drugs, depression, and parenting styles. Two of the presenters, a male and a female marriage and family therapist addressed these issues and educated at once parents, leaders and younger generations. The male also held a certification in Islamic studies which afforded him a degree of religious authority beyond his professional credibility as a therapist. As a counselor of young Muslims, he gave an assessment of the prevalence of depression and drug use, but also spoke from a religious perspective that destigmatized mental illness and naturalized sexual desires. Regarding depression, he argued that telling people to “have faith and be patient” is not helpful and might be dangerous. Instead, he said, “we need to normalize depression by talking about it. Imagine if Friday *khutbah* was on depression” and if individuals who inquired about seeking help were told to seek it from culturally-competent professionals regardless of their faith. He reproached parents by warning them of becoming “culturally irrelevant to their children,” if they insisted on recreating “back home” or do not contextualize Islamic teachings.

Younger people are also becoming more aware that they have to step up and take the lead. They want to change leadership models by bringing to bear their real life experiences and professional skills as articulated by Talib, a third generation Blackamerican Chicagoan. “We have to perfect leadership. We have to look at leadership like a science, like it’s an ‘ology’, like it’s something to study.” In this assessment, the
children of converts and immigrants agree because, as over 90 percent of them noted, they have common experiences, despite some cultural differences based on their ethnic background. Second and subsequent generations of Muslims, even the whites among them, have in common – among other things – experiences that are shaped by being a racialized religious minority. Of course there are also cultural differences in the households of their childhood and in the degree to which they retain and internalize those differences. They also share a critique of the parental generation and particularly of immigrants, but this at times put the offspring of immigrants in a bind. Hannah, a Chicagoan of Egyptian background, told me she feels distressed when her friends of convert background get “very angry” at immigrants and accuse them of narrow mindedness and of imposing their “cultural baggage” on others. She shares their criticism but still, she says, “it hurts, because you know, I’m like, you know these are my parents” that you are attacking. She and others have noted that sometimes negative views of immigrants go too far and those who hold them are guilty of the excesses they criticize. Some children of converts thought that their parents’ views of mainstream culture were even more negative than those of immigrants. These parents see American society to be in state of jahilya (ignorance) from which these converts are trying to extricate themselves. In all cases, besides the experience of growing up as Muslims in America and sharing many experiences with people of their own age in society, these younger Muslims share what Safia called the struggles of the “growing pains of parents – immigrants and converts- who are trying to adjust to a new lifestyle.”

In the introduction to her edited volume, *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak*, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur (2005), a second generation Blackamerican Muslim, captured the sentiment of her generation:

This anthology is about women who don’t remember when they weren’t both American and Muslim. We are the children of immigrants from Pakistan, Egypt,
and Senegal. We are the distant descendants of African slaves brought to the Americas as well as the children of American men and women who accepted Islam in adulthood. Unlike us, our parents were raised largely in other countries or in other faith traditions. Our education was a colorful mix of home schooling, local mosque, and Public School # 9. We wore Underoos and watched MTV. We know juz’amma (the final thirtieth of the Qur’an) and Michael Jackson’s Thriller by heart. We played Atari and Game Boy and competed in Qur’anic recitation competitions. As we enter our twenties, thirties, and forties we have settled into the American Muslim identity that we’ve pioneered. [2005, 1]

**Bridges “Under Construction”**

Differences across class, ethnic, racial, gender and generational divide are not unique to Muslims, and the power struggles along all these rifts are shared with other fellow citizens. Muslims, however, have the added burdens of unparalleled diversity and the pressures of an accusing outsider’s gaze as they attempt to bridge their various rifts, as they work to construct a cohesive political community out of disparate groups. Community, as noted earlier, is defined both from within and without, but the process of working out internal differences and creating a cohesive political community with a vision and agenda is an entirely internal and a perpetually “under construction” project. Some Muslim Americans may be motivated by religious ideals, others might be motivated by pragmatism and the convergence of interests, and still more might be motivated by both, but regardless of underlying motives there is an emerging realization that something needs to be done. Trying to find inspiration in the religious concept of an ummah and in the struggles and success stories of other American minorities (such as Blacks, Jews and LGBT), the project of constructing a Muslim American community is still in its infancy. MANA’s reconciliation project and ISNA’s diversity forums are conversations at the national level that may have local reverberations, but at both levels the efforts are in fits and starts.
The prescription for reconciliation includes overcoming the residue left by colonialism, slavery and racialized class prejudices; establishing a religious authority and leadership based solely on qualifications that include linguistic and cultural competence; acknowledging and claiming the history and contributions of all segments of the community; and leveraging all available human/material/cultural resources. Some younger generations of Muslims, regardless of their background, are pushing to hasten this community construction project. While not numerous, their impact is consequential as they offer a critique of their families, ethnic groups, leadership and gender relations, and as they create institutions that meet their needs and as they serve community and society. Muslim women, meanwhile, are working on multiple fronts. They are trying to disabuse the public of the negative stereotype of Muslims and at the same time attempting to balance pushing for a better space at the mosque and a better station in the community without seeming to echo the criticisms of outsiders or to be implementing an outsider agenda.
The 1975 death of the founder of the NOI, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, defines this periodization as his followers called his lifetime the "First Resurrection" when Blacks were "delivered from the darkness of slave mentality into the light of their true Blackamerican selves." The “Second Resurrection” marks the period after his death when NOI split with the majority transitioning into Sunni Islam under the leadership of the founder’s son and a smaller group continued in the NOI under the new leader, Minister Farrakhan. Jackson notes that in these two eras, it was a “charismatic leader rather than any objective method of scriptural interpretation that made or unmade religious doctrine.” The third Resurrection that he is arguing for would be one where Blackamerican Muslims necessarily gain mastery of the Islamic discursive tradition which is the primary authenticating agent (2005, 6).

2 *Al-Ansar* (the supporters) is the term used to distinguish the natives of the city of Yathrib from Prophet Muhammad and his Meccan followers (*Al-Muhajereen*–the immigrants) whom *Al-Ansar* offered material and moral supported. *Ahal-e-dar* literally means the residents of the house and *al-ajaneb* means foreigners.

3 The Arabic word for the color black is *aswad* and for white is *abyad*. Different Arab groups may use *asmr* or *aswad* to refer Black people in general whether or not they are Arabs. *Abd* is more frequently used by Palestinian and Syrians and some from the Gulf. For example, the neighborhood of the ethnically African Palestinians in Jerusalem is referred to as *harat al-abeed* (*abeed* plu. *Abd*).

4 This notion of emigration for the sake of *deen* (faith in God) or *dunya* (earthly desires) invokes an Islamic tradition that is oft repeated in such Qur’anic verses as “And whosoever leaves his home as an emigrant unto Allah and His Messenger, and death overtakes him, his reward is then surely incumbent upon Allah” (4:100). The contrast of such migration to that for worldly reasons (for *dunya*) is articulated by the Prophetic tradition narrated by Umar bin Al-Khattab who said: “I heard the messenger of Allah salla Allah u alihi wa sallam (Peace be upon him) say: ‘Actions are but by intention and every man shall have but that which he intended. Thus he whose migration was for Allah and His messenger, his migration was for Allah and His messenger, and he whose migration was to achieve some worldly benefit or to take some woman in marriage, his migration was for that for which he migrated’” (Bukhari volume 1, book 1, hadith # 1 in M.M.Khan 1987).

5 The story of Bilal, an Abyssinian slave and one of first companions and the first muezzin in Islam, figures prominently in Islamic history. His courage and perseverance, as he opted to endure the torture of his polytheist master rather than to reject Islam, is part of every Muslim’s education. Bilal is ultimately acquired by another companion and is set free and is honored by the Prophet. The symbolic power of his story inspired W.D. Muhammad to name the new community he transitioned from NOI to Sunni Islam as the Bilalian Muslims.


8 They list English words of Arabic origins (for example, algebra and alcohol, banana, caraway and coffee, and magazine and mattress), food items, along with practices like academic chairs and diplomas

9 The store owners who are mostly Yemenis argue that lack of education limits their economic opportunities and owning such shops requires little skills. Because the stores presence in the neighborhood predated their ownership, they do not think they created an exploitative business.
This, however, does not lesson the conflict they feel as they trade in religious prohibited merchandise (Pauline Bartolone. 2007. “Muslim Liquor Store Owners Face Criticism.” http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7217584) accessed on 8/30/2012

10 “About Muslim Run” see http://www.imancentral.org/organizing-advocacy/muslim-run/ accessed on 8/30/2012

Glenn and her co-authors propose that in addition to “prejudice” (interpersonal) and “white supremacy” (institutional and group approach) racism should be explored through economies of color. They note that colorism and racism are not identical and can be independent and that “hierarchies of color destabilize hierarchies based on race” but they are nevertheless linked. Colorism “operates sometimes to confound and sometimes to restructure racial hierarchy. Meanwhile, the circulating meanings attached to color shape the meaning of race” (Harris 2009, 1–2). The authors also explore the commodification and consumption of whiteness which globalizes esthetics and standards of beauty through skin lightening products and plastic surgeries. Colorism is based on lighter skin, Eurocentric features, class, culture and education are all seen by members of these societies as marks of beauty, intelligence and higher socio-economic status (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2009).

12 In a presentation of this project that I gave at a Christian theological seminary, Christian and Jewish female academicians told me that this is the case in most religious communities. Women do the work but are not in the spotlight. Similarly, a few women lead in academia and the corporate world though their presence in these areas is well established

13 Jilbab (Pl. Jalabeeb) is an outer overcoat-like garment worn primarily by some Arab hijabi women.

14 There was a 10 percent difference between Chicagoland and Phoenix-valley residents in attendance of study circles or interfaith events with the former more frequently attending the study circles and the latter more frequently participating in interfaith events. This difference is due to the extensive interfaith work in the Chicagoland area including Interfaith Youth Core, interfaith Ramadan iftars and interfaith alliances on community services engaged by organizations like IMAN and Muslim Women Alliance.

15 Khutbah is the sermon given during the Friday communal prayers.

16 To drive his point home, he gives an example of how blind imitation of the Prophetic tradition is problematic. In this story, a young man asked the Prophet for permission to fornicate. The Prophet, living in a society where sexual moral virtues especially of one’s women folk, were paramount, asked the youth if he would approve of that for his sister, mother, or aunt. The youth said no and the Prophet told him others do not want that for their women folk either. He dissuaded the youth through this process and prayed for him acknowledging, in the process, the natural desire of sexuality. The therapist-imam pointed out to the audience that today if a boy asks his father to date and the father follows the example of the Prophet and asks the son “would you be Ok with you if your sister dates,” the boy is more likely to say, “why not if that is what she wants”. So parents must be relevant and not just blindly imitate.
CHAPTER 8

“CREATING” AN AMERICAN MUSLIM CULTURE

As noted earlier, this chapter and the previous one are linked by a narrative that calls for building a community and creating a culture. This chapter considers the inspiration for this call and examines its background, meanings, and contested nature. It then grapples with the question of whether or not there are uniquely American Muslim norms, practices, and expressive/material cultural products. Exploring these areas is essential to the primary concern of this dissertation, the formation and the expression of identity (a sense of being and belonging) of the younger generations of Muslim Americans. Cultural products are the technologies for/of the dialogical process of the co-construction of self, community, and nation and for/of the meanings and relationships that sustain each. Additionally, these products serve as tools for both presenting and representing oneself and one’s group and for struggling against marginalizing ideologies and practices. In other words, as Myers (1995) notes, the producers of this cultural products engage in “a form of social action in uncertain discursive spaces” in and through which collective cultural values are (re)produced (Mahon 2000, 469).

As noted earlier, Muslims have a long history in the United States, living both as Muslims and as Americans with all the struggles (with self, family, community and society) that this dual heritage entails. They have created institutions, norms, and expressive and material culture along the way. The young woman recalling her “American Islam” at MYNA camp in the 1990s points to one sign of the existence of this culture. Yet, at the dawn of the twenty-first century and in the post-9/11 era, there are assertive calls for creating an “American Muslim identity” and an “American Muslim culture.” The calls are from leaders, activists, and ordinary Muslims of diverse backgrounds.
The meaning of this call to the speaker and the listener varies depending on the background of the speakers and the context in which it is made. To many, this is at last an affirmation of their experiences, sentiments, and identity as authentically both Muslim and American. It is the answer to all of those who told them “don’t be too American” whenever the speaker did not like something they did. Others, however, read in this call various hidden agendas. Members of both camps span the ethnic and ideological spectrum. Some Blackamerican Muslims assert that as long as they have existed, an American Muslim identity and culture has been their daily reality, so what is all the fuss about? In this call, they see nothing but immigrants’ belated realization that they want to assimilate and “want to be Americans.” But some Blackamericans argue that they embraced Islam to distinguish themselves from a jahali (living in era of pre-Islam ignorance) society, and that they have no desire to emulate that society by embracing its culture.

As for immigrants, some agree with Blackamericans that this is their daily reality and not something that needs to be “created”, while others see a need to protect themselves from assimilationist impulses and to try to recreate their home culture. Other immigrants, suspicious of the agenda, see in the call to create an American Muslim culture a hegemonic social engineering project aimed at marginalizing their own ethnic heritage. This project, they say, is one largely put forth by converts who initially committed cultural apostasy by shunning everything American to become Arabs and Asians. Now, they are trying to reclaim their American-ness by imposing a particular way of being American, centered on black urban or white middle class norms and normativity, on everyone. Salem, the thirty-four year old Chicagoan of Pakistani background quoted earlier, articulates this position. He studied Arabic and Islam and lived a few years in a Muslim country and was pursuing a doctorate in Islamic studies at
the time of my fieldwork. He elaborated with fondness on his Midwestern upbringing, which left an indelible imprint and an embodied mode of living and viewing the world. So to him, Muslim American identity and culture are self-evident. Salem, however, understands “the narrative of the converts where they feel they have the right to be the moniker of the American Muslim and that they want to define that moniker”. He thinks that the champions of this call, like sheikh Hamza Yusuf and Dr. Umar, “who are pushing this ‘American Islam’ narrative, have a specific vision that systematically precludes some images typically associated with Islam. These images, he postulates, are ones that popular culture associates with Arabs and South Asians and consist of “some brown person dressed in some kind of weird head cover and usually a beard that is unkempt or a headscarf.” Though both Dr. Umar and Sheikh Hamza are White, Salem knows well that both men are bearded and alternate wearing suits with wearing head caps and North African attire. Nevertheless, he notes that the proponents of this call want to replace these images of “weird” brown people and their restrictive gender norms with “white upper middle class”-based images and unrestricted gender norms. To him the irony is that many so-called immigrants, like his father, already live this White middle class life. Salem also argues that this narrative promotes a West coast middle class or Black urban culture at the expense of Midwestern or Southern cultural norms and sensibilities.

Many Muslim Americans conflate images of immigrants as suburbanites and Blacks as urbanites. While it is true that many post-1965 immigrants were or became middle class professional or business people, waves of immigrants and refugees followed and often occupy the lower socioeconomic rungs in American society, while many Blackamericans are middle class professionals or business owners. Nevertheless, there is some merit to Salem’s arguments. “Immigrants” tend to be homogenized and reified as
conservative islands of “back home” cultures when they, like others, in fact reflect America’s social–religious–political spectrum, and some are already in many ways culturally “mainstream” middle class. Additionally, some converts understandably champion the call to create an American Muslim culture as a means to reclaim a cultural heritage that they might have given up in order to be Muslims.

I would argue that, rather than a social engineering project invented by converts or by the desire of immigrants to assimilate, calls to create an American Muslim identity, community and culture are evolutionary products of the collective Muslim American experience. In particular, these calls have resulted from a confluence of historical developments that include the transition of the majority of NOI followers to Sunni Islam; the acceptance by most immigrants that they are in America to stay; the coming of age of the descendants of both immigrants and coverts in multicultural, post-civil rights America; and the discursive and real consequences of conflicts in the Middle East and America’s foreign policy. In different stages of their community development, Muslim Americans have had to grapple with social and ideological hurdles. In the 1980s, they debated political participation by engaging the Islamic discursive tradition and concepts such as *Dar el Harb* and *Dar el Islam* (abode of war and abode of Islam). Recognizing the inapplicability of these concepts in an interconnected world and the consequences of their nonparticipation, the West was reclassified as an abode of peace, or of witnessing or of treaty, where Muslims can and must participate in order to live and thrive (Ramadan 2004). In the 1990s, the focus shifted to bolstering Islamic knowledge and students of all ages headed to the Muslim East, imagined to be the repository of Islamic knowledge and heritage (Grewal 2006). There were also efforts to bring immigrants and converts together as some realized that their common interests necessitate this bridge-building.
A volatile Middle East, the first bombing of World Trade Center, and a Sufi leader’s accusation that 80 percent of the mosques are controlled by extremists have contributed to the conflation of conservatism, terrorism and Islam. The charged atmosphere and greater public scrutiny that resulted, propelled activists and leaders in the late 1990s to push for local financing of their institutions and more scrutiny of their political and religious rhetoric (Leonard 2003). The Clinton era brought greater Muslim public visibility: the first White House Ramadan *Iftar* (breaking fast), an imam offering an opening prayer in congress, and a second generation Muslim female physician serving as a U.S. delegate to the International Conference on Women in Beijing. The twenty-first century began with an attempt at a Muslim bloc vote in the 2000 presidential election. Rather than resulting in a unified vote, however, this attempt only revealed the intra-community fissures and launched the discourse for “an indigenous” American Muslim agenda. Discussions and debates that began long ago, about religious authority and about the role of context in the interpretations of canonical texts, continue today. After debating political engagement and religious knowledge acquisition, it was inevitable that culture, the common thread in all these narratives, would be the next frontier to tackle. While the call seems more urgent now, this identity and culture “project” has been in the making for decades. It is at once a call for a community building project, a conscious shaping of a political subject, and an assertion of belonging and cultural citizenship.

“*Islam is Like a Pure River*”

Almost like a mantra, I heard it time and again from men and women of diverse backgrounds with slight word variation: “Islam is a like a pure river that reflects the color of the bedrock.” The mechanism by which Islam spread –whether or not by the sword–
is the subject of great polemics. History, however, shows that the spread of Islam was not a homogenizing and Arabizing project, as evident by the presence of culturally-distinct Muslim majority societies and minority communities around the world. By the eighth century, Islam had spread from its birth place in Arabia and extended from China across Africa to Europe. As it spread, it did not provide its new adherents with a comprehensive cultural script, nor did it require them to jettison their cultural heritage. Arabic terms and some cultural aspects might have survived but as many noted (Abd-Allah 2004; Jackson 2005; Ramadan 2004), Islam may be the religion of most Arabs, but Arabic culture is not the exclusive culture of Islam. While they share the history and civilizational heritage of Islam, the names, foods, arts, architecture, myths and folklore of Muslim Chinese, Malians, Egyptian, and Turks are particular to their locale and – except for some names and some foods – are usually shared by their non-Muslim neighbors. New Muslims everywhere engaged in a cultural inventory whereby what did not conflict with a specific religious precept was accepted as inherently Islamic. This allowed for a distinct cultural identity and an Islam that is dressed in the local cultural garbs of China, Persia, Mali and Bosnia, to name a few.

This indigenization process is illustrated by the conceptualization of the term Islam in Chinese. In China, the term qīng zhēn (pure and true) refers to Islam, Muslim foods, and their institutions. In using this term, Chinese Muslim scholars rendered the meaning of Islam in an authentically Chinese idiom. Gladney points out that when the ethnically Hui Chinese Muslim scholar Ma Fuchu said “To deny oneself is pure, to restore propriety is true,” he was elaborating this conceptualization of Islam as a “pure and true” religion in Confucian values. In doing so, Gladney notes, the concept “reveals two aspects of Islam in China central to Hui community interests and self-understanding: pure (qīng), in the sense of ritual cleanliness and moral conduct; and
truth (zhēn), in the sense of authenticity and legitimacy” (Gladney 1996, 13). For the Hui, these characteristics of purity and truth point to the two elements of their identity: a moral purity grounded in their Islamic faith and a lineage, way of life, and cultural heritage that are authentically grounded in their society (Gladney 1996); this is not unlike what Muslim Americans are struggling with and for.

This indigenization process has been a complicated one in the Unites States. While it has deep roots, an Islam dressed in a uniquely American grab and commanding recognition and consensus among the various segments of Muslim Americans has been slow to emerge. Its racial supremacy and problematic theology notwithstanding, the Nation of Islam’s ingenuity and longevity lie in its creative appropriation and refashioning of Islam and American norms (Jackson 2005). The process has been more difficult and complex in the extraordinary ethnic and sectarian diversity of the rest of the Muslim American community. Therefore, today’s discourse on Muslim American culture and identity by diverse groups is about the reasons for and the features of an Islam with an American cultural garb. A unified sense of self with locally grounded sensibilities and esthetics, intra-group reconciliation and collaboration, civic engagement and cultural contribution, and the development of local interpretative authority are at once the essential elements and the byproducts of the process of the indigenization of Islam. The coalescence of these elements in the Muslim community in the U.S. has been hampered by historical, sociological and geopolitical factors, including the long standing divides among its constituting groups.

While many argue that globalization is but another name for Americanization, in a multiethnic America segmented by multiculturalism, culture wars, and cosmopolitanism, Americans periodically ask if a common American culture even exists. It is not surprising then that Muslims, similarly segmented by ethnicity among other
things, contemplate if there is an American Muslim culture; that itself is a quintessentially American trait. This is also the assessment of Naeema, a Blackamerican second generation woman from Chicago, when I asked her if there is an American Muslim culture. She said “no! As there is no American culture because we are a patchwork; we are diverse, that’s the beauty it is. Just like I wouldn’t normalize or minimize all white Americans or African Americans as one, I can’t say that Muslims in America are one. We’re very diverse, which makes us that much more American because that mirrors everyone else here.” To Naeema and many participants, Muslim American culture is a quilt and to be otherwise would be un-American. In his widely circulated paper, *Islam and the Cultural Imperative* (2004), which sparked this discussion in the Muslim public sphere, Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah uses the metaphor of a peacock’s tail. Here, each feather stands for the various ethnic cultures and the tail represents the envisioned unique American Muslim culture. But because difference stands out and represents a challenge to be managed, it is often too easy to focus on the patches or the individual feathers, to the neglect of the quilt or the peacock’s tail. Therefore, while such a culture has been difficult to identify by looking at the groups and their specific heritages, a shared culture has nevertheless been in the making for decades. Yet, because of the diversity and the tacit nature of culture, most Muslims do not take note of the specificity of their shared norms and practices that are grounded in U.S. culture. But that is changing, and it is part and parcel of a process of cultural citizenship that other minorities have also experienced.

Beyond legal citizenship, cultural citizenship creates a space to be both different and belong, a space for creative self-expression, representation, engagement and contribution. It at once challenges the black/white color line that defines citizenship and the nativist anti-immigrant discourse that marginalizes cultural differences, especially
those of “new minorities” (Flores and Benmayor 1997). Cultural citizenship involves forming and defining a collective and demanding a group’s political rights. Equally important, however, it is also about how groups (re)interpret their history and cultural heritage and use that knowledge to create new cultural norms, sensibilities, esthetics, and discourses that are grounded in and transformative of their new context. Cultural citizenship encompasses a range of activities that define a space for self-definition, empowerments, and expression. However, a group’s efforts and demands are not aimed at carving out a space to remain isolated and different, but at finding ways to be comfortable and at home in their difference; in short to belong (Flores and Benmayor 1997). Thus far, this chapter and the preceding ones have explored Muslim Americans’ cultural citizenship efforts regarding self-definition and empowerment. The remainder of this chapter explores how these efforts are manifested in institutions and expressive cultural products.

**American Muslim Institutions**

**The Family**

Family is the primary institution in every community and society; it is the first educator of religious and societal norms and values. Like other Americans, Muslim Americans primarily live in nuclear family households, often away from extended family members. They struggle with the demands of childrearing and worry about aging parents and relatives. While caring for one’s elders is a religious obligation and a cultural tradition for many Muslims, the reality of contemporary society presents seemingly insurmountable challenges. Discussions about these issues have only begun in Muslim America.
Most Muslim American families are dual income by economic necessity but, when able, many younger women are choosing to put careers on hold and stay home to raise their children, at least in their formative years. Delayed marriages, rising divorce rates, domestic violence, and drug addictions are on the rise and are now becoming topics of discussion among Muslims. Both marriage and divorce for most Muslim Americans, observant or not, involve a religious officiation in addition to civil registration (for marriages) or the use of the court system (for divorce). Differences in expectation and backgrounds, the role of the in-laws, gender roles and life–work balance issues are some of the reasons for divorce. Alarmed by the rate of divorce among Muslim Americans and to forestall severe conflicts and domestic violence, some imams and Muslim social service professionals and activists have proposed pre-marital counseling, imam education in family counseling, and the spelling out of expectations in marriage contracts. Sharifa Alkhateeb (1946–2004), a prominent second generation activist, leader and educator who worked across the different Muslim organizations and groups, founded the *Peaceful Families Project* in 2000. The project has a group of qualified and diverse speakers that includes imams, counselors and social service providers who do workshops on all matters related to family life.

The American Mosque

The American imam serves a role that is more like that of a church pastor than that of a typical imam in Muslim majority countries. This makes it very difficult for “imported imams” to serve the community effectively. Subsequently, many communities now couple religious education and cultural competence in their job descriptions for potential imams. Besides leading the prayers and Friday services, imams must now serve
as spiritual counselors, conflict mediators, family and marriage counselors, interfaith representatives and community spokespersons. The mosque in America is a multipurpose space that serves as a place of worship and education, a meeting and planning venue for various activities, a venue for social services, a place to prepare the dead for burial, a center for public education about Islam, and a destination for officials (domestic or foreign). Mosques hold general membership meetings and house Islamic weekend schools which are uniquely a Western Muslim phenomenon. In the United States, they also host Ramadan suhoor and iftar potlucks (meals before dawn and after sunset) and organize Eid picnics/barbeques with games and entertainment for children.

As mentioned earlier, Blackamerican mosques are headed by an imam, whereas predominantly immigrant mosques are managed by boards (usually elected but sometimes appointed) who then hire an imam. Recently, citizenship or legal permanent resident status has been added to the qualifications for board membership and there is greater scrutiny in the community regarding the activities and discourse of its leaders. Whereas foreign students or those on work visas could serve before, now there is heightened vigilance as articulated by Shareefa, a second generation Blackamerican female quoted earlier. She says

now they’ve [leaders] come to the realization that we’re invested here, our kids are from here. We need knowledge coming from here. We need leadership coming from here versus [someone] from someplace else who is not necessarily invested here, who plans on leaving, who didn’t grow up here, who has no clue about our laws here. And I think what pushed them to that is the law, is that the FBI is hot. The scrutiny is high on the Muslim community, legally, and you can get into a lot of trouble. And so I guess the fear factor has kind of popped in and they realize “we can’t just have ‘Abdullah Schmoe’ from foreign country X on our board signing our financial documents and making decisions, because we can all end up in Guantanamo”. So you know, Alhamdulillah [glory be to God]. We were trying to tell them, but I guess they had to see it to believe it.

Younger people and women are filling more of these board positions but that still varies from mosque to mosque. Additionally, young men are starting to serve as regular
imams though more commonly they may serve as guest imams who deliver the Friday sermon or lead the long *Taraweeh* prayers during Ramadan. *Taraweeh* is a recommended nightly prayer that involves reciting the entire Qur’an from memory over the month. In several of the mosques I attended during my fieldwork and since, younger men often led this nightly prayer and then delivered short lectures. They were popular with younger as well as older worshipers.

Many of my collaborators noted that they are not attached to a particular mosque and do a lot of “mosque hopping” because there is not one mosque that has all they are looking for. I asked them to describe their ideal future mosque and with their responses they constructed the following composite vision of such a mosque. It would be designed as a community center with prayer space; there would be no dividers between women and men but because of postural positions during prayers, women would be in the back of the same space or in a parallel space; it would be multi–ethnic/racial in membership and administration; and potluck dinners would include burgers, biryani, bean pie, and baklava symbolizing a splendid multicultural table reflecting the community diversity. In this community center, there will be learning opportunities (religious, health, civic) and town- hall meetings as well as leisure activities (movie nights, ball courts, and gym). It would be a space where non–Muslim friends and relatives could come and feel comfortable and where neighborhood activities are welcome. A place, Angie notes, “where you feel at home, it belongs to you and you are accepted and not constantly judged”. This envisioned mosque echoes the earliest Islamic centers founded by a previous second generation, the descendants of the early 20th century immigrants.

Some in Chicago gave the Webb Foundation as an example of this envisioned center, a welcoming place with education and leisure activities. Its name is chosen to symbolize its grounding in America and honors Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb
(1846-1916), the first prominent Whiteamerican convert to Islam. His life story was brought to the attention of Muslims by the Chicago-based Nawawi Foundation scholar-in-residence and Whiteamerican convert Dr. Umar F. Abd-Allah—often called Dr. Umar in the community. The foundation was founded by a group influenced by Dr. Umar and is intended to be a concretization of the narrative of creating an American Muslim culture that Dr. Umar called for. Manar, who is not a member, notes that Webb Foundation serves converts as well as those who do not attend mosques. Here, they all feel welcomed and not judged; they find a community to belong to.

Though a long way from the ideal kind of centers envisioned above, mosques are gradually changing. Recently, *The American Mosque 2011 study* found that only a few mosques (3 percent) are today frequented by the members of only one ethnic group, and that even those where 90 percent of the worshipers are of one ethnic group are decreasing (now 16 percent). In the year 2000, for comparison, these numbers were 7 percent and 24 percent respectively. Furthermore, where it has been common for mostly Arabs or South Asians to attend the same mosque, now 81 percent of all mosques have Blackamericans as well (Bagby 2012).

Civic Organizations

The mosque and the Islamic school take first priority in Muslim communities and have the lion’s share of community funding. The Nation of Islam was focused on uplifting Blacks, so it created institutions that attended to the economic, health, and educational needs of the community. As most Blackamerican Muslims transitioned to Sunni Islam, the community sustaining these institutions declined. The NOI, however, continues to operate them in some areas. Sunni Blackamericans have created diverse
organizations, including a short-lived Islamic Party of North America (1971-1981) for political and social activism (Mamiya 2010). Former members of the NOI who transitioned to Sunni Islam under the leadership of W.D. Muhammad created the American Muslim Society, operated Sister Clara Muhammad schools, and later formed the Mosque Care project. Today, the Muslim Alliance of North America serves as a loose coalition of Blackamerican Muslim mosques and organizations and is trying to create social services centers.

If today’s children of immigrants are eager to take over organizations led by older immigrants they refer to as “uncles,” this completes a circle. Foreign Students founded the Muslim Student Association which gave birth to many of today’s national organizations, as noted earlier. It was, however, Abdallah Igram (b.1923- d.1981), a second generation Muslim and a World War II veteran, who founded the first umbrella organization, the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada, in 1952 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Echoing today’s goals and cultural citizenship efforts and prompted by the discrimination against Muslims that he witnessed in the military, Igram put out a call to create an organization and found a receptive audience. The goal was to unite Muslims and connect them to the global ummah, provide education for Muslims and non-Muslims, and work towards obtaining recognition and accommodations from the state and from society (Howell 2010). Igram asked President Eisenhower the reason why, unlike other religions, the religion of Muslim servicemen was not recognized by the military. It was at Igram’s behest that “I” for Islamic was added to Military identification tags (dog tags). He also worked for recognition by the Boy Scouts of America, which subsequently created the “In the Name of God” merit badge for learning about Islam (Howell 2010). Like participants in the project, Igram saw no contradiction between his dual heritages; in the midst of his campaign to organize the Muslim community, he was
also working to bring the Y.M.C.A to Cedar Rapids. He was quoted as saying, “I was president of the Islamic Federation and the Y.M.C.A. at the same time” (Harsham 1976).

After focusing inward for decades, many of today’s national organizations (for example, the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, and the Muslim American Society, Muslim Alliance of North America) have the same goals of education, service, unity, representation, and interfaith work as Igram’s federation did more than half a century ago. Others, like CAIR and MPAC, have civil rights and politically-focused missions while education remains central. There are also professional associations like the Islamic Medical Association, the Islamic Social Services Association, and the Muslim Social Scientists Association. Additionally, Muslim-founded free clinics, food banks, and social service organizations dot the landscape. There are also Muslim think tanks, the most important of which is the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) with the mission to research and provide expert analysis on issues related to Muslims at home and abroad. Created post-9/11, ISPU has since generated reports, policy briefs, and articles, and its expert academics—who are mostly Muslims of diverse background—have been called on by various media outlets and political officials.

Education and Scholarship

Islamic schools offer state-mandated curricula along with Arabic and Islamic Studies but also aim to provide an “Islamic” environment for the young, as discussed earlier. Some families send their boys to boarding schools where, along with the standard curriculum, they learn to memorize the Qur’an. Americans who have memorized the entire Qur’an are in great demand, particularly during Ramadan. However, few families encourage careers in religious studies. While most direct their
children toward professional careers in medicine, engineering and technology, as noted earlier, Muslim Americans have gradually realized the importance of social services, law, social sciences, and humanities. There has also been growing interest among younger generations of Muslims for specializing in Islamic studies, both in the Muslim East and more recently in American universities. In American universities, Islamic studies is a field that has long been dominated by non-Muslim faculty, but there is now a small but growing number of Muslims men and women in this field.

In previous decades, Muslim Americans who desired training in “classic” Islamic scholarship went to the Middle East or South Asia. There they trained with scholars who then authenticated their studies with an *ijazah* (certificate) that qualified them to transmit knowledge in a specific field. The problem has been that, frequently, these students returned as “Arabs” or “South Asians”. Having internalized the culture of these countries, they were judged to be as removed from the American context as “imported scholars”. As a remedy, in the past decade, some organizations have sponsored students to attend established universities (Al-Azhar University, for example) to obtain academic degrees on the condition that they return to address the specific issues and concerns of their community. Ubaidullah Evans represents this group. He was co-sponsored by IMAN, the Chicago-based culture and social service organization, to study at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. In that period, he also had scholar-in-residence status with IMAN where, during a short visit to the U.S. in the summer of 2010, he facilitated a class titled “Ramadan Reflections”. Rather than a typical lecture, the class was an interactive seminar. Because the meaning of the Qur’an is continuously revealed to each believer, he exhorted participants to allow their “own lived experiential reality [to] interface[e] with the word of Allah”. He argued that “if we don’t engage the Qur’an, we risk it becoming irrelevant” (fieldnotes). The homework for the next session was to select verses from the
Qur’an and derive a personal meaning that was then to be put in dialogue with the authoritative *tafsir* (exegesis) which Evens planned to present. In doing so, he aimed to illustrate the importance of and the parameters for personally engaging canonical texts.

New institutions such as ALIM and Bayyinah were founded by second-generation Muslims who wanted more rigorous explorations of Islamic studies (the ALIM program), or mastery of Arabic, and more intense but local and context-relevant learning of the Qur’an (Bayyinah). These institutes along with the Zaytuna Institute, Deen-Intensive Foundation (DIF), and AlMaghrib offer weekend, month, or summer-long workshops and programs for interested Muslims. Zaytuna, DIF, and the Chicago-based Nawawi Foundation also offer *Rihla*. *Rihla* (a journey) typically consists of two to four-week long education trips to Muslim countries and communities (for example, in Russia, China, or Bosnia) for religious and historical education and to connect with the global *ummah*. The teachers in these institutes are mostly converts and second generation American Muslims with few scholars from the Muslim East. These teachers are very popular with younger Muslims on whom these institutions rely to organize local workshops. Bayyinah Institute, for example, held a two-day intensive workshop in Phoenix-valley in 2010 on *Divine Speech: Literary Characteristics of the Qur’an*. The workshop entailed an $85 per-person fee, the commitment of an entire weekend, punctual arrivals and very short breaks. Led by a young and relatively unknown teacher, the event was the most demanding and intensive program the community had had. It was also widely attended by men and women of diverse age and ethnic backgrounds. The workshop organizers offered scholarships with funds raised from the attendees for those who could not afford the fees.

There are also seminary schools that train Muslim chaplains for universities, the military, and healthcare. Most notable among these new institutions is Zaytuna College
in Berkeley, California. It is the first four-year college that combines general liberal arts education with the option to major in Islamic Law and Theology or Arabic Language. The college was founded by two converts who are religious scholars, imam Zaid Shakir (a Black American) and sheikh Hamza Yusuf (a White American), and an immigrant who is a University of California-Berkeley academic, Dr. Hatem Bazian (a Palestinian American). Its mission is to prepare religiously and culturally-grounded future leaders and educators.

**Expressive Culture and the Cultural Production of Home**

As noted above, whenever a culture encountered Islam, it was able to retain its unique identity through a reflexive process of assessing and harmonizing its communal praxis and ethos with Islam. Consequently, be they the majority or minority, Muslims produce a rich tapestry of expressive culture through art and architecture, music and film, theater, fashion/textile and literature, each carrying the stamp of a particular community, country or region marking its identity. This is at once a “cultural product and social process,” through which “individuals and groups negotiate the constraints of the particular material conditions, discursive frameworks, and ideological assumptions in which they work” (Mahon 2000, 468). The producers of this expressive culture are not merely capturing a social reality but are actively engaged in (co)constructing, contesting, and transforming the lifeworlds they inhabit. Scholars have viewed such creative and expressive endeavors as “sites of the reinscription of dominant ideologies and also as contestatory interventions with the potential of contributing to social transformation” (Mahon 2000, 468). Furthermore, there are “cultural politics of aesthetics, authenticity, and appropriation that underpin these productions” (Mahon 2000, 468). These politics
reflect different positions and subjectivities and their associated power differentials between producers and consumers. Consequently, as Abu-Lughod (1999) points out, these cultural producers are often working within the confines of these “structures of power and organizations that are tied to and doing the work of national or commercial interests” (Mahon 2000, 469).

Muslim Americans, like all cultural producers, are also enmeshed in specific but multiple intersecting historical, socio-cultural, local and global spheres of power. These spheres and their associated discursive frames can both create and limit the expressive and transformative possibilities of these cultural producers. Yet through (and because of) it all, the narratives of word and image they create in arts and other forms of expressive culture subvert hegemonic tropes and topoi circulating in the popular and political discourse and in media. In the process, Muslim Americans engaged in cultural production not only alter the frames that hold Muslims as a foreign, violent and an existential threat but also create “new subjects and new subjectivities articulating shared experiences and constructing social identities” (Mohan 2000, 470) for both Muslims and other Americans. Besides being a form of creative individual self-expression, this is also a form of cultural activism and civic engagement with consequential political and social dimensions, whereby the producers employ these creative forms to change the narrative and the terms of debate and to challenge stereotypes and marginalization. They also (re)construct and propose meanings consonant with the multiple dimensions (gender, race/ethnicity, religious, sexual, and national) of their identity (Mohan 2000).

Today’s Muslim artists and cultural producers are following in the footsteps of Blackamericans, Latino/as, Jews and other minorities before them. Lacking institutional powers, they all used esthetics, comedy, and sports to present satirized, idealized or realistic portrayals of their groups to counter the negative images created by outsiders
and hegemonic images imposed from within (Mohan 2000). Since culture is shared but is unevenly distributed in a collective, and because the public sphere is a space where ideas are put forth and contested by differentially powered actors, it is here where these cultural producers employ various media to influence others.

Expressive culture in Muslim countries and communities through the ages has been productive and rich, but Western Muslims face special challenges. These challenges stem from the current historical context of an ever globalizing world where “culture” becomes contested spaces of piety, belonging and politics. Additionally, the diversity of the constituent groups of Muslim America means that the producers of expressive culture must clear the “ethnic” hurdle, both to appeal to their larger community and to represent Muslims to the larger society. For these cultural products to serve these purposes, they have to be known and recognizable to those whose lifeworlds they portray. To discern this, I asked participants to list any Muslim American religious scholars, musicians, fiction/non-fiction writers, poets, and artists whose work they think is both Islamic AND specifically American. Then I asked about what makes these works “Islamic” or “specifically American”. Only half of the participants responded and some included in their lists Canadian and European Muslim artists or scholars who lecture or perform at Muslim events and speak to their social-cultural realities. Less than a quarter of participants listed an American artist or writer. As for the reasons their works are identified as “Islamic,” it is the themes/topics and values the artists/writers address, articulate, or uphold in the practice of their craft as noted by this survey participant:

in a lot of their music, they [Muslim musicians] discuss values that exemplify Islamic principles. For example Lupe Fiasco, who is openly Muslim refuses to accept endorsements from alcoholic beverage companies and discusses volunteering and giving back to your community.
As for what makes these works specifically American, the overarching theme is captured by another survey participant: “They talk or express experiences of being American, and they are American themselves.”

Muslim artists have a long presence in American culture but their religion has been incidental to their art and often is unknown to their audiences and left unexpressed in their work. But a new generation of Muslims is asserting both its American and Muslim identity and is creating art, fashion, comedy, music, and creative and religious literature that unequivocally expresses and claims this dual heritage. I will now briefly explore these oft-contested different areas of individual creativity and the (un)intended cultural activism they serve.

Muslim Musical Landscapes

Music is one of the 3Ms (music, meat, and mortgage) about which Muslim Americans always ask scholars and seem to endlessly debate, and some are growing weary of it all. The discussions continue because there are, and have been for centuries, differing opinions on the permissibility (and conditions) of music. Through it all and through the ages, Muslim artists and the music they produce or influence—from traditional Arabic and Swahili music, Sufi devotional music, to flamenco, jazz, and hip-hop—have enriched cultures around the globe. In North America, the historian Sylviane Diouf (1998) notes that the musical imprint of slaves from Muslim West Africa survives today in the traces of their melisma style in Blues music.
While their more explicitly religious values and themes may be a recent phenomenon, Muslims have played a pivotal role in America’s music history, including in the founding of its best known record label, Atlantic Records, in 1947. Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertgun, the sons of the then Turkish Ambassador to the U.S., were passionate about music and combed the neighborhoods of Washington, DC offering to buy music records. They accumulated over 15,000 records, many of them rare. They then invited groups of White and Black musicians to play at the Turkish Embassy in what was, perhaps, the first integrated concert and the start of a lifelong mission for Ahmet to integrate music production and consumption\(^7\). For this purpose, he cofounded Atlantic Records with Herb Abramson and for the next fifty years they together launched or advanced the careers of such American and British music icons as the Rolling Stones, Bill Crosby, Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles. According to Time Magazine’s Richard Corliss, the mark Ahmet left on Jazz, Blues and Rock ‘n Roll makes “this son of a Turk a virtual deity of music in the American century” (2001).

Many well-known jazz musicians were Muslims; for example, Grammy award winner Arthur “Art” Blakey, led The Jazz Messengers, a band composed entirely of Muslim musicians. His band launched or advanced the careers of many jazz giants, including Wayne Shorter and Wynton Marsalis (Morrison 2009). Jazz pianist and composer Ahmad Jamal, who played with Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday, toured Europe and performed in Istanbul’s 2012 “Jazz in Ramadan” program. His “After Fajr” (after Dawn prayers) album was critically acclaimed and described by a New York Times music critic as “one of his best”(Ratliff 2005)\(^8\).
The contributions of Muslim musicians to jazz are well documented, but it is hip-hop the soundtrack of today’s global youth culture, where Islam is the religion of the music genre and the associated cultural phenomenon. Originating in the 1970s in New York’s poor and predominantly Black and Latino/a “urban wasteland,” hip-hop reflects the influence of its early practitioners, who were members of the NOI and its breakaway group the Five Percenters\(^9\) (FP) (Abdul Khaabear 2011). Neglected in the transition from a manufacturing to a service economy, the deplorable conditions in the area and the resultant social problems inspired hip-hop’s early classics and shaped its image. Its sights, sounds and movements, however, spring from the deep cultural roots of the Black diaspora and of Latino/a immigration to the United States (Abdul Khaabear 2011). NOI has influenced the lyrics and themes of its followers who are members in famous groups like Public Enemy. But Islamic idioms are part of hip-hop culture and available for use by non-Muslim artists\(^{10}\). While the FP and the NOI have been the main routes of Islam into hip-hop, Sunni Islam and the Muslim world at large also offer artists an inspirational palette to sample (Abdul Khaabear 2007). Famed Muslim hip-hop artists are many; those listed by project participants include Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, and Everlast.

Commercial success in the crowded hip-hop world is difficult enough. Muslim artists have to also balance the demands of their faith with their art, where success results from contents and contexts antithetical to the religious mores. Even when they adhere to Islamic mores, however, they are still encumbered by debates on the permissibility of music and by the expectations for gender norms. Some, like the artists listed above, play for general audiences and vary in their adherence to religious stipulations. Other musicians, hip-hop or otherwise, play “Islamic music” which, until the few years, used percussion as the only instrument and limited its lyrics to devotional themes (loving/fearing God, loving the Prophet, controlling desires and so forth).
Consequently, such music was limited to Muslim communities and even then appealed to only a small segment.

The three member hip-hop group, Native Deen, met and performed during the MYNA camp in 1992, where young Manar first encountered and experienced her American Islam. They formed their band in 2000. All second-generation Muslim Blackamerican activists in their local communities, Native Deen band members were seeking innovative ways to inspire and motivate young Muslims. To achieve this goal and to stay above the permissibility fray, they decided on a “fusion of street Rap, hip-hop and R&B flavors” and restricted themselves to percussions “in line with the majority Muslim opinion on the use of musical instruments”. This decision earned them annual appearances at the largest Muslim convention (ISNA) and events across North America and Europe.

Unlike Native Deen, Remarkable Current (RC) does not limit itself to percussion. RC is a collective of musicians, writers, producers and a record label started in California in 2001 by Anas Cannon, a Blackamerican convert. RC boasts musical influences ranging from Santana, Miles Davis and Sting, to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (a world renowned Pakistani Sufi devotional singer). Though it focuses on hip-hop, RC also draws on Rock, Jazz, and traditional World Music. Like Native Deen and others, RC is a creative endeavor with an activist agenda through its Hip Hop Ambassadors program whose mission is “presenting positive examples of African American musicians to the international community, as well as spreading the messages of peace & love through the universal language of music.”

Popular perception shaped by music videos with images of nudity and violence with misogynistic lyrics informs many parents’ opinion of hip-hop. However, for many young people, including Muslims both in the U.S. and abroad, hip-hop is the music of
protest against all forms of oppression and represents a call for empowerment, self-definition, and solidarity with which they identify. It is a cultural phenomenon that transcends ethno-racial, faith, class and (sub)urban boundaries and forms what Rami Nashashibi (2011) calls Ghetto cosmopolitanism. In the post-9/11 era, the encounter between Islam and hip-hop has been employed by diverse subjects for different motives and ends (Nashashibi 2011). By stressing the connection between Islam and hip-hop, Muslims have attempted to authenticate their belonging. By firmly grounding themselves in this most identifiably American art form and its urban roots, they aim to counter the Othering discourses and practices that place them outside the national belonging. Some Muslim artists have also used their platform to critique and push back against negative images and demonizing discourses (Nashashibi 2011). For example, Lupe Fiasco *Words I Never Said* expressed a range of themes starting with a scathing critique of the “war on terrorism,” government policies, reality TV, racist commentators, fear mongering, and the media and President Obama’s handling of the 2008 Israeli attack on Gaza. He also takes on Muslim extremists, at once criticizing them and educating the public as he says “Jihad is not a holy war/where’s that in the worship?/Murdering is not Islam!/ And you are not observant/And you are not a Muslim”.

_Musical Ambassadors_

The State Department and other agencies also use the connection between hip-hop and Islam in the government’s counter-terrorism project as it tries to promote a “moderate” Western Islam (Nashashibi 2011). RC as well as Native Deen bands have, at the request of the State Department, toured Muslim countries like Indonesia and post revolution Tunisia, where they engaged in jam sessions with local hip-hop artists. This
program of “people-to-people diplomacy” is modeled after the cold-war era “Jazz Ambassadors” program which sent jazz luminaries Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie to Europe, Middle East, and Asia for an intercultural dialogue through the international language of music. Reinvented as “Rhythm Road” by the Bush Administration for its Public Diplomacy efforts in the midst of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the new musical ambassadors included practitioners of jazz and other musical styles with an emphasis on Black music and particularly on the internationally resonant style of hip-hop (Aidi 2011). Including hip-hop was seen as ideal because of its Islamic roots and its origins as an “outsider’s protest” of the system by young inner-city Muslims drawing on the “African-American Muslim tradition of protest against authority, most powerfully represented by Malcolm X.” The designer of the Rhythm Road project said his inclusion of hip-hop aimed at “the greater exploitation of this natural connector to the Muslim world” (Aidi 2011, 28). The risk of exploitation for political ends and loss of credibility was not lost on Native Deen when they were first asked in 2005 to go on a trip to Muslim West Africa. The band members discussed their misgivings about being “puppets, going over there saying: ‘Everything’s O.K. We’re bombing your country, but we have Muslims, too!’”. So they invited “people of knowledge” and called for a community consultation which resulted in the decision to selectively accept invitations that are consistent with their “mission to spread tolerance and faith” (Oppenheimer 2011).

The ghetto cosmopolitanism that Nashashibi (2011) describes materializes biannually at Marquette Park on the south side of Chicago in a day-long Takin’ it to the Streets festival of art, music, forums, education and service. The event is the brainchild of IMAN, an organization Nashashibi co-founded in 1996. In the 2010 event, there were multiple music stages that included a world Music stage where Qiuwwali Sufi and Turkish music was played. But the main stage, Streets Stage, was where this cosmopolitanism
was most at work. Here performers from several countries and multiethnic groups from the U.S. were featured. The audience also reflected this cosmopolitanism, as women and men both young and old, of different ethnicities and religions, swayed to the beat.

*Streets*, as the event is referred to, offers a creative space for Muslim artists and brings together activists, artists, scholars and communities. It features collaborative projects and raises consciousness about the common concern for social justice.

**Muslim Women Musicians: Gender, Faith, and Art**

Muslim female artists like Anaya Mcmurray have the added challenge of their gender. Even if they adopt the majority scholarly opinion of the conditional permissibility of music, they encounter the even more contentious issue of women performing to mixed audiences. Additionally, women, Muslim or not, unlike their male counterparts must overcome the priority their appearance is given over their talent in an industry where women’s bodies play a central role in the making and marketing of music. In her article on Black women, hip-hop and Islam, Mcmurray laments the expectations put upon a Muslim woman to be “good girl” and the often limited roles available for Black women as over-sexualized dancers and/or rappers. These factors make it very difficult for Muslim women to break into the field. She is troubled by what she sees as a double standard that has allowed Muslim men “to carve a substantial niche in the industry”, a development that is “partially because the spaces men are encouraged to occupy in hip-hop are far more expansive” than those available to women (McMurray 2008). McMurray is undeterred by the challenges and uses her music for creative and activist purposes. She may reference only a few Islamic idioms, but her spirituality informs and inspires her socially-conscious work. Her critique of society and of her faith community extends from her lyrics to her appearance. In her dress, she does not
conform to stereotypical images of Muslims and through it she attempts to challenge these images and the “assumption that women who are not visibly marked as belonging to another faith are by default Christian” (2008,86).

Miss Undastood, Tavasha Shannon, started rapping as a child in the bathrooms of her very strict Islamic school and chose this stage name to reflect her being a misunderstood Muslim woman. For a long time, she did not do “Islamic” and instead focused on “street stuff” in her lyrics, but after an extended spell of writer’s block what she wrote “came out Islamic.” Since then, her work has been equal parts critique of her faith community, her society and of geopolitics. In her song Hijab is the One thing, she combines all three as she problematizes the potency of this symbol, infused as it is with multiple meanings. She asserts that: “just because I cover don’t mean I’m more righteous/ Just because she doesn’t, don’t mean she’s less pious” (Brown 2007). Like Miss Undastood, Ms. Latifah is another young second-generation Blackamerican hip-hop artist who dons a hijab and writes socially-conscious lyrics. They are among the few Muslim women artists who perform in Muslim conferences and large events in addition to performing for general audiences. All three of these Muslim female artists say they wish to serve as role models for other female artists by focusing on a positive message and by carving out a space for their message and for women of color.

Performing Identity

The children of immigrants not only consume but also create works that are informed by and contribute to hip-hop. Palestinian New Yorker Suheir Hammad, an award winning artist/activist, is among the most notable of these younger Arab Muslim artists. Hammad’s first poetry collection is titled Born Palestinian, Born Black. Having
grown up in midst of New York City’s diversity and reading Blackamerican literature and poetry, she agrees with poet Audre Lorde that black, beyond cultural identity, is a political identity. Hammad notes that in her Palestinian culture as in other cultures, black is associated with negative forces. Therefore, in her poetry, she wanted to “take back the negative energy that is associated with black, reclaim it, and say that this is something that is about survival, something that is positive” (Handal 1997). Omar Offendum and Ragtop (Nizar Wattad) similarly speak to their experiences as Americans and in solidarity with oppressed people at home and abroad.

Western Muslim artists and Americans in particular see their entire community’s heritage as their own to sample and integrate into their art. They effortlessly switch from English to Arabic to Urdu or Somali or Turkish and back to English in the same track. Many of their parents may object to hip-hop, not because they object to music but because they dislike this particular style of music, which they associate with clubs, drugs and sex and with negative images of blackness. Arab and South Asians are framed as cultural, not racial, minorities, but they too are no less racialized as groups. Therefore, the young hip-hop artists, Muslim or not, from these communities find it necessary to eschew the racialized representations by performing and redefining the complexities of their identities (Sharma 2010).

Suad Abdul Khabeer, a second-generation Blackamerican Muslim female anthropologist and hip-hop artist, argues that hip-hop enables younger Muslim Americans to “construct and perform Muslim Cool, a practice of American Muslimness.” This she notes is a “practice of religious self-making by young American Muslims that is cool because it operates at the intersection of blackness, hip-hop, and Islam” (2011, 22). This Muslim cool enables them to cross ethno-racial and class barriers; additionally, hip-hop’s central focus on these issues informs their activist projects. Here
establishing connections to specific notions of blackness and the ‘hood become important techniques in configuring a sense of American Muslim identity. These techniques are located in the everyday performance of self, including how, by way of style and activism, the body is a site of American Muslim self-making. [Abdul Khabeer 2011, iii].

Documentary films like The New Muslim Cool as well as Deen Tight feature the deep connections of Islam and hip-hop as well as the complexities and challenge Muslim artists encounter as people of color and as Muslims in post-9/11 America.

Muslim cool is one of several different modalities available for American Muslim-ness. Hip-hop may dominate youth music, but Muslim American musicians span the musical styles from punk and country. Like hip-hop, punk music has an anti-establishment stance, a global following and a distinct fashion and music style, and it offers younger Muslim Americans another modality for authenticity in difference.

Growing up in 1990s California, Tanzila Ahmed, a contributor to the Love InshAllah anthology, was the only brown girl at Saturday night punk concerts and was driven there by her Indian immigrant mother who waited for her in the parking lot. The next morning, Ahmed would put on a headscarf and attend her mosque’s Sunday school. Rather than being lost in contradiction and suffering identity crisis, she says:

I was defiantly proud of being desi and Muslim in an Islamophobic and racist America, and to me that translated into punk. If I told fellow punks that I was straight edge—meaning I didn’t drink or do drugs—they didn’t bat an eye. And when I went to work in political organizing because I wanted to make the world a better place for my people, that wasn’t just an Islamic value—it was a punk value, too. [Ahmed 2012, 60].

Tanzila Ahmed details the “Muslim punk” scene aware that the term seems inappropriate since, rather than devotional lyrics, punk lyrics “to[e] the line between Islamophobia and orthodoxy” (T. Ahmed 2012, 64). Fitting-in is antithetical to punk, but as a marginalized religious and ethnic minority, Muslim punks claim their ethnic markers as they mix boisterous music and provocative politics without regard for the consequences. This image materialized in the scene of a Muslim punk wedding she
attended. Here, bodies were adorned with “piercings and saris, dyed hair and kurtas, sunglasses and cholis.” The Muslim punk scene is a space where they can mix “racy lyrics and fighting against racial profiling in the same breath, and top it off with ‘fuck that shit, inshAllah,’ and no one would blink” (T. Ahmed 2012, 64).

If “Muslim punk” seems like a contradiction in terms, then “Muslim country” music would seem no less incongruent. Kareem Salamah is Muslim country singer, a peculiarity that brought him media attention and an Obama White House invitation. An Oklahoman son of Egyptian parents, Salamah credits his mother for supporting his love of music. But unlike Tanzila Ahmed’s mother, who waited for her in the parking lot, his mother was the one attending the musical events; he accompanied her as she followed her “insatiable desire to learn and experience all” of Oklahoma’s mixed heritage. The rodeos, fairs and the Grand Old Opry to which she took him were his initiation to country music. His upbringing nurtured his talent and emboldened him to defy stereotypes and to cross boundaries as he mixed studying law, boxing, country singing, and memorizing classical Western and Arabic Poetry. His début at ISNA a decade ago, singing cappella solo, introduced him to Muslim audiences; since then, he has added instruments and has risen to international fame touring with his band. Salamah performs in North America and Europe and recently completed a tour of several Muslim countries as part of the State Department’s Rhythm Road program. Salamah too uses his art form to speak back to his community and society as he when he sings “I know it’s hard to listen to the words you just can’t stand\Gonna take more than a fist to enlighten an ignorant man”\textsuperscript{15}.

In the construction of the American ummah, the borders of what is (or is not) Islamic are closely patrolled and debates abound about the proper role of art and about the need for a space for artistic expression within the community. IMAN’s biannual
Takin’ it to the Streets festival and monthly Community Café have charted the course by creating that space for artists, though its focus has been primarily urban and world music. IMAN has a full-time staff for its Art and Culture department and considers its programs and events as a vehicle to showcase Muslims in the arts, to foster new talent with an “urban Muslim identity”, and to mobilize and organize for a social justice agenda. Though based in Chicago, it has organized events in New York at the Apollo Theater, an enduring symbol of African American renaissance. Being here is not by accident as noted by Amir Al-Islam, who lectures on African American history and who chairs IMAN’s board. He says that “bringing IMAN to the Apollo is a reminder to the Muslim American community of its roots in the African American community”. Though Islam’s presence in the U.S. is perceived as new, the musical imprint of Muslims is documented in music that is quintessentially American and which America exports into the global soundscape.

Comedy: “Turning Fear to Funny”

In their abilities to make explicit a culture’s tacit norms and beliefs and to offer a critique, Koziski (1984) likens comedians to anthropologists. The comedic context offers a safe space from which standup comedians jolt audience sensibilities by making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As deep seated beliefs and mental frames are made explicit, a shock of recognition ensues. Comedians hence serve as “cultural critics” who bring about new cultural awareness (Koziski 1984, 57). Comedians from marginalized groups recognize the powerful role of this art form. They subvert their powerlessness by offering critiques both of their group and of the society at large from a
safe comic position that shields them from retribution from within and without their group. Cognizant of their role as cultural critics and finding examples in Billy Crystal, Richard Pryor, Margret Cho’s crucial roles in changing societal perceptions of Jews, Blackamericans, and Asians respectively, Muslim American comedians began to stand up and step out. Laughter, let alone comedy, is not part of the public image of Islam which makes the jarring category “Muslim comedian” itself a powerful tool in changing perceptions. While some Muslims (for example, Preacher Mos, Dave Chappell, and Dean Obeidallah) have long been in comedy, their religion has not been part of their act. In May 2008, Public Television Stations (PBS) aired an hour-long documentary entitled, *Stand-Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age* which showcased the works of five comedians in a post-9/11 America. The program introduced Muslim comics to a wider audience; since then, Muslim comedians of all backgrounds, whose acts are not merely ethnic but address Muslim experiences, have emerged.

Chicago native Azhar Usman, the son of Indian immigrants, left law and took up standup comedy in 2001. On his website, Azhar says that growing up in suburbia in a non-White Family made him “naturally begin to think of himself as Black.” He sees himself greatly influenced by rap’s rebellious lyrics and by leftist political writings, but among his multiple selves as a citizen of the world, he says he is “Psychologically Black.” Preacher Mos, a Blackamerican convert who has done standup comedy for over 20 years tackling race and cultural issues, teamed up with Azhar and Muhammad (Mo) Omer (Palestinian-American). They formed the *Allah Made Me Funny* comedy troupe which has since gone international. The trio has entertained Muslims and non-Muslim alike by poking fun at their families, their community, post-9/11 security issues and anti-Muslim rhetoric. They critique Muslims with insider jokes that they often have to explain to the general audience, and they test the limits of tolerance of both audiences while carefully
treading religious boundaries and keeping their humor “halal” (free of profanity and sexual references). They have been featured in most major news outlets, both print/digital and visual. This trio is among the many Arab and Muslim Americans who have taken the path of entertaining while educating and critiquing. Making the most of the current hyperawareness and hypervisibility of Muslims, these comedians are “perhaps helping to ease tensions surrounding the nation’s newest persecuted minorities. With self-deprecating jokes about terrorism, racial profiling, religious customs and international politics, the comedians turn fear into funny, following a long tradition of ethnic humor in America.”

The *Axis of Evil* was formed by three second generation Arab Americans and one Iranian American. This comedy group’s cultural critique started with its name, taken from a post-9/11 speech by President Bush. The group earned a spot on the show Comedy Central and toured Muslim countries before it broke up in 2005 and its members took up solo acts. Dean Obeidallah, one of founders of this group, is the son of a Muslim Palestinian immigrant father and a Christian second generation Italian American mother. Where Azhar saw himself psychologically Black, Dean says he grew up thinking of himself as “regular White American” with White friends. But all that changed, he says, when “after 9/11, I found that my membership in ‘The White Club’ had been revoked. I was now a minority, which, truthfully, was not something I wanted to be.” He does not want it because, he says, as a minority, you are responsible to answer for the vices and crimes of the worst in your group. Disoriented by his new status as no longer white, Dean eventually came to terms with his Arab roots and saw comedy as a way to push back against the rhetoric and misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims. In 2012, he collaborated with Negin Farsad, a second generation American Muslim of Iranian background and a standup comedian and filmmaker. They co-produced and co-
directed *The Muslims Are Coming*, a film and roadshow by Muslim standup comedians “using the only weapon they have: jokes” to counter Islamophobia and fear mongering. The two comedians traverse the country performing and engaging locals and confronting hate and fear. They enlisted American cultural icons like the Daily Show’s Jon Stewart, Rachel Maddow, CNN’s Soledad O’Brien, and hip-hop artist and business tycoon Russell Simons and others, along with an imam and rabbi, to share their insights and assessment.

Maysoon Zayid is among the comedians in this film. She is a self-described “Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey.” She is an established standup comedian performing across the country, the cofounder of Arab American Comedy Festival, founder of a children’s charity, an actress and a screenplay writer.

Tissa Hami is an Iranian American comedian who grew up in Boson. Hami rose to fame as a Muslim comedian post-9/11. In one of her acts, she comes on stage in full head cover and black jilbab (overcoat) then takes them off midway in an effort, she says, to show she is the same person and in the process break misconceptions about Muslim women.

Part of Muslim American comedy’s aim is to address intra-community relations across ethno-racial, gender, and generational lines, and these multiethnic comedic partnerships illustrate that differences can be assets as much as they are challenges. For some of these artists, comedy is one among several activist projects. For example, Azhar from the *Allah Made Me Funny* group is the cofounder of the Nawawi Foundation and works closely with Dr. Umar, author of the Cultural Imperative paper discussed earlier. Standup comedy, therefore, is to Azhar an important step in creating that uniquely American Muslim culture, which he says is the most critical task for the community. This is the charge of his and subsequent generations of Muslim Americans because, he argues, if Islam in Saudi Arabia does not look like that in India, should it not in America look
American? How Islam can be American and remain normative is what these artists are experimenting with.

Literature and the Need to be Visible

American author Anee Lamoot insightfully noted that “[w]riting can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong” (Rosaldo 1997, 37). Literature in all of its forms is one way for Muslim Americans to both perform and negotiate a third way of being and belonging to their ethnic heritages, America and Islam. They seek an alternative to full assimilation that demands giving up something of one’s self, and to isolation that defines one in opposition to one’s own heritage and history as an American (Jackson 2012). This new way is brought to life as much through the creative imagination represented in literature as it is through living reality.

Muslim literature, however, is not a post-9/11 phenomenon, though one could argue that this latter period has been the most productive. The first writings of the Muslim experience in America are also the first works of Blackamerican literature, namely the slave narratives exemplified by that of Job ben Solomon (1701-1773), whose given name was Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Diouf 1998). In more recent history, Muslim American literature starts with the 1960s Black Arts Movement (BAM) that accompanied the Black Power movement, of which “Black Muslim” authors, artists, and activists were integral protagonists. BAM paved the way for all ethnic American literature. It did so through what Houston Baker, a scholar of literature, called its “metaphorical rebelliousness” and its “willingness” to “postulate a positive and distinctive category of
existence and then to read the universe in terms of that category.” Having done so, it is both “a radical political act” and, more importantly, “a bold critical act designed to break the interpretive monopoly” of “white, literary-critical establishment that set a ‘single standard of criticism’” and thereby create an alternative ethnic “reference public” (Li 1998, 37).

Compared to other and more culturally diverse minority groups, such as Asian Americans, BAM had a large and more ethnically homogenous readership, prompting competition among great publishing houses to print and market its works (Li 1998). Nevertheless, Asians, Latino/as, Arabs, South Asians, and other minorities have benefited from the path-breaking efforts of BAM, while encountering their own challenges stemming from their diversity and their status as perpetual foreigners. The significance of minority literature is that it serves an important role indexing the cultural presence of the group. Here, writers offer a “professional service” of sort to their group, not because of any formal obligation but due to connection by association (Li 1998, 181). Unlike White authors who can at once maintain their individuality and stand for American normativity, ethnic authors can scarcely “transcend their ethnic collective to claim sovereignty of the self” and they seem almost compelled to link “each individual intrigue” to politics and not to neglect the role they serve for their readers and the social world they inhabit (Li 1998, 181). More than a mere creative endeavor for self-expression, ethnic literature is a way to negotiate cultural citizenship and belonging for minorities.
As with the case of music and comedy, Muslim Americans of various ethnic backgrounds have long been writing fiction, anthologies, historical narratives, and poetry that reflect their experiences and creativity. Most of that work, however, has been under the genre of ethnic American literature. Mohja Kahf (2008), a second generation Syrian American who is a professor of literature and an author, argues that it might be useful to read these works together as part of a developing new cultural field of Muslim American literature (MAL). After having surveyed this literary landscape, Kahf formulated an inclusion criteria based on the cultural Muslim-ness of the author, regardless of religious observance; the linguistic or aesthetics of the writing; and the inclusion of content that explores the experiences of Muslim Americans. She then proposes a four-tiered typology for MAL that starts with what she calls the “Prophets of Dissent.” This typology consists of BAM authors who first wrote from a distinctly Muslim cultural position and the current authors whom they have influenced. Together, they occupy an “outsider” status and offer a moral and cultural critique of mainstream society in a powerful and “prophetic, visionary tone” (Kahf 2008, 43). Malcolm X is the primary figure in this group and he still looms large. In one way or another, his legacy inspires Muslims in all of Kahf’s subsequent categories and in other art forms; as noted earlier, Malcolm X continues to offer many of today’s Muslim youth a mode of being authentically American Muslim.

Though Kahf offers Marvin X’s *Fly Me to Allah* (1969) as possibly the first published Muslim American collection of poetry, it is actually second generation Arab American Sam Hamod’s *Beaten Stones Like Memories* (1965) (Beausoleil and Shehabi 2012) that occupies this post. Marvin X is a Blackamerican Muslim poet and playwright
who was an influential figure in BAM and who remains an important advocate for Blackamerican Theater. Hamod is a Midwestern son of Lebanese parents who came of age and spent his life surrounded by Blackamerican artists and thinkers and had personal relationships with Malcolm X, Marvin X, and Alijah Muhammad. Both Hamod and Marvin X continue today as “prophets of dissent” and are joined by a younger generation of spoken word poets, authors, and hip-hop artists of all ethnicities whose work is socially conscious. These younger authors are more difficult to categorize as they use multiple media to feature their works. For example, Anida Yoeu Ali, a Cambodian Muslim from Chicago, composed a poem on the dramatic increase in the targeting of Muslims post-9/11 and turned it into the 1700% Project: Mistaken for a Muslim, which includes a video performance of this poem and a blog. This project, Ali notes, is “conceived as a collaborative project utilizing art not just as a means to address critical issues but also as strategic intervention.”

As with BAM, the 1960s were also a time for Arab and other minorities, who in prior generations had assimilated, to stand up and reclaim some of the history that has been lost; in the process, they tried to reclaim something of themselves. Writers from that time and the present day who write ethnic literature fall in Kahf’s second category of “Multi-Ethnic Multitudes”. These writers have earned fine art degrees, published in trade and academic outlets, and been critically reviewed in mainstream media. These writers, hence, enjoy an “insider’s status” in the American literary scene. The diversity in their aesthetics, ethnicities, and spiritual or secular leanings makes Kahf’s lumping together of these multitudes provisionary (Kahf 2008). In this group, she includes Agha Ali (a Kashmiri American poet), who introduced Ghazal in English to American literature, and Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, whose work has a lot of “Muslim content” because, though she is spiritually ecumenical, her Muslim heritage
through her father figures prominently in her writings. In this same multi-ethnic multitudes tier, Kahf also includes Mustafa Mutabaruka (a Blackamerican), author of *Seed* (2002); Samina Ali (an Indian American) author of *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004); and Michael Muhammad Knight (a Whiteamerican), punk rock author of the *Taqwacore* (2004). Yet Ali, Knight, and several new authors’ work seem different from the earlier ethnic literature in that the Muslim-ness of the protagonists is central to these works and all seem to tackle issues of Muslim identity and experiences. Therefore, I would propose a modification in this typology which would accommodate these and similar authors. I shall return to this matter shortly.

The third category in Kahf’s typology for this nascent Muslim American literature is what she calls “New American Transcendentalists,” who share a common aesthetics inspired by the Sufi cultural underpinnings of their writings. This group is influenced by classic Muslim Sufi poetry and by 19th century American Transcendentalists and, therefore, the group’s work is spiritual in nature. Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet, is America’s most read poet and a major influence on the works of the members of this category. Daniel (Abd al-Hayy) Moore’s *Ramadan Sonnets* (1986) exemplifies the writings of these New American Transcendentalists. The fourth category in this typology is “New Pilgrims” for whom, Kahf notes, Islam is not only a source of inspiration for their writings but is also the object and the objective. Unlike the previous three groups and more like America’s Puritans, the authors here write with explicitly religious motivation and voice. This group is also ethnically diverse but differs from the second group in its tendency to “come together around a more or less coherent, more or less conservative Muslim identity” (Kahf 2008, 44). Interestingly enough, she includes Pamela Taylor in this category. Taylor writes Muslim American science fiction and is a co-founder of Muslims for Progressive Values and has led mixed gender congregational prayers. These
activities and the fact that she serves on the board of Rabbi Lerner’s Spiritual Progressives\textsuperscript{30} defy the category’s defining characteristic of “conservative Muslim identity”. Taylor, however, is a member and former director of the Islamic Writers Alliance, which was established by Muslim American women writers and which Kahf includes in this fourth category. Another member of this category whose work may better exemplify Kahf’s characterization is Umm Zakiyya (pen name) and her book \textit{If I Should Speak} (2001)\textsuperscript{31}, about young Muslim Americans in college.

\textit{Agency and Activism: The Muslim Protagonist}

To overcome the limitations of the “New Pilgrims” category and the expansiveness of the “Multi-ethnic Multitudes” category, I propose a modification to Kahf’s categorization. I would redefine her fourth category to accommodate all the works (fiction and no-fiction) from these two tiers where the Muslim-ness of the protagonists, irrespective of the “conservative” or “progressive” voice of protagonist or author, is central and not merely an element or a background. Here \textit{Taqwacore} (2004), about punk rock Muslims struggling with religious interpretations and identity; \textit{Madras on Rainy Days} (2004), about a second generation Muslim woman struggling with her family’s frozen idea of back home and her struggle as a minority in India and America; \textit{If I Should Speak} (2001), about interfaith college roommates and a Muslim woman’s balancing of a passion for art and her religious teachings; and the science fiction of Pamela Taylor would all fall in this fourth category. If there is a unifying theme to this modified category, then, I think it is one about belonging and defining a space for one’s self to be whole. All of these works in some way are inspired by the author’s own
struggles with expectations that simplify complexities with which the authors and their protagonists have, overtime, grown comfortable.

The past few years have brought a burgeoning collection of Muslim fiction (for adults, young adults, and children) where the challenges and identity of Muslim America are again not incidental to the protagonists but are central and essential to the plot and where 9/11 and its aftermath figure prominently. Kahf’s own novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), falls in this forth category. The novel is about a second-generation Syrian woman growing up in middle America and dealing with the challenges of diversity within her community and of racism in society, all in the context of love, loss, and self-discovery. Nafisa Hajj, a second generation of Pakistani parentage, has two novels, *The Sweetness of Tears* (2011) and *The Writing on My Forehead* (2009), that exemplify this post-9/11 motif. Reflecting on writing this latter book, Hajj notes that:

> On one hand, in writing this book, I wanted to tell a story about one family only, without trying to write a commentary on the state of the world. On another, more personal note, I was trying to come to terms with being an American Muslim in post 9/11 America. I used to think I had resolved the question of who I was, a hyphenated American comfortable in my own skin and at ease with the complexity of my heritage. I felt I was neither defined by the past and no longer twisting and contorting my sense of self in order to escape it. Now, that carefully cultivated complexity was being reduced before my very eyes. Stereotypes of Muslims—of Muslim women in particular—were nothing new. But those old caricatures were being imposed with renewed fervor and virulence, forcing me to revisit the old question all over again. How does the individual quest to define oneself play out in the larger narrative of family history, social development, and political upheaval? What does the individual owe the group and at what cost should the debt be paid? These are universally human questions, played out again and again from one generation to another. In the end, heritage, duty, and the tension between family and individual all came into play when I began writing *The Writing On My Forehead.*

Female authors have been the most productive in the area of fiction. In addition to the above, these works also include Maryam Sullivan’s *The Size of a Mustard Seed* (2009), on urban Muslim life; Sahar Alam’s *The Groom to Have Been* (2008); Alia
Yunis’s *Night Counter* (2009), about two second generation immigrant families in the contexts of post-9/11 New York and Los Angeles, respectively; and Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams* (2009), about the double grief of a Muslim 9/11 widow. In this modified forth category, I would also include conversion narratives like Willow Wilson’s *Butterfly Mosque* (2010), because they too are about belonging to two ostensibly conflicted universes and about carving out a space to be comfortable in one’s own skin.

Also in this newly defined fourth category is a group of non-fiction anthologies aimed at demystifying Muslim American lives and showing their rich diversity and complexities through the various styles and voices. The nonfiction work of Muslim women garners greater public attention and acclaim than their works of fiction. In great part, this is because the dominant narrative on Islam, after Jihad and violence, is that of oppressed voiceless women; consequently, the real voices of Muslim women seem more intriguing than fictional characters. Cognizant of this reality, younger Muslim women took it upon themselves to tell their stories. Taking a line from pop culture and not waiting to be “given a voice,” Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur (a Blackamerican) edited the first of these anthologies and titled it *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* (2005). It was followed by *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* (2011), co-edited by Maria M. Ebrahimji (a CNN editorial Producer) and Zahra T. Suratwala, both of South Asian background. *I Speak for Myself* (ISFM) has since gone from a book to a project, an ISFM series that focuses on delivering “narrative collection[s]” of diverse interfaith and intercultural stories that at once connect, inspire, and educate. The series has published the first anthology about/by Muslim men titled *All American: 45 American Men on Being Muslim* (2012). The contributors represent diverse ethnic backgrounds and are accomplished in a variety fields in addition to being socially conscious and engaged.
A third anthology, intended to give a more intimate look at the private lives of Muslim women, sparked the interest of readers with its tantalizing title *Love, Inshallah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women* (2012). The editors, Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi, are community activists and civic minded. Yet, they were unprepared for the controversy generated by the subtitle’s evocation of Orientalist fantasies and obsessions with secluded Muslim sexuality. They explain that their intention and objective was twofold: to challenge stereotypes about Muslim women in the larger society by providing untold stories and to push the Muslim community to open up spaces for women to “share their lives honestly, across the full range of their experiences” (Mattu and Maznavi 2012, x). These experiences include growing up in families where cultural norms as well as the understanding and practice of Islam varied. The book details how women navigate their desire and sexuality and try to balance the demands of their faith, family and larger society. In the process, they paint an essentially human story of trial and triumph, love, loss and longing.

Muslim male works of fiction, on the other hand, are fewer in number but enjoy greater publicity and critical acclaim. Khaled Hosseini’s *Kite Runner* (2003), which was later made into a movie and a play, was an international best seller. Michael Muhammad Knight’s *The Taqwacores* is described by Carl Ernest, an Islamic Studies professor at North Carolina University-Chaper Hill, as the “Catcher in the Rye for young Muslims” and is on the reading lists of several colleges and universities. The *Mother of the Believers* (2009) by Kamran Pasha is a fictionalized account of the life of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet and an important figure for Islam’s critics and defenders alike. Through the narrator, the voice of Aisha at the end of her life, the author addresses and attempts to disabuse the readers of all the stereotypes and smears of Islam. The *American Dervish* (2012) by Ayad Akhtar was barely out when it was selected for translation to over twenty
languages. The novel is a coming of age story about a second generation Muslim American man of Pakistani background, a story about discovery and the loss of love and faith.

There is also a rapidly growing body of children’s literature. Some of this literature, like Asma Mobin-Uddin’s (2005) *My Name is Bilal*, like its adult counterparts, deals with issues of identity and is written for a Muslim audience. Others, like Alexis York Lumbard’s *The Conference of the Birds*, based on the widely translated work of a 12th century Persian poet, is written for general audiences due to its moral and spiritual import and its relevance to character education. Lumbard has also written books aimed at Muslim audiences, including *Meow, Meow, Maulana: The Story of the Muhammad*. In keeping with the times, this is a book with a mobile technology application for its interactive features.

*The Power of Playwright*

Theater is about storytelling through representing and performing life on stage in front of an audience. It lends itself to tackling sensitive and otherwise divisive issues through storytelling that humanizes the Other. It provides both a distance inherent in performance and an emotional intimacy that enable understanding and empathy to challenge cognitive schemas and attitudes in the safety of the audience. Muslim playwrights and theater performers are utilizing this transformative space to tell their stories and to challenge perceptions. They are producing works that address themes and issues pertaining to their spiritual and ethnic communities while aiming for greater social impact and cultural contribution. The *Domestic Crusaders*, by Wajahat Ali, premiered in 2005 and is a two-act play about a day in the life of a Pakistani-American
family, as its members gather for the twenty-first birthday of the family’s youngest child against the backdrop of 9/11. The heated discussions and debates along with the generational and gender tensions take audiences into the private lives of Muslims, lives that are often exoticized in the public imaginary. Ayad Khtar, mentioned earlier, has also written two plays, *The Invisible Hand* (2011) and *Disgraced* (2012). The author describes *Disgraced* as a story about a “Muslim-American lawyer who is rapidly moving up the corporate ladder while distancing himself from his cultural roots. At the moment of achieving his life-long ambitions, he falls victim to professional and personal betrayals, not least of all, his own betrayal of himself.” The play premiered in 2012 at the American Theater Company and earned positive reviews.

From the diverse ordinary women performing their stories in *Hijabi Monologues*, to the one woman act “*Unveiled,*” to the plays of *Progress Theatre*, Muslim female playwrights have self-consciously aimed at dismantling stereotypes and restrictive modes of femininity that frame Muslim women from within and without as agentless and silent. In so doing, they also express their creativity and humanize their community. Qasim Basir is charting the course for screenplay by and about the experiences of Muslim Americans with his first full feature film *Mooz-lem* starring Danny Glover which debuted in 2010 and received positive reviews from national media.

**In Word and Image: Educating While Entertaining**

Muslim artists in various creative fields have always been part of the American creative and expressive cultural scene. As noted previously, their religion was for the
most part not known to their audiences or readers. Their difference was/is primarily marked by their ethnicity; often, their creative work was classified as ethnic. Cultural producers draw on their private lives and on occurrences and discourses in the public sphere. The events of 9/11 and their aftermath have inspired diverse cultural producers regardless of their background. For those of Muslim background, the national and family conversations on 9/11 inform their creative works and, whether they intend to or not, their works have an educational effect. For example, novelist Saher Alam says she does not write specifically for Muslims nor does she know if Muslims even read her books. Additionally, she did not set out to write the novel she did in *The Groom to Have Been* (2008). This is a novel that deals with identity issues and its main characters grapple with post-9/11 fears and prejudices. Alam says: “when the attacks of September 11 happened, the conversations that my characters were having in various stories reflected aspects of the national/international conversation about the decisions Muslims should/could/would make about their negotiation with Western norms”\(^4\). So though she did not set out to make the Muslim-ness of her the characters an essential feature, it ends up being so.

Lately, however, many Muslims regardless of their religiosity are recognizing the power of word and image to at once educate and entertain. These musicians, comedians, authors, filmmakers, photographers and fashion designers are producing works that reflect their needs, experiences, and talent. They are using these works to express their creativity, to educate the public, and to humanize Muslims. The camera of photographer Sadaf Syed, a young Chicagoan, composes *iCOVER: A Day in the Life of a Muslim-American COVERed Girl*\(^2\). Syed lets the framed images of a woman judge, a truck driver, a car sales-woman, a scientist, a playwright and many other American Muslims of diverse age, occupation and ethnicity shatter monolithic images of Muslim women.
Some younger Muslims are explicitly combining creativity and activism. Marwa Atik and Tasneem Sabri are two Californian sisters of Syrian-American parentage who founded a handmade hijab company because, as Americans, they did not want to wear hijab like Turkish or Emirati girls. Their style and fashion sense is shaped by the esthetics of their American culture. They combine fashion and social justice by being involved in “Shop for a Cause” and they give a portion of the proceeds to charity both at home and abroad. In this activist-fashion, they share a common cause with a group of young women at University of California-Irvine who started Fashion Fighting Famine as an innovative way to wed their two passions and raise funds to fight hunger locally and globally. They ended up organizing the largest annual Muslim fashion show in the U.S., complete with runway glamour, media buzz, and fashion designers from as far as Singapore. In the 2012 New York Fashion week, Muslim American Nzinga Knight grabbed headlines with her designs. Her Caribbean heritage, Muslim faith and native New Yorker sensibility inspire her fashion style and design. She does not design for Muslim women only but for all women who want a modest yet trendy alternative to what most designers offer.

Michael Wolfe and Alex Kronemer (both Whiteamerican converts) formed a production company that creates films featured on public television. Their films have been historical docudramas with experts and academics; they include: Islam an Empire of Faith (2000), Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet (2002), Prince Among Slaves (2007), Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain (2007) along with the more contemporary On a Wing and Prayer: An American Muslim Learns to Fly (2008).

Dearborn, Michigan is considered the Arab American capital. Thus, it is not surprising that Dearborn has a public school, Fordson High School, where 98 percent of the students are of Arab background. Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football is a documentary
that tells the story of the school’s football team training for a face-off with a rival team in the middle of Ramadan and as the tenth anniversary of 9/11 approaches. It too addresses issues of faith, identity and the forces that shape them as it attempts to talk back to the prevailing Othering discourses.

Citizenship has both legal and cultural aspects. The first is about being permitted to be in a place and having rights and obligations in it. The latter is about being at home in a place where one could be at once different and belong; a place where giving up a part of one’s self is not the expected price of admission. This cultural citizenship also involves, however, an inventory of what one brings to this home and a (re)interpretation of one’s history and heritage. This process of inventory and rereading of heritage informs individual and group efforts to create new cultural norms, sensibilities, esthetics, and discourses. Their efforts, over time, in turn, change these individuals and their society.
Many said this was an African proverb, though the analogy is attributed to West African Muslim writer and ethnologist, Amadou Hampate Ba (b.1901-d. 1991). http://cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/research/ecmes/photo/beranek accessed on 09/04/2012

Even when the Arabic names are adopted, they are appropriated with cultural inflections. For example, Muhammad in Arabic is rendered Mahamadou or Mamadou in West Africa, Mehmet in Turkish and Ma in Chinese.

Academics grapple with this issue as well. For example, in 1998 sociologist Robert N. Bellah wrote Is There a Common American Culture? and political scientist Samuel Huntington took up the challenge almost a decade later in Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity.

The group “wanted to promote the practice of Islam while embracing the positive aspects of American life and culture. It seeks to provide facilities and programs that offer guidance and create a spiritually uplifting atmosphere”. http://www.webbfound.org/sundayprograms/sunday-program-updates/kg-1st-updates/ accessed on 12/05/2012

The American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM) was formally founded in 1998 as a result of long discussion among Muslim Islamic Studies professors and their Muslim students. The students complained that the Islam they learned at home, the mosque and the Islamic school was very different from what they learned in college. The latter “was not cake baked by imams or parents” (fieldnotes); it required critical thinking. So the students convinced their professors, who were already involved and lectured in the community, to teach academic style seminars at an institute that would be found and managed by these students.

Zaytuna College’s motto is “where Islam meets America”. Its mission is to “educate and prepare morally committed professional, intellectual, and spiritual leaders, who are grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition and conversant with the cultural currents and critical ideas shaping modern society.” It aims to remedy “two lamentable situations”: the scarcity of scholars prepared to “meet the religious and pastoral needs of a rapidly expanding Muslim community in the West” and the growing alienation of youngers “from the mosque and from religious culture”. http://www.zaytunacollege.org/academics/ accessed on 9/4/2012


Fajr is Arabic for dawn prayers.

The full name is The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths. It is a movement that began in the 1960s when a NOI youth minister’s teachings expanded from the eschatology and origin story of the NOI to include masonic mysticism and numerology among other things. The minister became known as Father Allah. Additionally, whereas NOI considers the Black man to be the “original man”, the Five Percenters consider the Black man to be god (Abdul Khabeer 2011)

For example, the artist 50 Cent used the title Ghetto Quran, while Jill Scott’s A Long Walk lyrics includes “maybe we can talk about Surah 31:18” a reference to the verse in the Quran warning about arrogance.


Group website: http://www.remarkablecurrent.com/ accessed on 12/10/2012
lyrics for this song could be found on [http://www.metrolyrics.com/words-i-never-said-lyrics-lupe-fiasco.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/words-i-never-said-lyrics-lupe-fiasco.html) accessed on 12/10/2012

Tunisian youth musicians and rappers in particular and their large followings were powerful players in the revolution. They gave voice and a beat to the people’s increasing rage after the self-immolation by Bouaziz, the poor young man who was the spark that lit the fire of the Arab spring. Well known rapper El General posted online a track that was a scathing open letter titled “Mr. President” about the regime’s oppressive laws including anti-veiling laws. The regime imprisoned him but could not imprison his track which was played from Egypt to Bahrain. Arab artists inspired and mobilized Arabs and Muslims on both side of the Atlantic and in a call and response fashion, Muslim American rappers led by Syrian American Omar Offendum posted a track “#jan25” in support of Egypt (Aidi 2011). Offendum has been touring extensively in support of the Syrian uprising.


When asked about his religion, famed comedian Dave Chappelle said that his religion is very important but he does not discuss it publically because “I don’t want people to associate me and my flaws with this beautiful thing. And I believe it is a beautiful religion if you learn it the right way. It’s a lifelong effort. Your religion is your standard. Coming here [to the beach] I don’t have the distractions of fame. It quiets the ego down. I’m interested in the kind of person I’ve got to become. I want to be well rounded and the industry is a place of extremes. I want to be well balanced. I’ve got to check my intentions, man.” See Peter Van Agtmeal’s 2005 Time Magazine interview at [http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1061415,00.html#ixzz266GmlKVl](http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1061415,00.html#ixzz266GmlKVl) accessed on 12/15/2012


The Muslims are Coming website. [http://themuslimsarecoming.com/about/synopsis/](http://themuslimsarecoming.com/about/synopsis/) accessed on 12/15/202

The Muslims are Coming website. [http://themuslimsarecoming.com/about/synopsis/](http://themuslimsarecoming.com/about/synopsis/) accessed on 12/15/202


Sam Hamod profile page on [http://contemporaryworldpoetry.com/?page_id=1317](http://contemporaryworldpoetry.com/?page_id=1317) accessed on 12/15/2012

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Hamod’s famous poem “Dying with the Wrong Name” laments some of what has been lost: “something lost down to the bone/ in these small changes. A man in a dark blue suit at Ellis Island says, with tiredness and authority, ‘You only need two names in America’ and suddenly—as cleanly as the air, you’ve lost your name” (Hamod 1980, 19).

Ghazal is a poetic form with roots in 7th century Arabia that spread to India, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran through the works of poets like Rumi and Hafiz. It invokes “melancholy, love, longing, and metaphysical questions” and it is usually sung by Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani musicians. http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5781 accessed on 12/15/2012.

For example, in her poem titled “Different Ways to Pray” she writes “Some prized the pilgrimage, wrapping themselves in new white linen to ride buses across miles of vacant sand. When they arrived at Mecca they would circle the holy places, on foot, many times, they would tend to kiss the earth and return, their lean faces housing mystery. See full text at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178315 accessed on 12/15/2012

See Pamela Taylor’s profile on http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslimwomen/bio/pamela_taylor/ accessed on 12/12/2012

If I Should Speak and the rest of her books are published by Al-Walaa Publications which appears to only publish her books and may in fact be a self-publishing establishment for Umm Zakiyyah

Excerpt is from the Nafisa Haji official website at http://www.nafisahaji.com/musings/ accessed on 12/15/2012

The official website of the I speak for Myself series http://www.ispeakformyself.com/ accessed on 12/12/2012


For more details on the play and the media attention it received see its official website at http://www.domesticcrusaders.com/ accessed on 12/12/2012

This is how Ayad Akhtar describes his play on his official website athttp://ayadakhtar.com/main.html accessed on 12/12/2012.

For more see the official Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hijabi-Monologues-Official/100387320045758 accessed on 12/12/2012

Chicagoland Rohina Malik is the creator and performer of this play. See her official website at http://rohinamalik.weebly.com/ accessed on 12/12/2012

“Mooz-lum” the movie’s Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/Moozlunthemovie accessed on 12/12/2012

This was a personal email communication dated 3/6/2013
See the official website of the photographer at [http://www.sadafsyed.com/](http://www.sadafsyed.com/) accessed on 12/12/2012


Fashion Fighting Famine is one of many efforts where Western Muslim women are seeing fashion as both a way to express one’s artistic talent and a space for activism and positive contribution to society. Rachida Aziz is a Belgian designer with boutique in the heart of the fashion district in Brussels. She hires single mothers in different countries and pays them fair wages, contracts with Belgian factories that train immigrant women, and her fabrics are from factories with earth friendly policies and good working conditions (Descartes and Abida 2012, 85–9).


The movie’s official website is [http://www.fordsonthemovie.com/](http://www.fordsonthemovie.com/) accessed on 12/12/2012
CHAPTER 9
CLOSING THOUGHTS: A MISSION AND THE CHALLENGE FOR/OF MUSLIM AMERICANS

The last two chapters began with the call from Muslim scholars and activists to build a community and to create an American Muslim culture and identity. The narrative underpinning this call is in dialogue with the three other narratives that frame this dissertation: the one purporting the presence of an “identity crisis” among young Muslims triggered by a conflict between the culture at home and in society, the one about the need to recover “pure/true Islam” from cultural contamination, and the one about saving America from cultural take-over by Islam/Muslims. In engaging the “identity crisis” narrative, I outlined its roots as a concept in psychology and a stage in the normal development of identity. I then situated this background in the vast theoretical landscape of identity studies and the discursive social context of this narrative. I sketched a theoretical framework of how identity is understood in this dissertation and operationalized this framework with the voices, positions and perspectives of second generation Muslim Americans who seem comfortable with the complexities of their dual heritage and multiple belongings. No doubt, these younger Muslims struggle with growing up as members of a racialized religious minority, but the alarmed tone of this narrative of “identity crisis” greatly exaggerates and pathologizes their struggles. If there is an identity crisis problem, it might be that some parents and society at large are the ones suffering from it, since these young people do not always meet the expectations that parents or society have of them.

The narrative of pure/true Islam vs. cultural Islam that is invoked by younger Muslims has also been a cause of concern for Muslims and non-Muslims alike and is inseparable from issues of identity. This narrative is invoked by multiple groups across
the ideological and religious interpretive spectrum and has different connotations and is used for different ends. In discussing it, I reviewed how the concept of religion is constituted vis-à-vis secularism and how it informs how religious people in general are viewed and how Islam in particular is conceptualized. I drew on Asad’s idea of Islam as a discursive tradition and situated this purity narrative in that tradition. I then teased out its various strands, including how younger Muslim Americans, as represented by participants of this project, use it. I explored their reflections, experiences, activities and their conceptualization of religious authority and authenticity. I aimed to illustrate that the narrative is invoked in this case as a discursive tool to challenge parental authority and the cultural hegemony of immigrants. It is used to create a space for expressing an Islam that is grounded in American cultural realities. Some younger Muslims may indeed advocate an austere “cultureless” Islam at one point in the maturation process of a religious awakening, but once again this observation tends to be overgeneralized and assumed to be a sign or a symptom of puritanism and eventual fanaticism. This hypervigilance may be understandable in the post-9/11 environment, but it deflects attention from something important that is taking place: a process of religious indigenization, one might say, and cultural citizenship.

I argued that my collaborators draw on this narrative to construct and express an Islam dressed in an American cloak while remaining normative. The productive expressive culture generated mostly by younger Muslims should reassure those fearful of younger, religiously-conscious Muslims said to be seeking a “cultureless” Islam. The increased visibility and assertiveness of Muslims in the West has caused an identity crisis for Europe. This visibility, in the setting of volatile geopolitics and economic crises, has become a wedge issue used by populist politicians in Europe to advance a narrative of Islamization. This narrative found fertile ground in the United States, where anti-
immigrant sentiment and the election of the first Black president unleashed fears and (un)veiled racism. While the “war on terrorism” showed the fragility of civil rights, it has also brought Islamophobia and sanctioned racism to the surface and hastened a process of Muslim racialization.

It should be apparent to the reader by now that, the urgent tone of all these narratives notwithstanding, a uniquely American and Muslim identity and culture have been in the making for decades. Since identity is not a finished product but a process of becoming and self-narration in dialogue with a social other in an ever-changing socio-political and physical landscape, Muslims (be they first or subsequent generations, immigrants or converts) have individual and collective identities, at once shared and unique. Muslim Americans have divergent origins but share a common faith, history, and a present where they are seen as the Other and as America’s latest “problem people”. Their identities are rendered unique at the intersection of personal disposition and the specificity of experiences based on class, gender, age, and race/ethnicity that take place in power-laden contexts.

Muslim American culture is like America itself; it is made up of a collective and the ever-changing sum of its immensely diverse constituents. The resultant sum, in this case, has lately been even more visibly expressed and shared among the groups, within the nation and across the world through music, comedy, art, and literature (the latter including academic, religious, fiction and non-fiction literature). It might be that as, Dr. Umar put it, “unity in multiplicity is Islam’s hallmark” but “the dominant beat” in Muslim American culture will be Blackamerican (fieldnotes). Like the stories in the national narratives that America tells about itself (that is, America is a project rather than a product), so too is the Muslim American community and culture. They are
projects continuously contested and negotiated between and across all the dimensions of difference among Muslims and with fellow citizens.

In many works of art and cultural expression, Muslim Americans portray all the diversity that their hyphenated identity masks. They offer their experiences to themselves and to others as they try to understand themselves individually and collectively through these works. They are addressing and challenging exclusionary discourses and practices, from both inside and outside the Muslim community, that offer only limited options for being and belonging. Rather than attempting to fit in the narrow definitions of self and the collective that is offered to them, the younger Muslims are finding ways to be comfortable with the messiness and complexities of being and belonging in today’s world.

Through it all, no matter the growing anti-Muslim rhetoric from officials and the public, and no matter the intra-community fissures and fault lines, the participants in this project are optimistic about the future. Though a third of them listed “slightly optimistic,” together with those who affirmed they are optimistic or very optimistic, 93 percent of the participants are hopeful about the future. Their vision for the future is one where the ideals of their faith and their country are realized and their presence is normalized through critical self-assessment, dialogue within the community and with society, civic engagement and contribution in all professions, and through “evidence-based” knowledge about “pure/true” Islam. They envision a community unified within its diversity where women and younger generation have physical and leadership space. They envision a mosque that is a place not just for “good Muslims” but for all Muslims and where non-Muslims are welcomed. They hope for a future where being Muslim becomes “mainstream” and where seeing Muslims pray in the park is like seeing a group
doing Tai Chi in the park, intriguing but not fear-evoking. To Safia, this mainstreaming means

not [being] singled out...just integrated and everybody is just accepted...You don’t have a stamp put on you, “this is who you are”...When I was growing up, I had to explain to my whole class what Ramadan was and why I was not eating, and I hope that my kids don’t have to explain that, don’t have to be the teachers at such a young age and don’t have [to have] all the answers for everybody else in their generation. I hope it’s just kind of like, we all are included. I knew as a kid that Christians went to church on Sundays and that the Jewish people in my community didn’t drive their cars after sundown on Friday until Saturday, I just knew that stuff. But they didn’t know anything about Islam, and I hope that’ll be the difference. I hope it’s just, you just know, and that’s just okay, that’s just the way that things are “that’s the way that they are raised and that’s what they believe and that’s fine”. It’s not like let’s pick one thing, one belief, and criticize the heck out...that you feel like you’re constantly defending yourself. And it’s so tiring...It’s just tiring and it’s a big burden to have to be the teacher so young...Islam’s about how to better yourself and I want people to understand that’s the real aspect of Islam itself. Take away the cultural crap and everything that comes along with it, it’s all based on peace. It’s all based on being good people. And there’s always gonna be somebody out there who is an extremist and giving Islam a bad name, but why is it Islam’s under attack? Why isn’t that individual under attack? I hope there’s enough understanding 20 years from now where should somebody go and blow up an area that [the question would] “what happened in that individual’s life where it went so wrong? Where it got so skewed and messed up that they thought it was okay to do that? Because nowhere in Islam does it say that that would be okay”.

Safia and others hope that fellow Americans will have at least rudimentary knowledge of Islam that enables them to avoid conflating individual actions with the teachings of a religious tradition or an entire community.

Among the things younger Muslims envision for the future is an important role for themselves in the global ummah, where American Muslims serve as a bridge between the Muslim majority countries and Muslim communities and the United States. In order of importance, they envision their contributions to the global ummah as educating the American public, shaping policy through engagement in the political process, Islamic scholarship, art and cultural products and financial assistance. As Muslim Americans
build institutions and create cultural products in various fields in the context of (and in reaction to) the fervent post-9/11 anti-Islam/Muslim discourse, the opportunities and risks are great. One serious risk is that “American Muslim identity and culture” will become an object in the service of the empire, to be showcased abroad as evidence of the success of Muslim “integration” and of American-style multiculturalism. Muslim artists, films, as well as notable individuals are already part of the State Department’s people-to-people diplomacy program at a time when the civil rights of Muslims are curtailed and their belonging is questioned by a growing number of their fellow citizens. In this context, there is also the danger of the “domestication” of Islam. Domestication, a concept introduced by Stephen Carter, is one “whereby religion is moved from a position where it can resist or challenge the state and the dominant culture to a position where it can only applaud” them (Jackson 2005, 19).

In their writings, workshops and lectures, the Muslim scholars whom participants listed as those influencing them most, scholars such as Sherman Jackson, Tariq Ramadan, Ziad Shakir, and Hamza Yusuf, warn Muslims about falling into this trap. They admonish them for being obsessed with being a minority. While they may be a numerical minority, these scholars argue, they ought to know that they subscribe to universal principles and should speak and act from a principled position. If for fear of retribution or for desire of favors, they do not speak truth to power and turn a blind eye to injustices except when it affects Muslims, then they betray both their faith and America. The Muslims of America have a unique role to play. In their visible practice of their faith, they serve as a reminder to fellow citizens of their own spiritual lives. In acting and speaking from a principled position, they serve as a “moral conscience to a state that happens to wield so much power” and should be willing to pay the price of standing up and speaking truth.¹ Scholars and the activists who echo their message
remind Muslims that serving in this vital role requires deep internal spiritual work, mental and moral fortitude, and a historical grounding that calls to mind that some of the most innovative and intellectually and culturally productive periods in Islam were in times and contexts where Muslims were a numerical minority. These scholars, as well as the activists who attentively listen to their lectures and read their works, ground this mission of Muslims both in America’s history and in the Islamic discursive tradition. They call the community to heed the lessons of the Civil Rights movement and to continue its work. Additionally, they remind immigrants that Prophet Muhammad was an immigrant who made a new home in Medina and never returned to live in Mecca even after he re-entered it victoriously. They also remind them also that the Prophet did not shun his Arabness or succumb to the demands of those who hinged his membership in the group on abandoning his new and alien ways. Instead, he claimed his belonging to his community but provided a new modality, an alternative way for being Arab that is neither the old nor in opposition to it. This task of creating an alternative modality for being and belonging involves a critical examination and requires a vision that sees beyond the urgent matters of protecting civil rights, creating alliances, and providing social services. It instead needs to interrogate the system that produces such inequalities and the associated defensive coping postures. This indeed is a radical idea that can transform a society, their society, for the better.

In their activism and assertive postures, these young Muslim Americans are not aggressively implementing an “Islamization” agenda or courting controversy. They instead draw on their religious and national discursive traditions where the ideals of rights and responsibilities, activism, service, critique (self, community, country, faith) and continued self-improvement are the ethics of both piety and citizenship. This engaged spiritual and social work, they say, is their greater jihad. The faith they aspire to
seek is reflective and reasoned, spiritual and ritual, visible and internal and they see no contractions in these aspects. Culturally, this Islam is grounded in America and embellished by the diverse cultural backgrounds and roots it has at its disposal; as they do in their fashion, younger Muslims freely mix and match these various influences and inspirations. They might be motivated by faith or civic mindedness or political stratagem, but all these motives converge on the necessity of civic engagement. The overwhelming majority (92 percent) of project collaborators are involved in organizations, and a great majority of those involved (67 percent) are working with both Muslim and non-Muslim organizations. In addition to Muslim Student Associations and professional (law, medical, and so on) organizations, they are also involved with organizations focused on youth, women, education, relief/charity, civil rights, politics and health.

A public sphere saturated with “the Muslim problem” and particularly Islam’s supposed monopoly on misogyny has dramatically increased activism, especially among Muslim women. Leila Ahmed (2011) notes how the discourse of activism and piety that are characteristic of the Islamic revival movement has informed and shaped the great majority of prominent Muslim American activists and leaders. They, she says, are visibly Muslim and feel at home drawing on their dual ethical traditions. They are part of the minority of Muslim Americans who frequent Islamic institutions and events where they are exposed to the discourse of the Islamic revival movement. Unlike those who are not influenced by this discourse, to these groups and individuals being “Muslim American” supersedes but does not render irreverent their ethnic and other belongings. Ahmed (2011), who shuns the model of public piety promoted by the Islamic revival movement, was quite surprised to see how

this younger generation of American Muslims who are grounded in Islam as faith and/or identity seem to see themselves first of all as part of a multiethnic Muslim
American generation whose bonds of commonality as Muslim Americans are stronger and more important—in contrast to perceptions and sense of identity of their parents’ generation—than are other national or ethnically based identities. Consequently, they work collaboratively as Muslim Americans, and their activism and writings are intensely in conversation with each other. [2011, 297]

Ahmed had expected that secular Muslims or those who, like her, privately practice their faith would be more fully if not completely integrated. She had to abandon that idea once she discovered that it was those who have internalized Islamic revival movement’s piety model that are most integrated and at home. They are redefining America’s tradition of protest and activism in the service of social justice on gender and on human rights issues that concern Muslims and, ultimately, society at large (Ahmed 2011). Be they of immigrant or convert background, these Muslims may be a numerical minority among Muslims in America. However, as they lead local and national institutions and produce and engage the discourse on Islam in America, those whose piety or identity prompts their assertive visibility and their committed action are poised to define the face and the course of Islam in America. They are enabled by the fact that they are comfortable with (and in) their multiple belongings and heritages. This, however, may seem puzzling and problematic to observers who view these heritages as mutually exclusive and who conceptualize identity as a zero sum product; that is, the more Muslim one is, the less American, with the opposite also true. These views and the behaviors or activities they inspire are not irrelevant to the process of identity construction. They are views held by fellow citizens or co-religionists, the social others who play a significant role in shaping individual and group self-image.

Muslim Americans and particularly their younger generations may find solace in the history of other minorities in America. But they differ from them in one crucial way. Islam and the West are presumed to be mutually exclusive and engaged in a perpetual conflict, and that conflict is imagined to be also occurring within American Muslim
selves. Their position and predicament are more like that of Sami Michail, the renowned Israeli author. His award-winning status notwithstanding, what is noteworthy is that he is an Arab Jew, or specifically an Iraqi Jew. For most people, being an Arab and a Jew is a contradiction in terms, since these two peoples are presumed to be in existential conflict not unlike that imagined by some for Islam and the West. But Michail and the participants in this project beg to differ; after all, they are the living example that gives lie to the rhetoric. Michail’s literary eloquence sums up the complexity of being and belonging and his simile is a fitting ending to this dissertation, which began with the words of Black and young Muslim Americans asserting their dual heritage and speaking back to those who tell them they cannot be both. Michail says: “Half of me is Arab, half is Jew but I’m not like a political nation where one is fighting the other. I’m like the layers of baklava, each layer loving the other layers in my person.” So is being Muslim, a member of an ethno-racial group, and American: A rich melody of visual sensations, palpable textures, robust flavors, and a powerful mix!

1 Field notes of a lecture by Sherman Jackson given at the Islamic American College in Chicago on Islam in America on 9/29/2010


4 As political dissident in 1940s Bagdad, Michail and his Iraqi communist comrades were persecuted and were either killed or left the country. He escaped to Iran and when it proved too dangerous to return to Bagdad, he immigrated to Israel in 1948 and settled in the Arab neighborhood there. Michail writes in Arabic and Hebrew and longs for Bagdad.

Table 1
Ethnic Background of Project Collaborator

<table>
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<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
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<td>African/African American/Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arab/Arab American</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bosnian/Turkish/White/Middle Eastern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian/South Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HUMAN SUBJECTS EXEMPTION
To: James Eder  
From: Mark Roosa, Chair  
Soc Beh IRB  
Date: 06/22/2009  
Committee Action: Exemption Granted  
IRB Action Date: 06/22/2009  
IRB Protocol #: 0906004082  
Study Title: Islam, Identity, and Intragroup Relations among Second Generation Muslim Americans

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.
Islam, Identity, and Intracommunity Relations Among Second Generation Muslim Americans

Dear Participant: 

I am, Muna Ali, a graduate student under the direction of Professor James Eder at School of Human Evolution and Social Change, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study on the views of second and third generations Muslim Americans (those born and/or raised in the US regardless of background).

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a one-on-one interview which will last for 60-90 minutes. I will conduct the interview at your choice of place and time. You will be asked to share your thoughts about being Muslim and American, your views on the relationship between women and women and between Muslims of different backgrounds, how is Islam practiced in America, and the present state and future of Islam in America. Approximately 220 subjects will be participating in this study. Half of the participants will be from the greater Phoenix area and the other half from the greater Chicago area. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older and/or born and raised in the USA to participate in the study.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the possible benefits of your participation in the research include contributing to a better academic and public understanding of the diverse perspectives of Muslim Americans – particularly the younger generations. This could also help generate discussion among Muslims and enhance their intergenerational understanding. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identify you. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, you can choose a pseudonym and I will assign you an ID number. All notes containing your words will use this assigned pseudonym.

I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. The interview will be audio-taped using digital voice recorder and will then be transcribed. The audio-file will be deleted within 24 months. Only the researchers will have password access or the key to the audio or transcribed materials.
If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team Professor James Eder or Muna Ali at (480) 965-6215 School of Human Evaluation and Social Change, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Please indicate verbally if you agree to be interviewed.
APPENDIX B

SURVEY FORM
SURVEY FORM

The following survey is being conducted by a Muslim doctoral student at Arizona State University as part of a dissertation research project. Please take few minutes to answer the following questions as completely and with as much details as possible. Your input is valuable, so please explain as much as you’d like in as clear handwriting as possible.

1) Where do you live? City __________ State____________

2) How old are you? _______ Place of Birth: City________________________ State______________
(If you were NOT born in the USA, how old were you when you moved the to USA?______________)

3) Sex: Female□ male□

4) Marital Status: Single□ Married□ Divorced□ Widow□

5) What ethnic background best describes you: _______________ Spouse’s ethnic background:____________

6) Education: Less than high school□ High School□ Bachelors degree□
Masters degree□ PhD□ MD/DO/DD/DVM□ Law□
Other (specify) ________________________________

7) Occupation: Student□ Homemaker□ Teacher□ Physician□ Nurse/Therapist□
Engineer□ Business□
Other (specify) _______________________________________

8) Number of people in your household: __________

9) Annual income: Less than $20,000□ $20-30,000□ $30-40,000□ $50,000-70,000□ Over $70,000□

10) How would you answer the following question: “Where are you from?”

   Explain as needed:

11) Where were your parents born?  Mother ________________
father__________________
12) Your Primary language at home: _______________ Other languages spoken  


13) Your family’s religious background is:  
Father:  Muslim □  Christian □  Jewish □  others (specify) __________
Mother:  Muslim □  Christian □  Jewish □  others (specify) __________

14) Type of school attended as a child:  (check all that apply):  
Public schools □  Private School □  Full-time Islamic school □  Weekend Islamic school □  Other (specify)

15) Growing up, your family was:  
Not religious □  Mildly religious □  Moderately religious □  Very religious □

16) List to which ethnic group(s) most of your friends belong (check all that apply):  
Arab □  African/African American □  Asian/South Asian □  Latino/Hispanic □  Anglo/European □  Mixed □  Other (specify) ___________________

17) Which faith tradition(s) do your friends follow? (check all that apply)  
Islam □  Judaism □  Christianity □  Hinduism □  Buddhism □  Other (specify) ___________________

18) Do you consider yourself:  
Not religious □  Mildly religious □  Moderately religious □  Very religious □  
[Please explain]  

19) If you are a female, do you wear hijab on regular basis?  
Yes □  No □

20) In your mosque, women pray in:  
Same room as men □  Same room as men with a curtain/divider □  Different room with TV to view imam □  balcony with view of imam □  No space for women □

21) What do you think of women’s space in your mosque?  
Very Good □  Good □  Barely Acceptable □  Poor □  Very Poor □

22) What are the roles of women in your mosque & community? (Check all apply)  
Islamic school teachers □  mosque board members □  committee members □  organizations board members □  Lectures/presentations to women only □  Lectures/presentations to men & women □  Help in but don’t run projects □  Women are not involved □  
Other(specify) ___________________

23) Women involvement in the affairs of your local Muslim community is:  
Very Frequent □  Frequent □  Occasional □  Rare □  Very Rare □  Never □
24) The level of women involvement your local community is:
Too much□ Just right□ Don’t have an opinion□ Not enough□
(Comments)

25) Do you attend mosque organized activities? (Check all that apply):
Friday service □ Study circles/halaqa □ Muslim lectures/conferences □ Interfaith events □ None □

26) The ethnic makeup of the mosque you attend regularly is mostly:
Arab □ African/African American □ Asian/South Asian □
Latino/Hispanic □ Anglo/European □ Mixed □ Other (specify) ________________

27) Rank your source of Islamic knowledge from 1=most applicable to 5=least applicable
Books □ Internet □ CD/DVD/Tapes □ Friends □ Parents □ Mosque □ College courses □
Study circles with scholars □ Islamic conferences □ Other (specify) _____________________

28) Converts/reverts are ____________ in your local community or mosque leadership or activities:
Not involved □ Slightly involved □ Frequently involved □ Very frequently involved □

29) Immigrant Muslims and convert/reverts to Islam: (check all that apply)
Have different mosques □ Pray in same mosques □ Work together on Boards □ Work together on projects □ Socialize together □ Have very little social interactions □
Have no social interactions □

30) The mosques/organizations that you’re familiar with are mostly governed by Muslims born/raised outside US □ True □ False □
(Please explain your thoughts on the issue)

31) Second generation (born & raised in USA) Muslims are ____________ in your mosque/community affairs & activities.
Not involved □ Slightly involved □ Frequently involved □ Very frequently involved □
32) Growing up in America, the children of immigrants and the children of converts/reverts have_______ in common:
Nothing □  Little □  Something □  Much □  Great Deal □
Please explain:
_____________________________________________________________

33) Imams of the mosque you attend are knowledgeable about the issues facing younger Muslim Americans.
   Strongly Agree □  Agree □  I don’t know □  Disagree □  Strongly Disagree □

34) Imams and leaders of the mosque you attend often involve the younger Muslims to address issues facing youth:
   Strongly Agree □  Agree □  Undecided □  Disagree □  Strongly Disagree □

35) The relationship between immigrant Muslims and convert/reverts to Islam in your area is:
   Very Good □  Good □  Barely Acceptable □  Poor □  Very Poor □
   Explain: ______________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________

36) Who are the current Muslim scholars whose teachings/writings influence you most?
   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________
   Why? _________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________

37) Is there a difference between yours and your family’s understanding/practice of Islam?
   Yes □  No □
   Explain difference & similarities:
   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________

38) Immigrant and non-immigrant Muslim Americans understanding / interpretation of Islam is
   Completely different □  Mostly different □  Slightly different □  Mostly the same □
   Exactly the same □
   Please explain any differences:
   _______________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________

39) I am currently (or have been in the past 5 years) involved in: (Check all that apply)
   Muslim organizations □  Non-Muslim organizations □  Both □  Neither □
   Types of organizations: Muslim Student Associations □  Relief/Charity □  Civil rights □  Education □  Youth □  Women □  Political □  Health □  Professional (AMA, Law etc.) □  None □  Others(specify) __________________________
40) In your opinion, how do Non-Muslim Americans view Muslim Americans?
   With distrust/suspicion □  Same as any other American □  As outsiders □  I Don’t Know □
Please explain:

41) Is there a change in the way Muslims see themselves since 9/11?
   Yes □  No □  Not sure □
Please explain:

42) There are ___________ in your neighborhood
   No Muslims □  Few Muslims □  Many Muslims □  Mostly Muslims □

43) Do people at work/school or neighborhood know that you are a Muslim?
   Yes □  No □  Not sure □
   Does knowing that affect how they treat you or how you interact with them:
   Yes □  No □  Not sure □
Please explain:

44) The term “Muslim American” includes: All Muslims in USA □ Only Muslim born in
   the US □  Only Converts/Reverts & their Children □  Not Sure □  Other
   (specify) ___________

45) “Indigenous Muslim Americans” are:
   I never heard of this term □  Indian Americans □  Any Muslim (immigrant or not)
   who thinks of USA as home □  Only Converts/Reverts & their children □  All Muslims
   born in the US regardless of background □  Not sure □

46) In your opinion, when compared to Muslims in Muslim majority countries, being a
   Muslim in the USA is:
   Easier □  Harder □  Easier in some ways and harder in others ways □  I Don’t know □
   Please explain your response

47) List any Muslim American religious scholars, musicians, fiction/non-fiction
   writers, poets, artists whose work you think is both Islamic and specifically American:
These works are Islamic because:

These works are American because:

48) The global Muslim Ummah can benefit from the work of Muslim Americans in:
[rank from 1=most important area to 5=least important area]
Islamic Scholarship □ Politics □ Art & culture □ Educating the Public □
Financial assistance □ Nothing □
Please explain:

49) Thinking about the future of Muslims/Islam in America society in 20 years, you are:
   Not optimistic □ slightly optimistic □ Optimistic □ Very optimistic □
Please explain what you envision as the future:

Additional Comments (use back of 1st page, if space here is limited):

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Your ideas and opinions are invaluable.
If you are interested in discussing your thoughts on these issues further by taking part in a one-on-one interview and/or a focus group with other participants, please indicate here by providing your Ph#____________email______________ to make arrangement.
APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Please, tell me a little bit about yourself: your background, where were you born, education/occupation and anything else you would like to share?
- When someone asks you “where are you from?” What is your usual response?
- What is your family’s religious background?
- What was it like growing up in your hometown?
- What was school like and were there other Muslims in your school?
- What role does religion play in your life?
- How did you learn about religion when you were growing up and what is your source of religion knowledge as an adult?
- Are there differences and/or similarities between your own and your family’s understanding/interpretation of Islam?
- Have you had disagreements about religion with you parents/family? If so, what was it about?
- If you have questions about a religious matter (whether something is allowed or prohibited or Islam’s position on something) who do you consult or ask?
- Are there Muslim scholars whose teachings/writings influence you? Who are they and why?
- What are some of issues/challenges/opportunities facing younger Muslim Americans?
- What might an American Muslim in Egypt or Indonesia notice in terms of differences and similarities with the Muslims there and in America?
- Tell me about your social network (what’s the ethnic and religious background of your friends?)
- Do you attend mosque activities, organizations functions, or social gatherings? If so, tell me more about your involvement. If not, can you share some of your reasons for not being involved?
- What is the ethnic makeup of the mosques you are familiar with? What space is available for women? What role do women and young adults play there?
- What is your impression of the local Muslim community in terms of:
  - Who is in (and the quality) of leadership?
  - space available for –and role of- women?
- space available for -and role of- younger generations? Are imams & leaders knowledgeable and/or addressing issues facing younger generations?
- interactions between different ethnic groups?
- interactions between those of convert background & of immigrant backgrounds?
- interaction with the larger society?

- What are your perceptions of the ways immigrant Muslims and American born Muslims understand/interpret Islam? Are there differences and/or similarities?
- How do the younger generations of Muslim Americans (the children of converts and immigrants) view each other? Are there similarities and/or differences in their experiences and views?
- Would you consider marrying someone from a different ethnic group or country of origin and how do you think your family might react?
- Would you marry someone of less education or income and how do you think your family might react?
- Some critics (both Muslim and non-Muslim) say that Islam and America are not compatible. What do you think?
- Are you involved in any non-Muslim organizations or interfaith activities?
- What do you think of Muslims getting involved in the society by participating in politics, civic organizations and social issues?
- Do you think there is a Muslim American culture? If so, what are its features?
- Are there Muslim religious scholars, musicians, fiction/non-fiction writers, poets, artists whose work you think is specifically American?
- How do you see Islam/Muslims in America in the next 20 years?
- Does the Muslim American community have a role in the ummah (global Muslim community)?
APPENDIX D

THINKDOT GRAPH