

UMMA EXPRESSIONS: COMMUNITY, ORIGINS, AND REPRESENTATIONS IN
CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

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Umma Expressions: Community, Origins, and Representations in Contemporary Muslim American Literature explores how Muslim Americans articulate their “Muslimness” while situating themselves within the *Umma* or Muslim community. I explore how Muslim writers (re)imagine their plural identities through narrative, grappling with what it means to be Muslim and American simultaneously; how they participate in, react to, challenge, reify, and shape existing rhetoric on Islam and Muslims; and how they participate in the production of American literature and the U.S. cultural imaginary. As it intersects two literary traditions, both national and religious, Muslim American literature weaves in dialogues that have taken place across a myriad of geographical and historical borders for centuries, effectively broadening the scope of American literary studies as well as our conception of America’s narrative.

As *Umma Expressions* examines various iterations of *Umma* that are expressed in contemporary post-9/11 Muslim American literature, each chapter focuses on a primary text that represents a different genre and time period. Beginning with a historical *Umma*-identification in an American context, Chapter One: “History, Storytelling, and a Muslim American Origins Narrative in Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account*” analyzes Laila Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014), which elaborates on the story of a marginalized historical figure named Estebanico. A work of historiographic metafiction, this novel blurs the lines between fiction and history, demonstrating the (inter)textuality of the latter, questioning the process of historiography, and subverting Western narratives of the past. By integrating elements of early African Muslim slave

narratives, Lalami contextualizes Estebanico's narrative within Black and Muslim American literary traditions. Chapter Two: "Muslim American Journeys in the Global" examines Willow Wilson's memoir *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam* (2010) as an autobiographical conversion narrative that documents her journey to and within Islam. Her journey to a publicly visible and communal expression of her Muslimness illustrates a reciprocal relationship between faith, self, and community. Wilson's perspective as an American convert to Islam contributes to a deeper understanding of American Muslimness that grapples with the narrative of Islam vs. West, private vs. public religion, and American individualism vs. community belonging. Chapter Three: "Breathing Through the Dust in Samira Ahmed's *Internment*" examines how the Muslim American community has struggled with the suffocating pressures of Islamophobia in the United States. I argue that the physical internment of Muslim Americans in Ahmed's *Internment* (2019), a work of speculative fiction, symbolizes the marginalization of Muslims in American society. The protagonist Layla bears the burdens of Islamophobia as she fights against a system that seeks to silence and eliminate her Muslim American identity.

Lalami, Wilson, and Ahmed offer three very different representations of Muslim American identity, each of which articulates belonging to the Muslim *Umma* while resisting narratives of an Anglo-American nationalist history; a manufactured clash of civilizations; and American Islamophobia via War on Terror culture.

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For my *Umma*
&
To Maryam and Yumna:
May you always be surrounded by faith, love, and community

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Introduction:

Muslims in Umma across Space and Time

My grandmother, though she speaks no English,
catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says,

*I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul
with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems*

*I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus
over painted bowls imported from China
among the best families of Aleppo*

- Mohja Kahf, "My Grandmother Washes Her
Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"

In contemporary discourse pertaining to Islam and Muslims in the media, popular culture, and politics, we frequently find reference to Muslims as a unified unit: the Muslim World, Muslim community, Muslim population, Muslim *Umma*, etc. This notion of a Muslim collective holds a range of implications and is commonly put forth by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. On the one hand, it highlights a sense of connectedness amongst Muslims, unified by beliefs and traditions that transcend race, ethnicity, language, and nationality. On the other hand, these terms are also used to perpetuate an image of a Muslim monolith that erases the diversity and complex range of realities that exist across Muslim cultures.

The word “Umma,” in particular, is rooted in Arabic and means community or nation. In *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, Zareena Grewal succinctly describes *Umma* as “the global community of believers” (22); this global community is both diverse and heterogeneous, encompassing a wide array of ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, customs, and languages, as well as a “variety of religious perspectives and interpretations” (40). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* further defines *Umma* as follows:

Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the *Quran*, [*Umma*] designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation.

This project specifically explores how this “essential unity” is reflected in Muslim American literature. How do Muslim Americans articulate their “Muslimness” while situating themselves within the *Umma* — both in the American context and the wider Muslim global context? I explore how Muslim writers participate in the production of American literature and the U.S. cultural imaginary; how they negotiate and (re)imagine their plural identities through narrative; and, in doing so, how they participate in, react to, challenge, reify, and shape existing rhetoric on Islam and Muslims. I will be looking at the challenges and contradictions that are brought to light by these texts and the associations they make, how the texts come to terms with such tensions, and what it appears to mean to be Muslim and American simultaneously. More broadly, I posit that *Umma*-identifications in Muslim American writings not only transcend various differences but also serve to contextualize *American* literature within a broader, *global* literature, weaving in other histories and traditions into America’s narrative.

The poem “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears,” cited in the epigraph above, illustrates the plurality and fluidity of Muslim identity, particularly as it situates itself within a broader historical and transcultural community. Syrian American author and poet Mohja Kahf calls forth architectural relics of Muslim civilizations from around the world. The narrator’s grandmother is in the public bathroom making *wudu*, the ritual ablution that must be made before the mandatory prayer. Kahf describes the quiet dignity with which the grandmother washes her foot in the sink: “with great poise, balancing/ herself with one plump matronly arm/.... after having removed her support knee-highs/and laid them aside, folded in thirds, /.... so she can accomplish this august ritual” (26). As she performs this “august ritual” so that she can return to the “ritual of shopping,” she perceives the critical judgment in the eyes of the other Sears matrons. Suddenly, this dignified grandmother becomes “an affront to American porcelain, / a contamination of American Standards/ by something foreign and unhygienic/ requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray...” (26). The grandmother and the foreignness of her actions are both an “affront” to and “contamination” of American social standards. The image of her washing her foot in the Sears bathroom is a public and visible expression of her Muslimness that must be sanitized.

As the Muslim grandmother looks into the mirror, reflected back are the magnificent cultures and histories of Istanbul, Damascus, China, and Aleppo. These iconic places of Muslim civilization are suddenly made to appear in the banal department store bathroom. While the Sears bathroom is, ironically, added to this list of monumental places where she has made *wudu*, the basic, unadorned American Standard porcelain cannot compare to the rich images of the “Iznik tile,” Damascene “bathhouses,” and Chinese “painted bowls.” Traditional measures of nearness and distance become obsolete as historical diachronic and geographical synchronic divides attain

heightened permeability. Glimpses from a historical, global *Umma* are a defensive response to the Sears matrons' abject conception of the Muslim grandmother preparing for prayer. The cultural history she carries is a source of pride, strength, and identity in a scene where she is viewed as low and dirty. To the other women, she "might as well have been squatting/ in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor, / Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which" (27); in contrast to the careful and elegant description of the cultural sites evoked in the poem, the latter lines convey a careless ignorance and scorn – far too prevalent in American society – for the grandmother's faith, religious practice, and personal history. She refutes the implication that her Muslim culture is in any way primitive or unworthy, "*And if you Americans knew anything/ about civilization and cleanliness, / you'd make wider washbasins, anyways*" (27). American society is called on to meet *her* standards by making "wider washbasins" that would make the washing of her feet during wudu more comfortable; the poem declares the superiority of the grandmother's Muslim culture and its high standard of cleanliness that requires her to wash her feet five times a day.

Wisam Abdul-Jabbar argues that Kahf's poems are not defined by an expression of resistance or defiance. She notes, "Most of the speakers are not skeptical about their essential Arab identity. They address foreignness as an occasion for exultation rather than destitution, mainly because they see it through their own eyes and not through those of the beholder" (245). A celebration of difference and an unbending pride in cultural histories define Kahf's poetic attitude. Abdul-Jabbar further observes, "Kahf introduces foreignness as fragmented and uprooted. The genealogical construct belongs to nowhere and everywhere. The sense of identity as fixed is gladly lost to a feeling of intersubjectivity, in which imbalance becomes the shared experience of a new consciousness" (253-254). While Kahf distinctly references her Syrian background, she

also integrates aspects of a broader history and tradition with which she affiliates herself; as a member of the Muslim *Umma* – that spans the globe and dates back centuries – she constructs a fluid identity that is infinitely richer and more complex.

Kahf illustrates the “feeling of intersubjectivity” and “shared experience of a new consciousness” in another poem titled “From the Patios of the Alhambra.” Kahf lays claim to a broad expanse of overlapping histories and cultures marked by brief images and affects: “From the patios of the Alhambra I come/ and out of the fountains of the Taj Mahal/ Hispano-Arab women sang me in Andalusia, in forgotten/ vernaculars.” She continues to make quick reference to various cultural markers and accomplishments that encompass architecture, embroidery, song and poetry, medicine, dance, etc. (34). She identifies traditions that are carried with pride through generations: “old women tell me to children: I dazzle!” (35). While the poem begins with images from Andalusia, Palestine, Baghdad, Khartoum, Cairo, and Aleppo, the poet then transitions to sites of diaspora: “Lebanese grocers of Argentina,” “Indian tailors of Trinidad,” and even “designs of rhinestone on denim in Detroit.” She is both here and there: “in the drumbeat of the Mandingo” and in “its echo in the heartbeat of the New World.” The drumbeat resonates as an echo in the New World, residing in the heartbeat that sustains it. In the final lines, the poet’s celebration of culture and traditions is advanced by an eagerness to exchange: “flinging myself, mingling/ with the oils of your body, / merging with you.” The result of this “mingling” and “merging” is the opportunity to “emerg[e] together in a new medium/ Meeting with ululations the new millennium” (35). The “new medium” that is created ushers in the “new millennium” and with it a better future.

Kahf's poetry records traces of the transnational and transgenerational circuits that color and define her cultural memories and affective histories as a Muslim.¹ Positioned both within and outside of U.S. poetic tradition, Kahf reaches outward, beyond the nation, to connect to locations and times that evoke Islamic cultural history and Muslim religious traditions. In doing so, she transforms the very idea of American poetry, adding to it by infusing it with articulations of Muslimness. Kahf makes these connections through subjective familial attachments (e.g. her grandmother) and through objective communal cultural references (Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Andalusia, etc.). She illustrates the inherent intersectionality as well as the geographic and historical border crossings that frequently characterize Muslim American writings.

Muslims in America uniquely reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of the Muslim *Umma*. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, scholar of Islam and author of *A History of Islam in America*, observes, "At the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States is home to about three million Muslims who arguably comprise the most diverse Muslim population in any single country in the world." Reflecting an array of ethnic, national, and sectarian backgrounds, the Muslim American community is "a microcosm of the world's Muslim population" (2). Literary characterizations of the Muslim *Umma* – and varied expressions of affiliation with it – serve effectively to promote the social formation of the Muslim American community as a site for diverse, plural histories and ethnic groups with rich cultural and linguistic resonances. Furthermore, as it intersects two literary traditions, both national and religious, Muslim American literature imbues the American literary tradition with the rich history of Muslim

¹ See also Kahf's more recent collection of poetry *Hagar Poems* (2016), which places early female figures from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – such as Hagar, Sarah, Mary, Khadija, and Aisha -- in modern contexts. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali (Kashmiri Muslim American) also integrate Islamic cultural histories into contemporary narratives.

peoples and cultures that extends far beyond the limited history of America as a nation. While I focus on “Muslim” and “American” as identity markers, I in no way suggest that the authors or their texts are limited to the two; they are undoubtedly shaped by other factors (race, gender, language, ethnicity, etc.) that further color their histories and narratives. Wai Chee Dimock, literary critic and scholar of American studies, describes the phenomenon by which history is lengthened as “deep time”:

Rather than being a discrete entity, [American literature] is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread America texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. (3)

Dimock offers the idea of deep time as an alternative to the narrower view of American literature “as a world apart, sufficient unto itself.... as if the borders of knowledge were simply the replicas of national borders” (3). Highlighting and examining *Umma*-identifications in literature answers Dimock’s call to view American literature as a natural subset of a broader and richer world literature. Acknowledging Muslim Americans’ affiliations with this “kinship network,” a global community that brings together a multitude of differences and has evolved over fourteen centuries of Islamic history, illustrates American literature’s “weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures.” In this light, the *Umma* serves as connective tissue “binding America to the rest of the world.” Consequently, neither Muslim nor American

literature is a “discrete entity”; America as a whole – not just Muslims in America – becomes inextricably bound to the histories and traditions of the Muslim world. Muslim American literature, precisely because it is both *Muslim* and *American*, simultaneously threads Muslim into America and America into Muslim. Kahf’s poetry illustrates this phenomenon as the Syrian Muslim grandmother recalls the Muslim history and culture – extending from Istanbul to Damascus to China – she proudly carries and that she has interjected into America’s national, historical narrative. Such an outlook generates feelings of belonging and a deeper sense of connection to other peoples and cultures beyond the nation’s borders. For Muslim Americans, in particular, this connection serves as a source of strength and empowerment; for Americans, in general, it reimagines and enriches our appreciation of America’s national identity and narrative. Weaving in dialogues that have taken place across a myriad of geographical and historical borders for centuries, Muslim American literature offers opportunity to broaden the scope of American literary studies.

This project examines contemporary Muslim American literatures that engage with the notion of a global and/or historical *Umma* in various ways that I discuss in greater detail below. This introduction will delve further into how scholars have defined *Umma* and its significance both in relation to an individual’s practice of Islam and to the broader community of Muslims in America. My purpose is to establish the idea of *Umma* as the underlying theme of my argument and to contextualize this specific project within a broader argument about the need to define and develop a field of Muslim American literary studies. While I draw attention to the bridging of various cultures and histories, I also recognize scholarship that cautions against the erasure of difference and undermining of political realities that are risked by idyllic, inauthentic portrayals of a unified Muslim World. In the context of America, various scholars have addressed further

the critical importance of Muslims' experiences of community and historical consciousness, particularly as a response to Islamophobia.

Umma Defined

In *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*, Tamim Ansary notes that while other religions identify their point of origin as the day of their founder's birth or death or a key "moment of their prophet's enlightenment or his key interaction with God," such is not the case in Islam. While many Muslims do celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birth,² "there's no analog to Christmas in Islam" (23). Ansary also acknowledges *Lailat al-Qadr* or the Night of Power, which commemorates the revelation of the Quran and is described by the latter as better than a thousand months; however, it too does not mark *the* turning point in Muslim history. Ansary turns to the early Muslims' *Hijra*, or migration from Mecca to Medina, that marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar:

The Hijra takes pride of place among events in Muslim history because it marks the birth of the Muslim community, the Umma, as it is known in Islam. Before the Hijra, Mohammed was a preacher with individual followers. After the Hijra, he was the leader of a community that looked to him for legislation, political direction, and social guidance. The word *hijra* means "severing of ties." People who joined the community in Medina renounced tribal bonds and accepted this new group as their transcendent affiliation, and

² In fact, the practice of celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday is a matter of debate among Muslims. Although the most widely celebrated day is the 27th of Rajab, there are various narrations as to the exact date of his birth.

since this community was all about building an alternative to the Mecca of Mohammed's childhood, it was an epic, devotional social project. (23-24)

As Ansary notes, the Hijra signifies the birth of the *Umma*, which became a source of “transcendent affiliation”; tribal bonds, family ties, and social status became secondary to ties of faith and a common purpose to serve God and their community.

Ansary further elaborates on the building of this Muslim community:

This social project, which became fully evident in Medina after the Hijra, is a core element of Islam.... Instead of focusing on isolated individual salvation, Islam presents a plan for building a righteous community. Individuals earn their place in heaven by participating as members of that community and engaging in the Islamic social project... (24)

This “social project” is concerned with all segments of the community: orphans, widows, women, children, neighbors, etc. Accordingly, the individual's “salvation” and “place in heaven” cannot be separated from his participation as a meaningful, contributing member of the *Umma*. This dynamic as described by Ansary coincides with GhaneaBassiri's elaboration on the triangular relationship between God, individual, and community. This concept, which I discuss in Chapter 2, locates the *Umma* in the individual's practice of Islam (ex. the five pillars of Islam). The importance allotted to the community of believers, awareness of this community, is explicitly stated in the *Tashahhud* or Testimony of faith that is recited by Muslims around the world every day, five times a day, as a part of their daily prayers.

All compliments, prayers and good things are for Allah.

Peace be on you, O Prophet, and Allah's mercy and blessings.

Peace be on us and on the righteous servants of Allah.

I bear witness that no one is worthy of worship except Allah.

And I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.

Following praise to God, greetings and prayers of peace are sent to Prophet Muhammad and to *all* servants of God. According to Hadith, those who recite this prayer send their greetings to every worshipper of God, in Heaven and on Earth³ (Hadith). Islamic scholars elaborate further, explaining that “Peace be on us and on the righteous servants of Allah” extends across space and time to encompass all of God’s creations:

We pray for ourselves then we pray for our brothers, whether they preceded us, exist in our time, or will come to follow us; be they djinn, humans, or angels; in the heavens or the earth... It denotes a loyalty and caring amongst all believers. (translated from al-Munajjid)

This supplication articulates a bond between all believers, those who live today as well as those who exist in the past and the future. Each supplicant – yesterday, today, and tomorrow – actively engages with and functions as a member of an *Umma* that spans the globe over centuries. For the individual, this connection stands to inspire awe, pride, and humility as she perceives herself as one of many and hopes that she too is considered amongst “the righteous.” Subsequently reciting the final two lines – comprised of the Declaration of Faith, the most fundamental belief in Islam

³ According to Hadith, Abdullah bin Masud (a companion of Prophet Muhammad) narrated: We used to say the greeting, name and greet each other in the prayer. Allah's Apostle heard it and said:--"Say.... (All the compliments are for Allah and all the prayers and all the good things (are for Allah). Peace be on you, O Prophet, and Allah's mercy and blessings (are on you). And peace be on us and on the good (pious) worshipers of Allah. I testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is His slave and Apostle.) So, when you have said this, then you have surely sent the greetings to every good (pious) worship per of Allah, whether he be in the Heaven or on the Earth. (“Chapter: 22, Actions while Praying”)

– is a basic expression of Muslimness that articulates one’s belonging to the faith community, a bond that transcends myriad differences and varying degrees of individual faith.

Faith Community vs. Geopolitical Unity

While invoking the notion of a global community of Muslims, we must remain cognizant of the very real political, cultural, and religious differences and tensions that exist irrespective of shared beliefs. Aside from the wide array of ethnic traditions, histories, languages, religious interpretations, etc., the political dynamics between and within various nation-states cannot be ignored. In May 2017, months into his presidency, former-U.S. President Donald Trump attended the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and gave “a speech billed as a call to Muslims to promote a peaceful understanding of Islam and to unite against terrorists.” In his speech, Trump stated, “I chose to make my first foreign visit a trip to the heart of the Muslim world.” Zareena Grewal responds with an article in *The Atlantic* titled “The ‘Muslim World’ Does Not Exist,” in which she argues that Trump’s speech is based on a “faulty premise.” She affirms that while “Riyadh is the capital of Saudi Arabia... it is not the capital of the Muslim world,” and “the Kingdom does not and cannot speak for all Muslims around the world just because sites Muslims consider sacred are contained within its borders.” Furthermore, Grewal reminds her reader: “‘the Muslim world’ is not actually a place. It’s a Western idea built on the faulty racial logic that Muslims live in a world of their own—that Islam is an eastern, foreign religion that properly belongs in a distant, faraway, dusty place.” This Orientalist image of the Muslim World perpetuates Islam and Muslims as alien and other, forever incompatible

with Western civilization; Grewal ascribes this logic to the Muslim Ban, one of Trump's first acts as president.

In *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, historian Cemil Aydin thoroughly examines the history and implications of a "Muslim World," a "global narrative" that he describes as a "product of nineteenth-century geopolitics and fresh scientific and political theories" (73). He affirms that "throughout modern history, Muslims and non-Muslims have appealed to an imagined global Muslim unity... [that] does not exist" (1). As Aydin "trace[s] the evolution of Muslim-world narratives across 150 years," he finds that "geopolitical projects responsive to momentary exigencies are the basis of both pan-Islamism and anti-Muslim racism, warring twins crudely and falsely proclaiming enduring religious and civilizational identity" (230). On one hand, non-Muslims employed this narrative to effectively exclude and racialize Muslims as a whole. On the other hand, the narrative appears in the guise of "pan-Islamism" as an attempt by "Muslim modernists... to elevate the status of Islam to a universal position comparable to those of Christianity and the Enlightenment" (73). In their efforts to counter anti-Muslim racism, Aydin maintains that "Muslims themselves strategically essentialized a notion of the Muslim world that contradicted the lived imperial, national, global, and local experiences of Muslim societies" (231).

Although the global community of Muslims remains tied to political realities that carry inevitable challenges, tensions, and divisions, this does not preclude a different kind of unity. Aydin deliberately distinguishes between the Muslim World as a "geopolitical unity" and the *Umma* as "a faith community" (18). He elaborates on the latter,

The pre-nineteenth-century notion of ummah was deterritorialized. It urged cross-tribal affiliation, shared legal practices, and a collective eschatological vision—the Prophet Muhammad says that, in the hereafter, he will gather his ummah from all generations across time—but demanded no specific government or place on a map. Members of the ummah neither lived in one land nor were subject to one political authority. (16)

It is this “deterritorialized” image of *Umma* – that encourages transnational “affiliation[s], shared legal practices, and a collective eschatological vision” – that is privileged in my project and serves, in part, to undermine the narrative of Muslim World vs. West.

Muslim Americans in *Umma*

When it comes to Islam in America, Edward E. Curtis IV notes that it “has been international and cross-cultural from its very beginning” (xiii). Grewal explicates a common reality for American Muslims wherein they “debate the place and future of Islam in the US as they grapple with their obligations both to their country and to their Umma” (22). In terms of responsibilities and loyalties, Muslims in the U.S. often maintain both national (American) and global (*Umma*) ties. As Grewal delineates the image of a Muslim *Umma* that includes Muslims in America and around the world, she indicates that her argument is organized by shared ideas and imaginaries rather than geographical, ethnic, or national boundaries. Grewal’s illustration of the transnational networks and very fluidity that links Muslim Americans to Muslims around the globe furthers our understanding of what is Muslim American. Rather than undermine the category itself, Grewal necessarily situates it within a larger, global context.

One of the aims of my project is to illustrate this rich complexity via analysis of various literary works by Muslim Americans. Their identities extend beyond frames that have been imposed by centuries-old orientalist discourse and very prevalent Islamophobic rhetoric. Muslim Americans naturally share common histories, impulses, and strivings with other identifiable groups, who are not necessarily Arab, Muslim, or American. Moreover, each individual is alone able to determine which particular histories and impulses take priority for her. Although inevitably shaped by communal discourses, each individual story is marked by different choices, circumstances, and connections. In this manner, the lines that define certain labels and boundaries become both fluid and blurred. How is this complex dynamic depicted in Muslim American literary works? How do they challenge and (re)define categories of Muslim, American, and Muslim American?

The study of Muslim American literature is a budding field that calls for greater and more thorough attention. It is not only timely, but particularly crucial today, in the wake of 9/11, ensuing U.S. foreign policies, and subsequent backlash against Muslims in the U.S. that continues today as is evident in the recent Muslim Ban that was authorized during the Trump administration. In “The American Ummah in the Era of Islamophobia,” Eboo Patel describes how Islamophobia has encouraged individuals – “with even the slimmest connection” to Islam – to publicly identify as Muslim and stand with their faith community (8).

A consequence of powerful outsiders attacking an identity is that people with even the slimmest connection to that identity will feel offended; find that once-small part of themselves growing in personal significance; then seek to reconnect with that identity; often by playing some role of value for that identity community. (83)

Patel thus describes a fascinating phenomenon where anti-Muslim prejudice prompts some individuals (certainly not all) to “reconnect” with – rather than dissociate from – their Muslim identity and assume the community’s challenges and struggles as their own. Furthermore, Islamophobia has generated “growing interest in stories *about* Muslims,” effectively supplying this discourse with both “a stage and an audience” (85). Salah Hassan makes a similar case in “Muslim Presence: Anti-Muslim Politics in the United States and the Rise of Muslim American Culture,” when he strongly suggests that “expressions of Muslimness have become more public in the face of an unbridled vilification of Muslims and Islam” (69). Hassan further maintains,

Rather than retreat from public view or totally assimilate to an acculturated secularism, many Muslim Americans have responded through cultural projects that stage an oppositional Muslimness.... the forms of Muslimness that have taken shape in these cultural projects also challenge normative understandings of Islam defined by Muslim religious authorities and resist ethnically specific modes of belonging modeled on homogenous national communities. (79)

In the face of anti-Muslim politics, Muslim American writings and other forms of self-representation reflect “an oppositional Muslimness” that assumes various “forms” and does not subscribe to any one version. As they challenge both external and internal definitions of Muslimness, the image of *Umma* that is reflected across Muslim American cultural productions becomes increasingly fluid and complex.

By defining and delving into the emerging tradition of Muslim American literature, this project participates in multiple dialogues that exist in America today about how Muslim Americans are defined by themselves and others. The aftermath of 9/11 was marked by a heightened awareness and visibility of Muslims that largely tends towards a gross racialization

and essentialization of the Muslim figure. In Junaid Rana's *Terrifying Muslims*, he describes the representation of Muslims as imperial targets that are made visible and identifiable to the public. These representations conflate a breadth of racial categories in the pan-ethnic category of "Muslim," removing all specificity and difference. According to Rana, this homogenization and racialization of Muslims involves a reimagining of a broad range of populations that serves to propagate the concept of "Islamic peril," which is to say, the perpetual possibility of terror in the Muslim figure. Thus, essentialist images and notions of terrorist, criminal, and immigrant have become intertwined and associated uniquely with the perception and depiction of Muslims as threatening foreigners.

Furthermore, in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11* (Jamal and Naber), Suad Joseph and Benjamin D'Harlinque analyze strategies of racialization that were frequently applied in *New York Times* articles published during 2000-2004.⁴ A number of these strategies are directly related to Muslims' global and co-religionist affiliations, including: Muslim Americans and Arab Americans are depicted as "intimately tied to their countries of origin, more so than other immigrants and more tied to their countries of origin than they are to the United States"; "devout Muslims are represented as devoted to Islam and other Muslims before they are devoted to the United States and other Americans"; and "through a series of associations, Arab Americans and Muslims Americans are portrayed as linked to international Muslims and Muslim movements, which are themselves racialized as dark and dangerous" (234). By specifically focusing on the concept of *Umma* as it is expressed in Muslim American narratives and self-representations, my project engages with the aforementioned notions that Muslims are not only

⁴ See also Evelyn Alsultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (2012).

foreign but that their global connections are also threatening and constitute additional justification for racializing and alienating them.

Efforts to define and affirm the heterogeneous category of “Muslim American” are necessary as they serve to highlight Muslim contributions to U.S. culture and history, counter the essentialism to which they are subjected, and restore the element of a complex humanity to the representation of Muslims in general. GhaneaBassiri positions Muslim Americans at the intersection of “American religious history and modern Islamic history,” maintaining that “their lived historical experiences give the lie to the notion that Islamic culture is intrinsically distinct from American culture” (4). It is these “lived historical experiences” that are represented and made accessible in the literature. Although this project utilizes both “Muslim American” and “Umma” as coherent and unifying terms, it also recognizes and struggles against the immanent risk that is the essentializing use of these terms. It is important that we pluralize the meanings and resist the erasure of their inherently rich diversity and myriad differences. As it lies at the intersection of discussions of religion, politics, culture, nation, and gender, the category of “Muslim” in general is anything but static, constantly redefining itself. By maintaining this pluralistic vision, we not only account for a dynamic reality and diverse differences, but we also counter ideological representations of the Muslim figure that have become naturalized. As I refer to Muslim or Muslim American identity throughout *Umma Expressions*, this inherent heterogeneity, fluidity, and intersectionality is implied. As this work privileges *self*-representations *by* Muslim Americans, it makes visible how they are challenged to inhabit and negotiate multiple identities. Importantly, by giving voice to Muslim Americans via their writings, we allow *them* to define, in various ways, what it means to be Muslim American and how that reality exists within the context of a broader community.

A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center, “U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream,” states that Muslim Americans are a “diverse and growing population... estimated at 3.45 million people of all ages, including 2.15 million adults” (30). The survey outlines various statistics pertaining to Muslim American demographics, contributing to our understanding of this community’s dynamics and affiliations beyond U.S. borders.

Nearly six-in-ten U.S. Muslims adults (58%) are first-generation Americans, having been born in another country. An additional 18% are second- generation Americans – people who were born in the U.S. and who have at least one parent who was an immigrant. About a quarter (24%) of U.S. Muslims are U.S. natives with U.S.-born parents (i.e., they are from families who have been in the U.S. for three generations or longer). (31)

Accordingly, about three-quarters (76%) of U.S. Muslims are either immigrants themselves or are the children of immigrants (compared to only a quarter or 27% of the U.S. general population). Thus, the great majority of Muslim Americans are directly connected to histories, cultures, and roots that lie *outside* of America; this reality is especially relevant when considering Muslim immigrant literature. Additionally, American foreign policy and recent military activity in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and other Muslim-majority countries bring these foreign affiliations into sharp focus for those who identify with these parts of the world, in addition to America. This issue is frequently addressed in Muslim American writings.

Among first-generation Muslim American adults, "more come from South Asia (35%) than any other region.... [and a]n additional 23% were born in other parts of the Asia-Pacific region (such as Iran, Indonesia, etc.).” These significant numbers appear to reflect the fact that Asia is “home to most of the world’s Muslims.” Other first-generation Muslims immigrated from

the Middle East-North Africa region (25%), sub-Saharan Africa (9%), Europe (4%), and other parts of the Americas (4%). Notably, the country that accounts for the highest numbers of immigrants to the U.S. is Pakistan (15%), followed by “Iran (11%...), India (7%), Afghanistan (6%), Bangladesh (6%), Iraq (5%), Kuwait (3%), Syria (3%) and Egypt (3%)” (32). The vast majority of Muslim Americans is undoubtedly connected to a wide range of places and cultures around the world, underscoring the pan-ethnic nature of the Muslim population on a global level (although the Pew report does note that the “geographic origins of Muslim immigrants in the United States do not precisely mirror the global distribution of Muslims” (32)). As “Muslim American” literature necessarily evokes a wide range of ethnic roots and cultural backgrounds, bringing together different languages, cultures, and ethnicities under one category, again, the diversity and individuality inherent therein must be recognized.

In terms of citizenship, Pew (2017) further reports that 82% of Muslims in America are U.S. citizens – “including 42% who were born in the U.S. and 40% who were born abroad but who have naturalized” (34). In other words, only 18% are *not* American citizens, a low number considering the problematic portrayals of Islam as foreign and incompatible with American culture. In response to such portrayals, Grewal describes a subsequent phenomenon of countercitizenship, whereby Muslim Americans embrace outsiderhood, and in doing so have “developed transnational moral geographies as Islamic critiques of the contradiction between the universal promise of legal citizenship in the US and the ways they have been excluded from American social citizenship” (83). She observes that the “alternative, transnational moral geographies, whether Africa or the Islamic East, and alternative, transnational imagined communities, whether the African diaspora or the global Muslim umma, eclipse their attachments to and investments in the nation” (82). In a reactionary circumstance, their *Muslim*

identity thus appears to outbalance their *American* identity. Grewal further notes that these narratives of countercitizenship are characteristic of other minorities over the course of American history: “their countercitizenship reflects their ambivalence toward the US and its cultural mainstream, manifest as a seeming embrace of their exclusion and a strong identification as religious outsiders” (82). In *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Sherman Jackson notes a similar occurrence that takes place in protest culture, wherein looking beyond America’s borders becomes a legitimate means of freeing oneself from the Master and seeking confirmation of their American identity; for Blackamerican Muslims, this might take on a religious dimension as they look to the Middle East (154).

In terms of this particular project, how does this foreign or immigrant element – whether it is actual, perceived, or sought out (all necessary and important considerations) – factor into Muslim American writings? In identifying expressions of *Umma* in Muslim American writings, I explore if and how they might be motivated by an embracing of an outsider status and what this signifies. These politics of identification and inclusion/exclusion are further complicated by Muslim and Muslim American understandings of *Umma*. For instance, Jackson observes that while *Umma* technically refers to “the entire Community, the unqualified collective of all who espouse, ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger,’” it often refers exclusively to certain parts of the globe such as the Middle East and South East Asia, and in turn, excludes places like America, where Muslims are a minority. Looking to Muslim American writings will help to address a subsequent question raised by Jackson, namely if and in what ways Muslim Americans perceive themselves in the context of *Umma* and as representatives of Islam (“Muslims as a Marginal Minority”).

Project Scope and Outline

As I explore how Muslim Americans identify with the broader *Umma* in American and global contexts, historical and contemporary, my examination of their writings is built upon a multidisciplinary framework that extends to literature, history, anthropology, and religious studies. In my analysis and discussion of these texts, I am concerned with issues of citizenship, alienation and belonging, the religious and the secular, and the public and the private, particularly as they have been explicated in scholarship by contemporary Muslim Studies scholars including Moustafa Bayoumi, Edward E. Curtis IV, Zareena Grewal, Sherman Jackson, Khalid Beydoun, Shabana Mir, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, and Junaid Rana among others.⁵

The scope of my study is intentionally limited to texts *by* and *about* Muslim Americans, written in English. In so doing, I hope to examine how these authors employ writing as a means of producing their own narratives and making their voices heard in a dialogue that so often excludes them, despite being its focus. Furthermore, I focus primarily on contemporary Muslim American texts, in accordance with the growing trends in Muslim American literary production that witnessed a major increase at the turn of the 21st century, particularly post-9/11. This time period was also marked by an increased visibility of the Muslim figure, whose portrayal was often racialized and essentialized. Consequently, in discussing this literature, it is especially important that we pluralize the meanings of “Muslim” and “Umma” to highlight the rich diversity and range of differences that each term encompasses.

⁵ In a future version of this project, I intend to incorporate more thoroughly the critical works of other notable Muslim Studies scholars including Mucahit Bilici, Sally Howell, Evelyn Alsultany, Julianne Hammer, and Su’ad Abdul Khabeer among others.

Notably, this discussion aligns itself with an approach of *Muslim connectedness*, which according to Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin necessarily moves beyond the frame of simply providing positive images of Islam and Muslims. Morey and Yaqin argue that “an understanding of Muslim connectedness, both to other Muslims and to the wider world” is necessary because it reminds us that the clash of civilizations is a fallacy. Furthermore, “what is needed is a recognition of the ubiquitous cultural interpenetration that has always marked relations between Islam and the West, and an attempt to work this realization into the mainstream representational landscape” (207). In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said similarly urges us to undermine “the manufactured clash of civilizations,” and instead “concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow” (xxix). Among other things, the history of Muslim Americans and Muslims in general is certainly a history of “the slow working together of cultures that overlap.” Said, Morey and Yaqin each call upon us, as critics, to conceive the world as richly complex and nuanced – much like Dimock’s conception of American literature across deep time. The study of Muslim Americans and their literature fits within this multilayered and intersectional approach to history and humanity.

As I consider how the Muslim American individual is represented as part of various collectives, my discussion necessarily engages with “Muslim” not only in religious terms but also as a social and cultural marker; for instance, the decisions, practices, and expressions that determine terms of inclusion and exclusion are pertinent. I also question how this negotiation between the individual and the collective(s) elicits transnational and transcultural sentiments that are expressed by means of affective histories and cultural memories, transcending immediate

boundaries of space and time. Ultimately, my project is invested in examining how we can constructively define and discuss the Muslim American imaginary.

More broadly, my project addresses the importance of literature as a means of both defining and reproducing what “Muslim American” and “Umma” mean. These texts serve as a site of mediation between Muslim writer and non-Muslim/Muslim reader. What is being shared and expressed in this space, and why is it important? Hence, I have consciously limited my study of Muslim American Literature to works written *by* Muslim Americans. Representations of Muslims are widely prevalent, but as Moustafa Bayoumi observes, “the problem is not that they [Muslims] lack representations but that they have too many. And these are all abstractions” (5). He elaborates on the root of this problem, noting that Muslims are “constantly talked about but almost never heard from” (5). Thus, there is a strong need for Muslim self-representations and, subsequently, a more focused study of them. By turning to representations of Muslim Americans *by* Muslim American writers, we help to bring their voices to the forefront and become better able to examine how they engage with, and *despite*, the current discourse that has served to distort the Muslim figure. As producers of their respective narratives, Muslim Americans play a pivotal role in the national narrative on Islam and Muslims.⁶

As my project examines various iterations of *Umma* that are expressed in contemporary Muslim American literature, each chapter examines a particular text that represents a different genre and time period. Beginning with a historical *Umma*-identification in the context of America, Chapter One “History, Storytelling, and a Muslim American Origins Narrative in Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account*” positions Laila Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014) as a

⁶ See Mucahit Bilici’s discussion of how Islam and Muslims have gradually become a part of the American cultural landscape in *Finding Mecca in America* (2012).

Muslim American origin story. Lalami's text offers a fictional memoir in the voice of Estebanico – an enslaved African Muslim and one of four survivors of the 1527 Spanish expedition to America – whom historical records barely acknowledge. Storytelling emerges as a means of empowerment and liberation, effectively centering its narrator. As a work of historiographic metafiction, *The Moor's Account* blurs the lines between fiction and history, demonstrating the inherent (inter)textuality of the latter, questioning the process of historiography, and subverting the Western narrative of the past.

Recalling the long history of Muslims in America, their early contributions and struggles, not only complicates our understanding of America's historical narrative but also serves as a means of empowerment for Muslims and other marginalized communities in America. In his essay "Muslims as a Marginal Minority in America," Jackson states,

It would seem, then, that, even as a marginal minority in America, a healthy sense of historical consciousness would empower us to see ourselves in some pretty eminent company and to recognize that we are not just victims or passive objects but actual agents – good or bad, lazy or energetic, petty or big-minded — who contribute directly to our lived circumstances.

Lalami offers readers this "sense of historical consciousness" and, in the process, restores agency to an individual who has long been invisible and silent. She contextualizes Estebanico's narrative within Black and Muslim American literary traditions, as well as Islamic tradition, by integrating elements of early African Muslim slave narratives. As Lalami's text disrupts the Anglo-American nationalist narrative, she highlights the complexity and intersectionality of America's

national identity, reaffirming Muslim American presence and giving voice to stories and perspectives that have otherwise been marginalized.

Chapter Two: “Muslim American Journeys in the Global” shifts to contemporary associations, specifically how Muslim Americans negotiate and define *American* Islam while also identifying as members of a global Muslim community. Willow Wilson’s *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman’s Journey to Love and Islam* (2010) is an autobiographical conversion narrative that documents her journey to and within Islam. Unlike earlier conversion narratives of Alexander Russell Webb (*Islam in America*, 1893) and Malcolm X (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965), Wilson’s journey is shaped by her specific position as a privileged white American woman, who is attempting to define her beliefs and identity while living in Egypt, in a post-9/11 context. Her journey to a publicly visible and communal expression of her Muslimness illustrates a reciprocal relationship between faith, self, and community. Wilson’s perspective as an American convert to Islam contributes to a deeper understanding of American Muslimness that grapples with the narrative of Islam vs. West, private vs. public religion, and American individualism vs. community belonging.

My final chapter “Breathing Through the Dust in Samira Ahmed’s *Internment*” examines how the Muslim American community has struggled with the suffocating pressures of Islamophobia in the United States. A work of speculative fiction, Samira Ahmed’s novel *Internment* (2019) imagines a near-future America, where anti-Muslim sentiment escalates to the point that Muslims are placed in internment camps. Highlighting historical and contemporary instances of abuse particularly towards Muslims, this novel serves as a cautionary tale of what could possibly happen. I argue that the physical internment of Muslims in the novel symbolizes the contemporary marginalization of Muslims in American society. The protagonist Layla bears

the burdens of Islamophobia as she fights against a system that seeks to silence and eliminate her Muslim American identity.

The three contemporary authors whose primary texts I examine in this project – Lalami, Wilson, and Ahmed – are all women. While unintentional and this project certainly is not exhaustive, this commonality prompts the question of how these Muslim American women simultaneously challenge and/or reify ideas about Muslim womanhood and the nation? Additionally, how do Muslim men and women’s articulation of their relationship to the *Umma* compare? Furthermore, the three texts – all written post-9/11, specifically during the 2010s – offer various depictions of the past, present, and future that together define the Muslim American imaginary. The authors prompt us as readers to consider what we can learn from the past and how it contributes to our contemporary narratives and understandings; how Muslim Americans today are grappling with their intersectional identities and their belonging as Americans; and what the future of America, and Muslims in America, looks like based on our present. Even as we look to the past and the future, the present remains central.

Lalami, Wilson, and Ahmed offer us very different representations of Muslim American identity, each of which articulate belonging to a Muslim community and tradition – be it national or global. In doing so, they resist narratives of an Anglo-American nationalist history; manufactured clash of civilizations; and American Islamophobia via War on Terror culture. Jackson remarks that “the phenomenon of Islamophobia as a whole will not likely second-guess itself until it is confronted by enough Muslim power to make doing so appear to be in its own interest. The *sine qua non* of such power, of course, is Muslim unity” (“Freedom of Religion”). In other words, the “*sine qua non*,” or essential condition, for “enough Muslim power” to effectively challenge Islamophobia is “Muslim unity.” A community that perceives itself and is

subsequently perceived as united and empowered by its historical predecessors and global counterparts is strong, resourceful, and visible, refusing to be silenced.

Muslim American literature offers a rich site for diverse, plural histories and a more complex understanding of its representative community, complicating the essentialized image that is stereotypically evoked by the “Muslim” category. My study hopes to extend and nuance existing conversations about Muslims in the U.S. and about ethnic studies in general. By closely examining the various paradigms of Muslim American identification as they are expressed in their own writings, this project sheds much needed light on the cultural interpenetration that transcends divides not only of Islam and the West, but other geographical, historical, and religious divides as well. Regardless of their ethno-national origins, Muslims in America share a common minority status. While the category of “Muslim” or “Muslim American” tends to create a certain inclusivity across national and ethnic differences, it also excludes many who may share their ethnic or national origins, but are not Muslim. Articulating identity in terms of religious belonging, with a global and historical Muslim *Umma*, is simultaneously broader and narrower than national or ethnic categories (e.g. Arab American, South Asian American, African American, etc.). Far from suggesting that individuals should be limited to the single label of “Muslim” or “Muslim American,” my research aims to broaden the scope of contemporary literary scholarship to allow for the acknowledgement and inclusion of Islam and Muslims as an entry point into texts.

Chapter One:
History, Storytelling, and a Muslim American Origins Narrative
in Lalami's *The Moor's Account*

“And those who came after them say: Our Lord! Forgive us, and our brethren who came before
us into the Faith” – (Quran, 59:10)

“Telling a story is like sowing a seed – you always hope to see it become a beautiful tree, with
firm roots and branches that soar up in the sky. But it is a peculiar sowing, for you will never
know whether your seed sprouts or dies.” – Estebanico, *The Moor's Account*

Estebanico, the narrator and protagonist of Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014), compares a story to a seed that has the potential to grow tall with roots firmly established in the ground.⁷ The uncertainty as to whether the seed “sprouts or dies,” the fact that “you will never know,” strongly implies that the life or success of a story is measured by the fruit it bears for posterity. A story thrives in its retelling, extending to different peoples and times, even as it may

⁷ Estebanico appears to reference the following verses from the Quran:

Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky? It produces its fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for the people that perhaps they will be reminded..... Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, in worldly life and in the Hereafter... (14:24-25, 27).

assume different shapes and guises. Conversely, a story that remains forgotten and untold, silenced and marginalized, withers and dies.

The particular story that Estebanico narrates takes the form of a Muslim American origin story. Estebanico serves a historic starting point for Muslims in America and Lalami's novel, a fictional memoir, serves as the imaginative foundation for a Muslim American literary tradition. Importantly, the Muslim American narrative is iterated via the actual telling of a story but also the people living it. The firm roots of Estebanico's story signal that Muslim Americans, representatives of this tradition, are an established aspect of the American landscape; Muslims have a long history in North America and are here to stay. The beauty of a tree as it stands firm and "soar[s] up in the sky" is visible for others to see; they recognize not only the beauty it adds but also the fruit it bears, how it gives back to its surroundings. In this instance, we as readers are called to recognize and appreciate the presence and value of Muslim Americans and their contributions.

This chapter provides a brief survey of the history of Muslims in America, highlighting early figurations of Muslims in the American imaginary that were largely shaped by political contexts and relations. I then proceed to explore how *The Moor's Account* elaborates on a passing, but noteworthy reference to Estebanico, a largely *absent* historical figure who has been relegated to the margins of History. One of only four survivors of the 1527 Spanish expedition to the "New World," there is no historical account of Estebanico's journey or background on his life. Lalami fills this void and restores Estebanico's voice in a fictional account that offers an image of the man he may have been – his upbringing, faith, circumstances, and capabilities that would lead him towards becoming the first African and Muslim traveler in the Americas. As a 16th-century Arabic-speaking Moor from Azemmur, enslaved by Spaniards, Estebanico's purpose is to set the

record straight and document *his* participation in the Spanish imperial expedition to Florida as he witnessed and experienced it. In doing so, he resists narratives of power put forth by white, Christian “servants of empire.”

Bringing together fiction and history, Lalami enriches our engagement with and understandings of the past and its historical texts. As Estebanico narrates his own journey, he effectively questions and undermines the construct of History and the process of historiography – even as he participates in it. Radically rewriting its source text, namely Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*,⁸ Lalami by way of *The Moor’s Account* deliberately aligns Estebanico’s narrative with an Islamic tradition – via recurring Quranic references – as well as Black and Muslim American literary traditions by integrating elements of early African Muslim slave narratives, especially *The Life of Omar Ibn Said*. In the process, a self-proclaimed “servant of God” liberates himself from the bonds of empire. Ultimately, this historical novel is consistently grounded in a textuality and intertextuality that expresses the complexity, heterogeneity, and intersectionality of America’s history and cultural identity. A work of historiographic metafiction and an imaginary Arab Muslim slave memoir, Lalami’s text reinterprets the Euro-centric origin story, disrupts the Anglo-American nationalist narrative, and reaffirms a Muslim American presence, giving voice to individuals and groups whose stories have otherwise been marginalized and suppressed. Highlighting the link between literacy and freedom, between written records and power, Lalami illustrates the centrality of storytelling, which serves to liberate Estebanico from the margins of History.

⁸ In 1555, Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación* was revised and published, along with the story of his experiences in South America, in a second edition titled *Naufragios* (frequently translated *Shipwrecks* or *Castaways*).

The story of Estebanico is a seed or origin of the Muslim American narrative that has developed and grown over the course of five centuries. American historian and law professor Annette Gordon-Reed, who maintains that Estebanico's story "should be seen as a part of the origin story of African Americans," argues that "the experiences of so many other Black people and communities have been pushed to the sidelines, held in thrall to the prerogatives of white storytellers and the needs of white origin stories." Gordon-Reed delineates the significance of origin stories,

Origin stories matter, for individuals, groups of people, and nations. They inform our sense of self, telling us what kind of people we believe we are, what kind of nation we believe we live in. They usually carry, at least, a hope that where we started might hold the key to where we are in the present. We can say, then, that much of the concern over origin stories is about our current needs and desires, not actual history.... But in the case of Black people, the limitations of the history and possibility of our origin stories have helped create and maintain an extremely narrow construction of Blackness.

Recalling and centering the participation of Blacks as well as that of Muslims and Indigenous populations in America's formative days – a history often marginalized and silenced – engenders an American origin story that is much more inclusive and cross-cultural than what is traditionally depicted. While these three groups have distinct histories, experiences, and challenges – particularly within the context of a dominantly white, Christian society – they come together in the specific story of Estebanico and in the broader history of Muslims in America.

As religionist and scholar of Islam, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri asserts, "The history of Islam in America reminds us of the neglected fact that the early making of the 'New World,' long

before the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, included Africans alongside Europeans and Native Americans” (10). Although our knowledge of “the actual religious practices and beliefs of early explorers and settlers, such as Estevanico and Anthony Jansen van Salee, who came from the Muslim-majority world” is limited, Ghanem-Bassiri further maintains that “their lives personify the interrelations between the Muslim-majority world, Northwest Africa, Western Europe, and the Americas that shaped the Atlantic world” (11). As Lalami elaborates on Estevanico’s experience living among various Native tribes for years as a healer, marrying a Native American woman, she draws particular attention to the “interrelations” between the Muslim North African and Native peoples, both of whom are subject to the agenda and racial politics of European imperialism. Estevanico’s history is both valuable and relevant as it lies at the intersection of multiple identities – Black, African, Muslim, Arab, Latino, and Native American. As an origin story, it speaks to each of these communities as well as other minorities, highlighting the diverse reality of our nation and that it has never been a monolith – neither in race, color, language, nor religion. The original story of Estevanico, and Lalami’s fictional elaboration, thus engage with the history of America’s identity as a nation, and also with more contemporary issues that disrupt the myth of America as a nation of and *for* white, Christian Anglophones. A more conscious understanding of America’s national identity and history has the power to impact sociopolitical issues including racial bias, police reform, Islamophobia, immigration policies, and the US-Mexico border.

Throughout this chapter, I differentiate between *history*, as a reference to the past (which we cannot fully access or comprehend, and which is always textually mediated), and *History* as a human construct, as text, a record and narrativization of the past. In his seminal work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph

Trouillot specifically examines how historical narratives surrounding the discovery – not conquest – of America (e.g. the celebrated image of Christopher Columbus) are largely shaped by Western narratives of power. His text examines critically the various uses of the word “history” and explains historicity, differentiating between the sociohistorical process or “what happened” (historicity 1) and “our knowledge of that process” or “that which is said to have happened” (historicity 2). He further asserts that the “semantic ambiguity” of the word “history” highlights “an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap” between these two sides of historicity wherein “the boundary between the two meanings is often quite fluid” (3). My examination of Estebanico’s narrative as it is given shape in *The Moor’s Account* – particularly as I apply Linda Hutcheon’s conception of historiographic metafiction below – highlights the simultaneous “distinction” and “overlap” between history and History, between what happened and the record of what happened.

Contributing to both African American and Muslim American origin stories, shedding light on Estebanico effectively opens and interrogates dominant narratives of History, enabling a more expansive “construction of Blackness” and Muslimness. This is evidenced in Gordon-Reed’s reminder (alluded to by GhaneaBassiri above) that Estebanico was “part of a cohort of African people who predated plantation slavery in the Americas, and had stories and legacies outside that institution.” He enters North America’s history in the early 16th century, “roughly a century earlier than when the most popular stories about Black” – and *Muslim* – “people in America begin.” Focusing specifically on the origins of Muslims in America, this discussion necessarily coincides with the question of the historical continuity of Islam in America. In *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Islamic studies scholar Sherman Jackson limits “the spread of Islam among Blackamericans to the twentieth century” in order to “emphasize that prior to that time

Islam was unable to sustain and perpetuate itself on North American soil.” According to Jackson, enslaved African Muslims had to contend not only with the “overriding stigma of color,” but also “the much older and more deeply rooted stigma of religion” (39).⁹ The established “fear and hatred of Islam” combined with “white supremacy and the dehumanizing brutalities of American slavery” made it “virtually impossible for African Muslim slaves to perpetuate their faith in America” (39). Sylviane Diouf similarly argues that the Islam carried from West Africa did not survive, noting that “there is no evidence in the United States of any Islamic continuity in the twentieth century” (277). She further maintains that any chances of survival depended on the ability to transmit their faith vertically by passing it down to their descendants, and horizontally by encouraging others to convert to Islam; the circumstances of their enslavement precluded this from happening (251).

As both Jackson and Diouf indicate, the syncretic movements that arose in the early twentieth century bear little to no resemblance to the Islamic practice of enslaved West African Muslims. Nonetheless there persists a level of continuity in the role that Islam has played in America across the centuries. Edward E. Curtis IV’s *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* explores how Islam is both practiced within and shaped by the global African diaspora. Curtis argues,

the religious practice and thought of most Muslims in the African diaspora has responded directly to or has reflected the influence of the centuries-old trade in African human

⁹ Jackson further notes, “Whereas, according to scholars like Theodore Allen, whiteness as a racial category uniting first land-owning and then ultimately all Europeans (particularly against blacks) was not invented until the late seventeenth century, the negative image of the Moor and the Muslim went back more than half a millennium” (39).

beings, the racialized societies that engaged in and were constituted by such trade, and the political consequences of slavery and racism. (4)

The centrality of these influences in African diasporic histories and narratives is evident not only in early African Muslim slave accounts, but in the thoughts and writings of African American Muslims, like Malcolm X, who emerge years later. Curtis further describes the function and significance of Islam as a “vehicle of political self-determination” (54); “a vehicle that will restore a self that is in some way broken and scattered” (166); and a “vehicle of healing and wholeness in an often violent diaspora” (171). The function of Islam as such becomes an essential aspect of the Muslim American narrative as it engages with the United States’ systemic racism which has persisted in various forms throughout the nation’s history. Appropriately, this is reflected in the Muslim American origin story, including Lalami’s narrativization of Estebanico, where his Islamic faith is central to his identity, serving as a source of strength and restoration as well as a means of resistance against the institutions that seek to silence and render him invisible.

Delimiting History: Muslims in the New World

A brief overview of America’s sociopolitical history reveals how Muslims have consistently figured rather prominently within the American imagination, shaping early discourses and behaviors. GhaneaBassiri reminds us that the very discovery of America is rooted in the political dynamics of European-Muslim relations: “European voyages of discovery in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were in large part intended to find new mercantile routes to circumvent the overland and maritime routes through rival Muslim empires

– mainly the Ottoman (1299-1923) and Mamluk (1250-1517) Empires” (10). Moreover, the 15th century reconquest of Spain and imperial domination of North Africa were the prelude to the conquest of the Americas. Ella Shohat describes how colonial discourse in the Americas was significantly constituted by what she refers to as the “proto-Orientalism” that characterized Iberian theology. Shaped by Reconquista attitudes towards Muslims and Jews, Spanish conquistadores arriving in the Americas in the late 15th and 16th centuries carried with them “a ready-made demonizing vision, transferable from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ world.” Thus, Shohat argues that Islamophobia and Judeophobia were essential in providing a “conceptual framework projected outward against the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas” (52).

Later, during the Founding Fathers’ conceptualization of an American nation in the late 18th century, the question of Muslims and their hypothetical position as American citizens would come to represent a critical point of debate. In *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders*, Denise A. Spellberg illustrates how “adherents of Islam came to symbolize the aspiration of political equality, irrespective of religion, in the new Republic” (195). She notes that the question of Muslim citizenship was considered exceptional: “while hypothetical Muslims inhabited the rhetoric of the Founders, in their midst there also lived flesh-and-blood Muslims who, as slaves, remained invisible and without rights.” Furthermore, “The lives of America’s actual Muslim inhabitants... could not have been more remote from the possibility that any Muslim could conceivably seek the presidency one day” (195). Still, Thomas Jefferson, among others, advocated for a vision of American pluralism and religious toleration whereby even a Muslim – demonstrating the extent and inclusivity of their conception of religious freedom – would enjoy the full rights of citizenship and could become President of the United States. Thomas Jefferson’s position regarding Muslims as full citizens with civil rights was

influenced by his intellectual predecessor, the English philosopher John Locke, who wrote in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), “neither Pagan nor Mahamedan [Muslim] nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion” (106). In 1788, his contemporary Federalist James Iredell also posed the question, “But how is it possible to exclude any set of men, without taking away that principle of religious freedom which we ourselves so warmly contend for?” (158). Despite negative perceptions of Islam as a fanatic religion and a foreign threat that were prevalent during this period, Jefferson, Iredell, and others were successful in advocating for a more inclusive American society that upholds this “principle of religious freedom.” Spellberg observes that today American Muslims continue to symbolize American ideals of inclusion and equality; the contemporary conversation is equally if not more critical than its predecessor as it pertains more directly to the visible and very real presence of Muslims in the U.S. Spellberg concludes:

Thus, challenges to Muslim civil rights continue to represent threats to the rights of all Americans. How the nation responds to these threats against this signal religious minority will determine whether or not founding ideals of inclusion will survive in practice or succumb to rank fear, prejudice, and discrimination. (272)

Both Shohat and Spellberg’s depictions of these early moments in American history, affirm how Muslims played a role in the ongoing conversation that has shaped America’s history and democratic ideals, as well as its sociopolitical and cultural dynamics. The presence and participation of Muslims in America and the nation’s evolving historical narrative highlights a complex relationship between Islam, Muslims, and America that has developed over centuries. As today’s national rhetoric positions Islam in America as a recent phenomenon and, subsequently, Muslims as foreigners who do not belong in America’s national landscape, it is

increasingly important to highlight and contextualize the longstanding presence of Muslims in America. In his essay, “The Study of American Muslims: A History,” Curtis observes that the study of Muslim Americans formally began in the 1930s and focused primarily on “proto-Islamic movements” including the Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya movement, and the Nation of Islam. This scholarship was largely motivated by the concern of Muslims as a threat to national security because each of these movements “urged Blacks to challenge their second-class citizenship in the United States by converting to Islam” (16). As these “so-called Black Muslims were declared to be inauthentic Muslims,” scholarly focus shifted towards African Muslim slaves, and Curtis notes that “it was almost as if the only African American Muslims worthy of a book were the dead ones” (17). When Islam in America emerged as a subfield of religious studies in the 1980s, the focus would once again shift overwhelmingly towards Muslim immigration post-1965. Curtis argues that this effectively “obscured the presence of African American Muslims and mistakenly analyzed the Muslim American experience as a whole through the lens of a first-generation struggle between American modernity and Islamic tradition” (15). It was only in the aftermath of 9/11 that this “leading paradigm of the field was challenged” and scholars began “to analyze Islam as an American religious tradition and to narrate the lives of Muslims as mundane Americans” (15). This is evidenced by the rise in scholarship surrounding the subject of Islam and Muslims in America in the past two decades.

Still, popular discourse has yet to mirror this shift away from positing Islam as an immigrant phenomenon that challenges Western and American traditions of modernity. Additionally, what Curtis’s trajectory of the formal study of Muslim Americans over the years reveals is a narrative that is too-often only disjointedly presented in bits and pieces, and rarely as a coherent narrative that dates back to America’s earliest days and extends across centuries to

our contemporary time. Remembering and affirming this long history serves as an important means of complicating and intervening in our understanding of America's historical narrative as well as contemporary discourse pertaining to Islam and Muslims in America.

Narrating and Subverting History

Lalami's novel highlights the complexity of early American history and offers a Muslim American origins story that questions the traditional historical narrative. *The Moor's Account* is the imagined memoir of Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori, whom History recognizes by the name Estebanico. Mustafa or Estebanico sails to America as the slave of Spanish conquistador Andres Dorantes and soon becomes one of only four survivors of the 1527 Spanish expedition to Florida led by Panfilo de Narváez. The *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History* (edited by Curtis) describes Estebanico as "one of the first Muslims to set foot in the Americas" (172); the "first Spanish-speaking Muslim known in the Americas" (333); and "perhaps the first Muslim-American healer" (236). The text briefly outlines his life:

the North African Estevanico (ca. 1500–39), [was] also known as Estevanico el Moro or Esteban "the black." Born in Azemmour, Morocco, in his youth Estevanico—"Little Stephen"—was captured and sold as a slave in Spain. Estevanico reached America in 1528 as part of the disastrous Pánfilo de Narváez expedition that arrived in what are now the states of Florida, Texas, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa before reconnecting with Spanish colonial settlements in Culiacán in 1536. During his trek through the American Southwest and Mexico, Estevanico earned a reputation for his linguistic skills, as well as

for his powers as a healer. In 1539, Estevanico was captured by Native Americans and killed near present-day Zuni, New Mexico. (333)

In a brief historical overview *Muslims in America*, Curtis offers a more speculative description, referring to “the legendary African explorer Estevanico [who] is said to have explored Arizona and New Mexico in search of gold and treasure” (4). He further remarks that whether Estebanico was “an actual historical figure remains a matter for debate.” Nonetheless, Curtis continues to assert that “his presence in historical lore reflects, at least symbolically, the likely presence of Muslims among explorers and settlers from the Iberian peninsula” (5).

As Lalami’s fictionalized Estebanico relates the trials of the Spanish expedition, his imaginary account is interspersed with stories about his family and his childhood in Azemmur, the events that lead to him selling himself to feed his family, his ensuing years as a slave, and how he became the first African and Muslim explorer of the Americas. In her acknowledgements, Lalami notes that while her novel is based on “actual events, the characters and situations it depicts are entirely fictional.” Further, she states, “This is especially true of my protagonist, about whose background nothing is known, except for one line in Cabeza de Vaca’s relation... ‘The fourth [survivor] is Estevanico, an Arab Negro from Azamor.’”¹⁰

In an interview, Lalami explains that her choice of the Arabic name “Mustafa” was based on “some Moroccan scholars [who] use that name for him and [she] wanted to make it easier for readers who were familiar with that work to find him. But there is no historical basis for it” (Shamsie 197). In writing this chapter, I encountered the question of how to properly refer to Mustafa/Estebanico. On the one hand, the narrator undoubtedly views himself as “Mustafa” and

¹⁰ “*el cuarto [sobreviviente] se llama Estevanico, es negro alarabe, natural de Azamor.*”

considers “Estebanico” to be a foreign name, forced upon him and a mark of his enslavement and conversion; to refer to him by the latter name seems to perpetuate the circumstances of his enslavement. On the other hand, Mustafa is clearly a fictional characterization of a historical figure; Estebanico is the only historical name that we have for this individual, a name widely recognized by scholars based on how he is identified in Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*.¹¹ To refer to him as anything else would obscure this historical basis, a significant point in the present study that examines how Lalami’s novel is grounded in various historical texts and at the same time questions History’s authority. The usage of “Mustafa/Estebanico” and alternating between the two names, both valid solutions, are cumbersome and risk confusing readers. While I have opted to use “Estebanico,” it is evident that this name signifies the force of a particular imperial History and its inherent limitations (we simply do not have any access to or textual evidence of Estebanico’s original name), which neither novelist nor literary critic can quite escape.

Despite Lalami’s statement that “nothing is known” about Estebanico, various scholars have written about him and attempted to tell his story. In 1902, African American civil rights leader Major Richard Robert Wright¹² (1855-1947) questioned the obscurity of Estebanico’s story:

¹¹ He is also commonly referred to as Esteban, Estevan, and Estevanico.

¹² Born into slavery on May 16, 1855, by the end of his lifetime Richard Robert Wright Sr. would become known as an educator, banker, and civil rights leader. A strong advocate for black higher education, Wright founded the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth (known today as Savannah State University) and served as its president from 1891 to 1921. During the Spanish American War (1898), Wright was “the first African American to be named paymaster of the Army and the highest ranking African American officer [U.S. Army major] during the War.” In 1921, he established “Philadelphia’s Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company.... the only African American owned bank in the North and the first African American Trust Company.” Wright also led the effort to make February 1st National Freedom Day, commemorating the day President Abraham Lincoln signed the 13th Amendment in 1865 (Meakin).

It may be asked, Why is it that this Negro's name has remained practically in obscurity for more than three and a half centuries? The answer is not difficult. Until recently historians were not careful to note with any degree of accuracy and with due credit the useful and noble deeds of the Negro companions of Spanish conquerors, because Negroes were slaves, the property of masters who were supposed to be entitled to the credit for whatever the latter accomplished. The object of this paper is to direct attention to this apparent injustice, and if someone more competent will undertake a thorough investigation of the subject, the purpose of the writer will have been accomplished.

(Wright 228)

The marginalization and easy dismissal of Estebanico's pivotal role in history is emblematic of a larger trend that privileges the white man and undermines the Other – be it in the institutions that have marked the relationship between whites and Others (e.g. slavery and colonialism) or in the documented History that is indubitably a byproduct of these contexts. Over a century after Wright's call above for a more thorough investigation into Estebanico's story, writer and historian Robert Goodwin responds with his work *Crossing the Continent 1527-1540: The Story of the First African-American Explorer of the American South*. Goodwin argues that Esteban or Estebanico is “one of the few examples of a sixteenth-century African slave whose achievements were so outstanding that it is possible to piece together his story from the contemporary Spanish documents” (6). In opening his text, he describes History as “the origin myth of the Christian white man” (5). As such, “It tells us about our [white] ancestors, their heroes and wars, about how we came to live as we do, about our gods and our morality. It defines our values and reverses our political institutions. It offers a continuous story of our civilization...” (2). As Goodwin deliberately diverges from this conception of a white-centric History and attempts to “piece

together” Estebanico’s story from existing texts, he states that what unfolds is “the story of how history is written, the history of Esteban’s story, and also the tale of the first men in history to cross North America. It is a narrative of uncertainty, conjecture, and historical truth” (2). Much of the same may also be said of *The Moor’s Account*.

Lalami’s novel may be best described as “historiographic metafiction,” a term first coined by Linda Hutcheon in 1987 and which she develops in her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) to describe novels that are “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.” A product of postmodern theory’s challenging of the separation between fiction and History, this form of fiction is characterized by “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) [that] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon 5). By highlighting the blurred line between History and fiction, demonstrating that both are “human constructs” and neither can lay claim to an objective truth, historiographic metafiction problematizes the very notion of historical knowledge. Hutcheon describes the parallels between the literary and the historical, maintaining that the following are “also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction”:

[History and fiction] have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (105)

Perceiving History and fiction as inherently textual and intertextual, necessarily rooted in “linguistic constructs,” is key to Hutcheon’s conception of historiographic metafiction: “history does not exist except as text... its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts” (16). The (inter)textuality of *The Moor’s Account* is underscored in Lalami’s Acknowledgements, which identifies a select number of the key sources she relied on while researching her novel. Notably, her acknowledgements begin with the following explanation:

The *speech read* by the notary of the Narváez expedition in Chapter 1 is a *shortened* and *modified version* of the Requerimiento, a legal justification *drafted* by the Spanish jurist Juan López de Palacios Rubios in 1513... It was *read* to indigenous tribes when they were present, but their presence was not required. The *signed document* was then sent back to Spain. The *text* of the Requerimiento is in the public domain, but for an *analysis* see “The Requerimiento and Its *Interpreters*” by Lewis Hanke in *Revista de Historia de América*. (emphasis added)

Hutcheon notes that historiographic metafiction often uses “paratextual conventions,” like footnotes or in Lalami’s text her acknowledgements, to convey that “representations of the past are selected to signify whatever the historian intends... Even documents are selected as a function of a certain problem or point of view” (122). In doing so, such works serve to “both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations” (123). Above, Lalami offers a historical reference for the speech that she has included in Chapter 1; significantly, the *Requerimiento* (Spanish Requirement) – a legal document that offered justification for Spanish conquest – as a *text* is what offers us a glimpse into the past. In addition

to reiterating its textuality with references to the “speech” that was “read,” the “signed document,” and the “text” that exists today in the “public domain,” Lalami also underlines the fact that this evidence of the past was very much constructed and manipulated by people; initially “drafted” by the Spanish jurist over five centuries ago, Lalami includes a “shortened and modified version” of it. Furthermore, the *Requerimiento* has undergone various interpretations, as suggested by the title of Hanke’s essay, which offers us *an* analysis of the text (one of multiple) and which has been curated and presented in the publication *Revista de Historia de América*.

The evolution of the *Requerimiento* and our access to its textuality today echoes the postmodern problematization with the status and authenticity of the texts that necessarily mediate our understanding of the past. According to Hutcheon, “Historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their ‘facts’ and of the nature of their evidence, their documents.” Hutcheon further observes that historiographic metafiction questions “how those documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with narrativization? The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past” (122). Lalami’s note above provokes similar questions: how is our understanding of the circumstances pertaining to the deployment and invocation of the *Requerimiento* necessarily limited by the textual evidence we have access to today? What has been left out in the shortened version Lalami includes in her novel? What has been modified – when, by whom, and to what purpose? How is this version colored by Hanke’s analysis as well as that of Lalami? Even as she shares the sources that she relies on to write *The Moor’s Account*, Lalami urges her reader to question the “status of [these] traces of that past.”

The *Requerimiento* document itself is a tool in a performative act that is deployed by the Spanish Empire. Estebanico describes that a notary reads a speech, “on behalf of the King and Queen,” declaring that the native territories, upon which the Spanish conquistadors have just landed, belong to God and by extension the Church, which has donated this land to the European King and Queen. A key line reads: “we ask and require that you acknowledge the Church as the ruler of this world, and the priest whom we call Pope, and the King and Queen, as lords of this territory” (Lalami 9). The declaration further promises to unleash war upon the natives of the land if they should fail to comply with this demand. Estebanico is bewildered by the fact that “this speech was meant for the Indians,” who were not present to hear it – never mind the language barrier. He further reflects on “how utterly strange were the ways of the Castilians – just by saying that something was so, they believed that it was. I know that these conquerors... gave speeches not to voice the truth, but to create it” (10). The *Requerimiento*’s declaration that the Spaniards’ claim to the land is ordained by God was formally written and then read in a performative act that rendered the words “true,” to them at least. Similarly, in an “utterly strange” way, the recording of History and its claim to truth also renders it allegedly “true.”

Estebanico repeatedly remarks on the presence and role of those who record History’s texts. Early in his narrative of the expedition, he notes that Narváez is careful to treat the notary with some measure of respect since “without notaries and record-keepers, no one would know what governors did” (8). The notary of the expedition, who was “charged with the safekeeping of all its contracts and petitions... [and] was also responsible for chronicling its progress” (20), makes it possible for the Spanish Crown and people to read about Narváez’s adventures in America; assuming he survives, presumably, he will be rewarded and celebrated according to his

accomplishments. Beyond this contemporary audience, however, the notary also facilitates *our* knowledge of the expedition and his activities *today*.

Estebanico becomes increasingly appreciative of the power of the written word. As a young man, he ignored his father's wishes to follow in his footsteps as a notary public, yearning to be at the center of the contracts and events his father documented rather than a "simple recorder" (35); in retrospect, he wonders if his father's dreams are being realized as he writes his account of the expedition. When Cabeza de Vaca provides his testimony, "his memories of the expedition were entered into the official record, invalidating all others." Cabeza de Vaca's recorded experiences (his account of them) – to the exclusion of all others – become *the* official History; appropriately, Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* is *The Account*. Estebanico realizes suddenly, "I was once again living in a world where written records were synonymous with power" (28). This reality is especially evident when Estebanico's supposed freedom, which Dorantes promises him after ten years of journeying side by side and working together to survive, becomes contingent on a document; Dorantes assures him, "I will find a notary to draft a document declaring you a free man." Similarly, Estebanico remarks on the need to "get a contract that made legal the freedom that God had bestowed on [him] at birth" (271). Even as he acknowledges the absurdity of needing a document to make his freedom, a God-given right, legal, he is nonetheless *bound* by this reality; the text, or its absence, determines whether he remains free or not.

Viviana Plotnik's characterization of the contemporary Spanish American historical novel is pertinent to this reading of Lalami's novel and its engagement with historical events and the writing of History. Plotnik describes a shift in perspective that mirrors the rise of postmodern historiographic metafiction; unlike the 19th century historical novel, which sought to echo and

bolster historiographic narratives, the contemporary Spanish historical novel “whose topic is the discovery and conquest of the Americas distorts official history... and revises the past... indicating a mistrust of historiography” (36). Plotnik further adds that the protagonist is “frequently a member of a Spanish travel expedition who occupies a low position in the social hierarchy” (37), much like Estebanico who is a Black Arab Muslim and a slave to one of the Spaniards.

In considering History’s account of European “discovery and conquest of the Americas,” the status and nature of the written documents, reports, and eye-witness accounts that facilitate our access to this past bears attention. Goodwin (whose work Lalami cites as one of her sources) stresses this point:

At the time of Cortes’s conquest of Mexico, those documentary sources were almost all produced by Spaniards. How are we to write an accurate and balanced history of the events of that period when the Aztec Mexicans themselves left so few accounts of their own history? And it is more difficult still to write about Native American Indian history, which was an oral culture that did not produce written sources. Similarly, the history of the Africans who served the Spanish Empire is not easy to write, because the sources were written by the masters and not the slaves. But, buried beneath the surface of the historical sources there lies a fragmentary, uncertain African-American history... (7)

The fact that the master narrative is determined by Spaniards’ accounts and documents also means that this narrative is deeply colored by their perspectives and subject positions as white

Christian men, who are agents of the Spanish Crown and its colonization project.¹³ Cabeza de Vaca, the most renowned survivor of the 1527 Spanish expedition, documented his journey in a report to King Charles V that was published in 1542 as *La Relación* or *The Account*. In “A Brief History of Cabeza de Vaca and *La relación*,” Michael Hall states, “It is fitting that on this expedition, one of the most disastrous in an era of grand Spanish successes and failures, Cabeza de Vaca would also become one of the greatest explorers of all time.” Hall continues to describe the significance of Cabeza de Vaca’s travel narrative,

Cabeza de Vaca was the first Southwestern writer.... On one level, *La Relación* is a historical, anthropological document--in Texas alone Cabeza de Vaca named and located 23 Indian groups and their clothes, language, eating habits, rituals, homes, and migrations. On another level, it is literature, with an understated style and a storyteller's nerve. *La Relación* is also a forerunner of much of the land's great literature. America has been a country of frontiers, and many of our greatest national and literary heroes have been wanderers and journeyers.

While Hall describes Cabeza de Vaca as one of America’s “greatest explorers” and “national and literary heroes,” historiographic metafiction like *The Moor’s Account* question and decenter this depiction. Plotnik argues that such works function as “strategies of resistance” to “oppose discourses of power... [and] contradict the (hi)stories narrated in diaries and chronicles – supposedly their own literary origins” (43). Even as they “incorporate aspects and points of view” from these texts, they also “deconstruct them and create new versions of history” (38). When Lalami notes that “nothing is known” about Estebanico’s background “except for one line

¹³ Notably, Cabeza de Vaca’s account was at odds with the colonization project due to his empathic view and defense of the indigenous peoples.

in Cabeza de Vaca's relation," the latter becomes *the* literary origin for *The Moor's Account*.¹⁴ Lalami describes the original text in detail: how the expedition was "famously chronicled" by Cabeza de Vaca, the "excellent English translation by Fanny Bandelier, revised and annotated by Harold Augenbraum, is available from Penguin Classics under the title *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition*. That edition has the additional blessing of an introduction by Ilan Stavans." She clearly respects and appreciates the source, and appears to invite her readers to access and read it for themselves. Although she rewrites and incorporates various elements of *La Relación* – which according to Plotnik engenders "filiation" with the text, ironically, Lalami's novel also serves to decenter this report of the expedition and Cabeza de Vaca's travels, creating a new version of History. Plotnik further describes this subsequent process wherein *The Moor's Account* "questions [its] historical and literary 'origins'" and "subverts historiography" by "eliminating linearity and center" as a "symbolic parricide" (41).

Rival Storytellers

As *The Moor's Account* endeavors to decenter the master narrative, the notion that Cabeza de Vaca's travel account is unreliable is not without basis. In Goodwin's study of the Spanish expedition, he examines the accounts of both Cabeza de Vaca and Andres Dorantes, the latter of which served as the basis for the royal historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y

¹⁴ Robert Goodwin identifies "three main sources for Esteban's biography, all written by Europeans who were his companions during his adventures." These include: *The General and Natural History of the Indies* by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, who was the Spanish royal historian and compiled a History of the Narváez expedition based on the testimony of Andres Dorantes; *Naufragios (Shipwrecks)* by Álgar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca; and *Report* by Marcos de Niza, who led the expedition, along with Estebanico, to the Seven Cities of Cibola in 1539 (Goodwin 375).

Valdés's official History of the expedition, *The General and Natural History of the Indies*. As Goodwin highlights various discrepancies between the two accounts, he concludes that both narrators were "unreliable, especially when it came to the way they reported themselves and their own actions" (169). Both men appear to have political motives; Dorantes presents himself as the hero of his story just as Cabeza de Vaca is the hero in his.

Goodwin declares, "if each of these noble Spaniards could claim for himself the credit that was claimed by the other, then there is really no evidence at all that the credit was not in fact due to Esteban or Castillo" (169). Digging beneath the surface of these accounts and analyzing both, Goodwin arrives at the realization that "whenever anything important happened, Esteban was there. His presence often went unremarked in the accounts, but it could be deduced from other references.... Esteban quickly became an ever-present protagonist, concealed in the silence beneath the noisy words of the Spaniards" (152). Furthermore, he was "always the ambassador, a spy and a scout, the advance guard, the diplomat who dealt with the Indians while the Spaniards were mostly silent" (21). Cabeza de Vaca's own account asserts that it was Estebanico who communicated and negotiated with the Indians:

The black man [Estebanico] always spoke to them, ascertaining which way to go and what villages we would find and all the other things we wanted to know. We encountered a great number and variety of languages; God Our Lord favored us in all these cases, because we were able to communicate always. (89)

While Estebanico served as mediator and translator, the Spaniards rarely spoke with the Indians, purportedly to maintain an image of "authority and dignity among them" (Cabeza de Vaca 89). Based on his critical role, "Esteban may have been the leader of this group of wanderers, or at

least that he played the pivotal role in their survival,” according to Goodwin (170). He argues that this is perfectly plausible because of the four survivors, Estebanico possessed “the greatest breadth and depth of experience amongst different societies and religions... had traveled most widely and known the widest variety of men... was best prepared mentally to adapt to the ways of an alien culture... had already survived great cruelties and privations” (170).

Lalami appears to echo Goodwin’s depiction of Estebanico as an invaluable and indispensable resource for the group of explorers. Early in the novel, she highlights his facility for languages, “My upbringing in a trading town like Azemmur had instilled in me a love of language and... a certain ease with it” (11-12). When Castillo and Estebanico are reunited with Dorantes, the latter justifies the fact that he had abandoned them with the Indians by saying, “I left you with Estebanico, who speaks their language and understands their mores. I knew he would find a way out of their camp” (210). Later, even Hernan Cortes, “the peerless and popular hero of the conquest” (283), offers to help Dorantes with the expenses of his trip back to Seville in exchange for his slave. He remarks, “I hear that your slave is familiar with all the routes to the north, and fluent in the local languages” (291); Cortes clearly recognizes Estebanico’s contributions and the value he would bring to his planned expedition.

As Lalami shifts the historical narrative’s focus to Estebanico, the latter’s subject position is representative of historiographic metafiction’s protagonists, whom Hutcheon describes as “the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (114). Similarly, Plotnik observes that as the “traditionally hegemonic historical agent – a European and powerful Christian male – is decentered,” the contemporary Spanish American novel is defined by a “decentered perspective and a predominance of marginality” (37). Similarly, in *The Moor’s Account*, the African Muslim slave -- whose presence has been marginalized in historical

accounts – becomes the narrator and protagonist. Nonetheless, he continues to occupy a marginal position in society. Soon after arriving in Florida, he bemoans the fact that he is caught in a battle between the Spaniards and Indians, “O Lord, I thought, what am I doing here in this strange land, in the middle of a battle between two foreign peoples?” (23). Later, he describes his perpetual lack of belonging: “As for me, an interloper among the Castilians, I had shared their fate. Now, years later, I was no longer a slave, but my freedom had come at the price of being an interloper among the Indians. Give glory to God, who can alter all fates” (223-224).

Estebanico’s position as it relates to slavery changes drastically throughout the novel: before he sells himself into slavery, he partakes in the slave trade as a merchant; the master-slave relationship between Dorantes and himself fluctuates over the course of their journey depending on their situation; he and his fellow survivors are enslaved by an Indian tribe, making them more or less equal; he enjoys freedom and respect as a healer among Indians; his status as a slave is reimposed when they reach the city of Tenochtitlan, where Dorantes ultimately reneges on his promise to free him and instead sells him to the viceroy of New Spain. First among the Castilians and then among the Indians, Estebanico remains an interloper despite the experiences he has shared with both peoples throughout years of travel. Estebanico’s marginal position creates a blurring of identities – Black, Spanish, Indian, Muslim – and facilitates a fluidity that allows him to move between various peoples, languages, and cultures. His story illustrates a History of America that is deeply intersectional.

The Moor’s Account highlights Estebanico’s role where it was previously obscured, giving him a voice that had been silenced. Importantly, Lalami situates *The Moor’s Account* as a

counter to Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*.¹⁵ Even the title takes the original, translated as *The Account*, and replaces it with *The Moor's Account*. The shift from one to the other echoes the notion that there can be no *pure* account of the past; any account, History in general, has been constructed, manipulated, and interpreted and is necessarily a product of its context and the agents who have contributed to it. The interjection of *The Moor's Account* as a new version of History decenters *La Relación's* position as the primary version. In fact, the text of the new title physically positions the word "Moor"¹⁶ as the new center, denoting Estebanico's preeminent position in Lalami's narrative; previously rendered silent and invisible, he now occupies the center and has laid claim to his story and history.

In the preface to his narrative, Estebanico articulates his objective:

I intend to correct details of the history that was compiled by my companions, the three Castilian gentlemen known by the names of Andres Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and especially Álar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who delivered their testimony, what they called the Joint Report, to the Audiencia of Santo Domingo. The first was my legal master, the second my fellow captive, and the third my rival storyteller.

(3)

¹⁵ A separate study may be dedicated to a more detailed comparison between Estebanico's (fictional) account in Lalami's *The Moor's Account* and Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*. A more thorough examination of *what* Lalami has chosen to take from the original text and *how* she has incorporated it – either by reifying or negating it – would offer additional nuance to this discussion.

¹⁶ According to Ghaneabassiri, the term "Moor" "originally denoted Muslims of Arab and Berber background in Northwest Africa (modern day Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania) who conquered Spain in the eighth century. They were generally supposed to have dark or black skin even though 'white Moors' were also recognized" (25)

Although it was compiled by all three Castilian survivors, the History that Estebanico intends to correct is attributed primarily to Cabeza de Vaca as he was the one to deliver the Joint Report. Notably, Estebanico goes on to describe each man in terms of the latter's relationship to *him* (i.e. the center); Cabeza de Vaca is identified immediately as Estebanico's "rival storyteller." At one point, the two men are reunited and exchange stories of their recent adventures. Estebanico expresses his appreciation for the Spaniard's skill: "Here was a man, I felt, who knew how to tell stories and how to listen to them, who appreciated their purpose and their value. A kindred spirit, a fellow storyteller" (217). In addition to describing what it takes to be a good storyteller, Estebanico describes Cabeza de Vaca and himself as equals who share a common understanding and valuing of a story. This awareness of a "fellow storyteller" appears to be reciprocated; according to Estebanico, "Whenever I told stories around the campfire, I sensed that Cabeza de Vaca was anxious to rival them with his own, for he was a gifted storyteller" (224). When both men share stories with the cacique (chieftain) Tahacha about the Native tribes they lived with during their journey, "the tales of [their] travels delighted Tahacha," earning them blankets as gifts. This moment offers validation to their skills, marking them *both* as worthy storytellers.

When his three Castilian companions are called upon to testify and describe their travels, Estebanico is very much aware that "unlike them, [he] was never called upon to testify to the Spanish Viceroy about [their] journey among the Indians" (3). He comes to resent the privileging of their accounts, not least because they present a modified version of events. Towards the end of the narrative, Father Marco recalls, "The friars of the Narváez expedition had already been martyred by the time Cabeza de Vaca journeyed here." Estebanico takes exception to the fact that the expedition is constantly associated with the Spaniard whose account has made such a lasting and definitive impression: "Always Cabeza de Vaca, I thought, with not a little bitterness.

That man's sterile account of our travels would always be considered the truth – no matter what had happened" (313). He describes feeling "a small rebellion bubble within [him]" that provokes him into deliberately countering Cabeza de Vaca's story by noting, "Not all of the friars died.... One of them settled with the Indians." Surprised, Father Onorato asks, "Is that true?" and he responds in the affirmative, breaking his silence to articulate and claim an alternate truth.

Estebanico remarks upon the factors that influence others' stories. For instance, the bishop Juan de Zumarraga, "Protector of the Indians," manipulates and repurposes the four survivors' story to fit his own mission to peacefully convert the Indians to Christianity without the use of force (275). Estebanico also describes how Cabeza de Vaca's story changes depending on whether his audience is Indian or Spanish. Unlike the tale previously shared with their Indian hosts, in the account he tells to Alcaraz, a fellow Spaniard, "he was no longer a conqueror who had fallen for lies about a kingdom of gold; instead he was the second-in-command of a fierce but unlucky expedition." Significantly, in this version, "He had not depended on his companions for his survival; now he cast himself as our leader" (250). Estebanico reasons that Cabeza de Vaca altered his story because he was appealing to an audience of Castilian soldiers and because as the one telling the tale, "he wanted to be its hero." Estebanico clearly finds the depiction of Cabeza de Vaca as leader and hero of the group to be blatantly untrue.

Although he describes his companions as "men of good character," Estebanico notes that "under the pressure of the Bishop, the Viceroy, and the Marquis of the Valley, and in accordance with the standards set by their positions, they were led to omit certain events while exaggerating others, and to suppress some details while inventing others" (3). The History they provide in their testimony is a "shortened and sanitized version," without its "more damaging details":

They credited Narváez with all the poor decisions, they omitted the torture and rapes they had witnessed, they justified the thefts of food and supplies, they left out the Indian wives they married, and they magnified their suffering at the hands of the Indians as much as their relief at being found. In this shortened and sanitized form, the chronicle of the Narváez expedition became suitable for the royal court, the cardinals and inquisitors, the governors and officials, and the families and friends they had left behind in Castile. (286)

Estebanico's narrative, on the other hand, does not shy away from acknowledging the crimes they witnessed and in which they were complicit – through their silence if nothing else. He also readily shares the nature of their experiences – the good and the bad – as well as their relationships with the various native tribes. Unlike his companions, Estebanico “feel[s] free to recount the true story of what happened” as he is “neither beholden to Castilian men of power, nor bound by the rules of a society to which [he] do[es] not belong” (3).

Despite Estebanico's claims that his version of History is “the true story,” that it has not been shortened or sanitized for the sake of political favor, financial gain, and/or society and the readers' sensibilities and good opinion, he himself prompts us to question his narrative. This is partly due to the nature of this text as historiographic metafiction that consistently calls into question others' stories and the historiographic process that has shaped the established narrative. The reader is reminded that *this* text has also been manipulated by its author and that he is just as fallible. On a basic level, like any historian or storyteller, he has *chosen* and given meaning to specific experiences and events crafting a narrative with a purpose, even if the purpose is primarily to reveal the lies of Spanish companions; whatever the reason may be, he too has inevitably omitted various things from his account. Importantly, he is also driven by his unique circumstances and motives. Estebanico remarks, “What each of us wants, in the end... is to be

remembered after his death. I am no different.” He expresses the hope that one day his “countrymen will hear about [his] wondrous adventures” (4). He reiterates this point in his concluding chapter as he appears to dedicate his story to his unborn child¹⁷ – “that he might remember me” (320). How does Estebanico’s concern with being remembered, by his people -- his child and countrymen, further impact the story he tells?

Upon arriving at the town of Hawikuh, Estebanico advises Akhu, the cacique of the Zunis, that “his only means of salvation was to create a fiction” (319). This is precisely what Estebanico does. While historical records offer a vague account of Estebanico’s death at the hand of the Zunis, Lalami offers an alternate ending where he manipulates those around him to believe that he was indeed killed by the Indians in order to finally gain his freedom. Although well-intentioned and he does liberate himself from the bonds of slavery, Estebanico demonstrates that he is not averse to “creat[ing] a fiction” for the right reasons, prompting the reader to question the veracity of the purportedly true account he has related. He further justifies this when he reflects, “The only thing at once more precious and more fragile than a true story is a free life” (287). In Lalami’s account of History, Estebanico undoubtedly manipulates the truth, but in the process, he lives to tell his story as a liberated man.

African Muslim Slave Narratives: Faith, Literacy, and Resistance

As *The Moor’s Account* decenters the master narrative of History and commits “symbolic parricide” (Plotnik) by questioning and subverting its textual origins, it creates

¹⁷ Incidentally, Lalami similarly dedicates *The Moor’s Account* to her daughter, reminding the reader of the multilayered textuality of the text and her own intention and motives as author as she writes this historical novel.

filiation with other historical texts. More specifically, it incorporates elements of African Muslim slave narratives and aligns itself with a *Muslim* literary tradition. While the number of enslaved Muslims in America remains unknown, with estimates ranging between five and thirty percent of all slaves, Diouf remarks that what we can be certain of is that “there were hundreds of thousands of Muslims in the Americas” (70). Various accounts, by the slaves themselves and by others, offer us glimpses of their lives and histories as well as the cultures and traditions they carried with them across the Atlantic. In many ways, *The Moor’s Account* fills in the gaps for the few slave writings we have and the many we do not for the thousands of Muslim slaves we know were brought to the Americas. Lalami’s fictional memoir imagines the struggles, reactions, and sentiments of these individuals as it mirrors various aspects and tropes of the earlier, non-fictional slave writings. In particular, it calls forth themes of literacy and faith that are deployed as tools of resistance in the writings of enslaved Muslims. Finally, Lalami highlights a powerful impetus behind the slave-writing genre that is the need to reaffirm one’s history and culture, and to pass on your story so that it may be remembered. In writing Estebanico’s account of the Spanish expedition, we find not only a subversion of historiography, but also the interjection of a new beginning – a Muslim American beginning.

The genre of Muslim slave narratives serves to complicate and challenge the discourse of American cultural history as Ronald Judy, a scholar of critical and cultural studies, argues in *DisForming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. Judy’s text builds upon the 1977 Yale seminar on African American literary theory, which argued that “Afro-American canon formation opens up a moment in the contentious debate over American cultural history in which it becomes possible to think culture differently, if at all” (1). In his work, Judy extends this argument by examining the critical function of African-Arabic slave

narratives as they “(dis)form” the American canon and necessitate an understanding of “culture and cultural production as something other than either the sum total of Western thought about being, or the residual effects of an abstract ‘History of Thought’” (30). He argues that the textual indeterminacy of these texts offers sites of resistance and more effective means – than slave narratives written in European languages – of “emancipation through writing” (21). Their foreign language – and in particular the heterography that characterizes *Ben Ali’s Diary* – defies signification as per Western conceptions of modernity, and displaces “Reason and Understanding, civility and humanity (which were held to be constitutive of culture)” as exclusively characteristic of Western thought and civilization (161). Judy asserts,

The Negro who was literate in Arabic, however, flew in the face of the received conception of the Negro of Africa as a subhuman brute, or subspecies of human, and laid claim to a degree of culture thought to be the privileged property of modern Europe. (161)

Lalami recreates this sentiment in a scene where Estebanico communicates with one of the Indian guides. He recounts the Castilians’ bewilderment,

When I replied in his [Indian] language, the Castilian soldiers regarded me with the same look of wonder I had seen on their countrymen’s faces eight years earlier, whenever they encountered the strange creatures of the new world. Nothing in their gaze suggested that I was a man like them rather than some exotic beast or other. It was only decorum that prevented them from reaching out to touch me, to see if I was real. (250)

The Castilian soldiers perceive him only as “el negro,” a label that precludes him from being able to behave in a civilized manner; he is more an “exotic beast” than “a man like them.” His

ability to communicate in a foreign language, that they do not comprehend, gives him “claim to a degree of culture” that is incompatible with their conception of the African Negro as a “subhuman brute” or “subspecies of human,” as Judy describes. The notion of an educated, civilized “negro” is surreal to them. Soon after, when the governor Guzman attempts to extract from Estebanico detailed information about the land they have traveled, the latter claims ignorance while playing upon this preconception: “I am merely a slave. Whoever heard of a slave who can read or write, much less draw maps?” (270).

Lalami’s English-speaking audience is also subjected to moments of foreignness and even exclusion. The *Arabic* account that Estebanico narrates is actually written by Lalami in English, but the interspersions of Arabic words (e.g. *Ayah*, *msid*, *Jahannam*, *fqih*) that have been transliterated but not translated, in addition to a number of Islamic references serve as a reminder that the speaker is Arab and Muslim. He maintains control of the text and occasionally exercises the power to make the narrative via its language accessible only to certain readers.

In his examination of the novel, Abdellah Elboubekri affirms, “Inscribing difference on the body of grand narratives for the sake of struggling against exclusion and oblivion is central in *The Moor’s Account*.” This “difference” serves to “undermine the purported singularity of narration and purity of knowledge as well as unitary thought as claimed by Western history” (234). Estebanico offers a voice of resistance, one that rejects being relegated to the margins of History and instead calls for – even necessitates – inclusion. Elboubekri further notes that an immediate example of this inscribed difference is in the narrator’s use of the Muslim Hijri calendar as he refers to years and dates that mark their journey; “from the very onset, the writer accents the existence of another different subjectivity, apparently non-European slave, using a different historical prism to approach the story of today’s US” (234). The first chapter begins, “It

was the year 934 of the Hegira, the thirtieth year of my life, the fifth year of my bondage – and I was at the edge of the known world” (5). He situates himself, geographically, “at the edge of the known world,” having just disembarked from their ship onto the shores of La Florida after a long journey across what he refers to as the Ocean of Fog and Darkness. Their journey into the New World, a great unknown – with unfamiliar land, peoples, languages, and customs – was just beginning. Similarly, this narrative marks a journey into the unknown, or at the very least overlooked, recesses of History. Even our reference to time and history is upended when the less familiar Muslim Hijri calendar is used in lieu of the Western Gregorian calendar. Every time Estebanico refers to the Hijri calendar, he disorients the prism of Western History. By asserting his difference as a non-European, Arab, African, and Black Muslim who has been enslaved, Estebanico also exerts a measure of power and control over his narrative and the historical events he recounts.

Similarly, early African Muslim slave narratives utilize literacy to affirm their Muslim faith and to challenge Western historiography as well as the genre of slave writing and the very institution of slavery. Penned by his own hand in 1831, Omar Ibn Said’s *The Life of Omar Ibn Said* provides us with the only extant autobiography written in Arabic by an enslaved African in the United States. Born and educated in a region called Futa Toro, Omar was an Islamic scholar in West Africa before he was captured and sent to Charleston, South Carolina in 1807. After two years, he escaped harsh conditions only to be recaptured and imprisoned in Fayetteville, North Carolina where he filled his jail cell with Arabic writings that drew the attention of locals and in particular that of his future owner, James Owen. Although Omar’s literacy in Arabic earned him a certain level of fame and respect, he would remain a slave until the time of his death in 1863. Although his contemporaries were under the impression that he had converted to Christianity,

modern-day scholars including Ala Alryyes, who translated Omar's *Life*, use the intricacies of this text to argue that Omar did *not* abandon his Islamic beliefs. Alryyes states:

Omar's *Life* is replete with concealed utterances that not only hide his views from potentially dangerous readers, but also test the readers, sifting them into those who can interpret the utterances and are, therefore, within Omar's circle – his community – and those who cannot decipher them, and are outside it. (17-18)

In particular, Omar's Arabic literacy and use of the Quran defines Omar's "circle" and "community" as one that lies outside of his English-speaking and Christian surroundings. The "concealed utterances," even if they are in Arabic, illustrate the complex textual indeterminacy that Judy observes in African-Arabic slave narratives. Echoing Judy's argument above, Sylviane A. Diouf, author of *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, affirms, "This literacy enabled the creation of written sources by the Africans themselves... writing primarily for their own" as opposed to a Western audience (7). Estebanico's writing in Arabic, so that his countrymen and children may read about his adventures and remember him, mirrors the practice of Africans writing "for their own."

The Life of Omar Ibn Said begins with a *sura* or chapter from the Quran, *al-Mulk*, which literally means power and ownership. According to Alryyes, this *sura* and its title offer the "perfect allusion to slavery." Moreover, "The *sura* contends that it is God who is the owner of all and everything; through his choice of Surat al-Mulk, Omar seems to refute the right of his owners over him, since only God has the *mulk*, the power and the ownership" (18). Thus, Omar frames his writing, the story of his life and capture, with a rejection of the very notion that one human can possibly own another. Although slavery was an accepted aspect of early Arabian and

African societies, according to scholar of African History Nathaniel Mathews, Islamic law (based on the Quran and Sunnah) instilled a system of protections and encouraged manumission; it did not condone the abuse of slaves nor their treatment as subhuman.^{18 19 20}

Omar's recording of verses from the Quran is also significant in that it highlights his religious and cultural backgrounds, where literacy and Islam are intertwined. Diouf notes that the spread of Islam in West Africa also brought about the spread of literacy, and the Arabic language in particular. She describes the significance of Arabic as a means of understanding the Quran; "believers rely on the Qur'an not only to understand the religion but also to guide them in their daily life, to provide them with the right prayers for different circumstances, and to instruct them

¹⁸ Scholar and professor of African History Nathaniel Mathews examines the issue of slavery in Islam. Although Islam did not formally abolish slavery and accepted it as an aspect of Arabian society, he notes that "there is no evidence the tradition actively encouraged the taking of slaves." Instead, he argues that the "'trajectory' of Islamic interpretation based on the Qur'an and Sunnah... is a trajectory of manumission, not abolition." If manumission occurred regularly, slavery would "eventually die out." Additionally,

The Prophet Muhammad challenged the practice of slavery in Arabian society by compelling the powerful to care for and protect the less powerful. If masters and slaves could share some basic moral assumptions, powerful masters would feel a social obligation to protect and show kindness to their slaves. In Islam this is exemplified by a hadith enjoining the believer to treat their slaves as they would treat their own children. Slaves in Islam would (ideally) function more like kin and less like a separate caste of sub-humans.

Mathews adds that slavery was historically "a fact of life," and "many powerful non-Muslim African societies depended on slavery for their wealth." He concludes, "The Prophet Muhammad's attempt to protect the enslaved and to grant them protections and rights, without abolishing slavery, was not a moral failing, but the advancement to the limits of what it was possible to envision within his era."

¹⁹ Sherman Jackson complicates the understanding of slavery in Muslim history, describing a "tendency on the part of Blackamericans to assume American slavery to be the norm that all other systems of slavery followed." He argues that it is necessary to distinguish "between slavery in a capitalist society and slavery in a noncapitalist order, slavery that was race based and slavery that was race neutral, or slavery that drew slaves under the full orbit of law and slavery that denied slaves any legal rights." Jackson maintains that failing to make these distinctions "obscures the fact (in [his] view at least) that it was not slavery but white supremacy that was—and remains—the author of black subjugation in America" (215).

²⁰ See Bernard K. Freamon's *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (2019), Jonathan A. C. Brown's *Slavery & Islam* (2019), and Rudolph T. Ware's chapters on slavery in Islamic Africa for more thorough discussions of slavery in Islam and in Muslim societies.

on legal matters and proper social behavior” (23). While the extent to which Muslims rely on the Quran and incorporate it into their daily lives and religious practices may vary depending on individual levels of religious observance, the Quran nonetheless holds an important role in Muslim society and culture.

Omar’s use of the Quran to frame his autobiography is symbolic of the persistent centrality of his Muslim faith to his identity, however hidden its expression may be under the circumstances of his enslavement. Not only does this chapter of *al-Mulk* assert that only God can hold ownership of him, but its inclusion also constitutes an affirmation of Omar’s faith. The first verse states, “Blessed be He in whose hand is the *mulk* and who has power over all things” (51), which serves as a reminder – to both the author and his reader – that Omar’s fate lies in God’s hands, and that the matter of his freedom and enslavement is in His control alone. Diouf writes, “in the Islamic World, ... every human has to submit to his or her fate. Enslavement was recognized as the fate of the Africans who were deported” (185). While he might resist the institution that enslaved him, he also submits to God’s will. The chapter continues to describe life as a test of faith and that those who choose to believe or disbelieve will be rewarded or punished accordingly. The question of Omar’s false conversion and inner state of Islamic belief may also be referenced in his writing of the verse, “Whether you speak in secret or aloud, He knows your innermost thoughts” (53). Diouf remarks that Europeans justified their enslavement of Africans with the argument that they were “civilizing” them by “introducing them to the one true faith” of Christianity (31); enslaved Africans like Omar ibn Said “benefited from their apparent willingness to conform to their owners’ religion, and they were treated with leniency” (165). The verse above is reflective of the *Life*’s subversion, what is explicitly stated in the text (e.g. his purported conversion to Christianity) and the meanings that lie between the lines.

In *The Moor's Account*, Estebanico invokes similar sentiments of belonging to God alone every time he refers to himself as “this servant of God.” The frequent interjection is a reminder to his audience and to himself; when describing the miseries they suffered and the difficulties they survived during their journey, his faith in God is also a source of strength and comfort. The reminder that his true master is God is also expressed when he recounts the things he must do as a slave: Dorantes’s “traveling bag, which this servant of God had to carry on his back” (38) and “the slaves, including this servant of God, Mustafa ibn Muhammad, refilled them [the officers’ glasses] with wine.... I served the forbidden drink” (15). These moments illustrate his position of forced servitude as well as the guilt of having to take part in serving the wine, an act that his faith forbids. In another scene, their group hears the cries of Indian women being raped by Spanish soldiers in their traveling party; Estebanico’s master Dorantes instructs him to “close the door” and essentially ignore what they all knew was happening. Recalling the “powerless rage” he felt when he witnessed his friend Ramatullai being raped by their master in Seville, he states, “Here, halfway across the world, this servant of God was just as alone, just as helpless” (94). Alone and devoid of any power, he appears to view – or at least depict – himself as the sole believer surrounded by those who would commit vile injustices against other humans in their pursuit of greed and power. His enslavement means that he cannot act on his principles; rather, he is forced to live the contradiction between his faith and morals and his circumstances.

The restorative and spiritual power of faith and language, particularly via the text of the Quran, is highlighted when Estebanico describes the fear he and his fellow survivors lived in as their numbers were dwindling due to fever, attacks, and hunger. He describes, “Sometimes, I thought of letting go. Sitting under the shade of a poplar tree as the company took its midday break, I wondered what would happen to me if I was infected with the fever and perished in this

land.” In this moment of desperation, hopelessness, and loneliness, he recites a verse from the Quran and traces it in the sand:

I whispered Ayat al-Kursi to myself, over and over, the way I had as a child, whenever I had been scared or troubled or worried, hoping it would grant me the same measure of peace it had back then. With the stick in my hand, I wrote the verse on the ground before me, each word, each stroke taking me back further to my days at the msid in Azemmur, to those days when my life was still my own. (123)

The “msid” is a Moroccan word for a school where children are taught Quran and Arabic. Sand-writing is a traditional African teaching practice used with children and the first step in preserving one’s literacy (Diouf 164). It is significant that Estebanico is writing “Ayat al-Kursi,” which was described by Prophet Muhammad as the greatest verse in the Quran (“Tafsir”).²¹ According to Quranic interpretations, “Kursi” refers to the throne of God, signifying His kingdom that encompasses the heavens and the earth. Similar to *sura al-Mulk* which was referenced by Omar ibn Said, this verse is a reminder to Estebanico of God’s absolute ownership. According to the Zimbabwean Muslim scholar Mufti Menk, the verse “mentions the greatness of Allah; the fact that He is in absolute control; He is the Protector; He is the one who protects every single one; He has knowledge of absolutely everything.” As it invokes the idea

²¹ Ayat al-Kursi is verse 255 in the second chapter of the Quran, *sura al-Baqarah*. The verse is translated as follows:

Allah! There is no deity except Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. Unto Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedes with Him except by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge except what He will. His throne includes the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous. (“Tafsir”)

that God is the Protector of all things, Mufti Menk states that it is recommended to read this verse for protection from any number of things that would cause harm to mankind.

In this moment, the Quran serves as a source of peace, comfort, and even protection for Estebanico; importantly, reciting this verse also takes him back to his days of freedom before slavery, a time “when [his] life was still [his] own.” As Diouf asserts, “Faith meant hope, moral comfort, and mental escape. It was also a link to the past, to a time when they were free, respected, and, for some, engaged in intellectual pursuits, not menial labor” (86). Partly because it offered such a means of strength and self-preservation, Diouf remarks that African Muslim slaves “remained attached to their faith, and their enslavement was itself a good reason to be even more devout” (86).

This powerful moment where Estebanico writes the verse in the ground mirrors an identical habit undertaken by Abdulrahman Ibrahima ibn Sori (1762-1829), a prince from West Africa who was enslaved for 40 years before he eventually gained his freedom in a series of events that revolved around his literacy. In his biography *Prince Among Slaves*, Terry Alford writes:

Ibrahima had no access to pen and paper. He had no Qur'an. Years became decades, and he did not see a single Islamic text or piece of Arabic writing. To retain his own literacy, he took to tracing Arabic characters in the sand when Thomas would call a rest during work. (57)

The lack of “access to pen and paper,” basic tools of literacy, as well as a Quran or any Islamic text is a sharp loss to Ibrahima, who was an educated and cultured man. In a merging of the historical and the fictional, Estebanico helps us to arrive at a deeper, more tangible understanding

of the experience of enslaved African Muslims. Beyond preserving their literacy, Ibrahima, Omar, and Estebanico were all engaged in a preservation of their memories, their faith, and their spiritual and mental strength, empowering them to survive the trials of their enslavement.

Following *sura al-Mulk* and a brief note about how he has forgotten much of his ability to write (echoing Ibrahima's concern above with the neglect to his literacy as a consequence of his enslavement), Omar begins the account of his life with the *basmala*: "In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful" (61).²² The *basmala* is frequently said by Muslims to preface their speech, daily acts (e.g. eating and drinking), and acts of worship – particularly recitation of the Quran; the purpose is to imbue these acts with God's blessing and support. In an essay on the subject, writer Talal Mish'al notes that the one giving the sermon on the mosque pulpit begins with the *basmala*, asking God to guide him towards saying the truth and to help convey his message to his audience. Furthermore, a prophetic Hadith states that any matter (of significance) that does not begin with the *basmala* is '*abtar*' or incomplete (Mish'al). Notably, the word '*abtar*' is literally used in reference to something that has been cut off, such as a person without offspring ("'*abtar*'"). The absence of *basmala* renders an act incomplete precisely because it has been cut off from God's blessings.

Ronald Judy elaborates on the symbolic significance of the *basmala*, offering a literary interpretation of how the invocation is used in Muslim slave narratives:

The *basmala* recalls the displacement of pre-Islamic traditions by the Qur'an... [it] marks the passage of difference between what was obscured before the line of *basmala*, and what is revealed to be in the line... The *basmala* as the epigraph of all texts, is the reading

²² The term '*basmala*' is an abbreviation of the Arabic invocation *Bismillahi al-Rahman al-Raheem*.

of the texts of Islam by The Text of Islam. Hence, the Qur'an is The Text of Islam, which prescribes that all texts of Islam are readings of it. By beginning with the *basmala*, the Ben Ali manuscript places itself in a long line with those other Islamic texts that are readings of the "First Text." (262-3)

According to Judy's interpretation, Omar's use of the *basmala* situates his autobiography within a long and rich tradition of Islamic scholarship that can only be read and understood via the primary text of Islam, namely the Quran (again, the primacy of the Quran as articulated by *sura al-Mulk* is reaffirmed). The *basmala* is thus an invocation of God's blessings and support, the spiritual guidance and comfort of the Quran, and the Islamic literary tradition as well as the community that is represented by authors of this vast tradition. Just as it "marks the passage of difference" before and after Quranic revelation, i.e. Islam, the *basmala* also serves as an inscription of difference between the texts that align themselves within this tradition, like Ben Ali and Omar's writings, and all other texts. It resists the displacement and precarious situation of enslavement by rooting Omar – via his text – within an Islamic community that spans people and places across the world as well as centuries, extending back to the first Quranic revelation during the Prophetic period.²³ For Omar, who described himself as an educated and well-respected Islamic scholar in West Africa, this is particularly significant as it reasserts critical links to his past, his homeland, his scholarly upbringing, and his religious and cultural origins.

These links to literacy, education, and Islam are explicitly stated in Omar's opening lines:

²³ Mish'al notes that the first documentation of the *basmala* is attributed to Prophet Solomon (see *sura al-Naml*, 27:30).

My name is Omar Ibn Said; my birthplace is Fut Tur, between the two rivers [or seas]. I sought knowledge in Bundu and Futa with a Sheikh called Mohammed Said, my brother, and Sheikh Suleiman Kimba, and Sheikh Jebril [i.e., Gabriel] Abdal. I continued seeking knowledge for twenty-five years, [then] I came to my place [and stayed] for six years. [Then there] came to our country a big army. It killed many people. It took me, and walked me to the big Sea, and sold me into the hand of a Christian man... (61)

Immediately after informing his readers of his name and birthplace, Omar continues to identify himself by detailing his educational journey. Although a Western audience would not be familiar with the names of his teachers, he makes it a point to mention their full names; this suggests that he might be addressing a West African and/or Muslim audience that *is* familiar with them. It also demonstrates the extent of his knowledge, having studied at the hands of three distinct scholars, and for twenty-five years. Diouf notes that this focus on literacy and education is characteristic of Muslim slave narratives; it served to establish from the beginning of the text that “they were brought up as Muslims and had studied for a long time, that they were men of faith and accomplishments, who had not always been mere beasts of burden but intellectuals who had suffered a terrible reversal of fortune” (206).

In the quoted lines above, Omar describes his capture: “[a big army] took me... and sold me into the hand of a Christian man.” Throughout his text, Omar makes repeated reference to his “Christian” owners and their “Christian language”; he states, “And in a Christian language, they sold me” (63). Indirectly, this statement reiterates the connection between language and religion, and specifically his experience of Arabic as a language that defined his Muslim faith. Furthermore, this statement underlines the religious terms in which he perceived his capture; he had been enslaved by Christians, as opposed to foreigners or Westerners for instance. Diouf

argues that Islam created added incentive for Muslim slaves to seek freedom as they sought to escape their Christian captors and practice their religion freely (249). What *The Life of Omar Ibn Said* establishes is that while he would remain enslaved physically, both spiritually and mentally, he was free of his captors' shackles.

The Story of a Name: Servant of God vs Empire

Even as Lalami positions Estebanico as a 16th century Arabic speaking slave from Azemmur, in many ways, *The Moor's Account* emulates the narratives of enslaved African Muslims who asserted their religious identity and challenged Western authority and institutions. The imagined memoir begins:

In the name of God, most compassionate, most merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds, and prayers and blessings be on our prophet Muhammad and upon all his progeny and companions. This book is the humble work of Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori, being a true account of his life and travels from the city of Azemmur to the Land of the Indians, where he arrived as a slave and, in his attempt to return to freedom, was shipwrecked and lost for many years. (3)

As with Omar ibn Said and Ben Ali's texts, Estebanico begins with the *basmala*; his text is necessarily located within the genre of Muslim slave writings and within the Islamic tradition more broadly. In this introductory statement, he outlines the purpose of his account and identifies himself as its true author. In doing so, he claims ownership of the text and agency in writing it. After representing himself as a Muslim via the *basmala* and his praising of Prophet Muhammad, he introduces himself, his lineage as the son of Muhammad son of Abdussalam, and his

homeland of Azemmur (al-Zamori). Thus, he establishes his roots within a religious and spiritual tradition, a family history, and a geographical and cultural homeland. Whereas Omar ibn Said outlines his education and background in Islamic knowledge in his opening lines, Estebanico will go on to describe the Islamic education he received as a child – albeit reluctantly, at the behest of his father, as well as his subsequent career in trade.

Estebanico's full name is repeated throughout the text as an affirmation of his being. As noted above, he frequently describes himself as "This servant of God, Mustafa ibn Muhammad" (6), reminding his readers and himself – much as Omar Ibn Said does in his text – that despite his physical enslavement, his servitude is to God alone. When he sells himself into slavery in order to save his family from impoverishment, the clerk requests his name: "Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori, I replied, naming myself, my father, my grandfather, and my native town. With deliberately slow movements, the clerk opened his register and dipped his feather into black ink. Mustafa. Fifteen reais." Thus, he describes the mundanity and ruthless ease of his erasure: for fifteen reais,²⁴ this contract "traded what should never be traded. It delivered me into the unknown and erased my father's name. I could not know that this was just the first of many erasures" (82). In erasing the name of his father, grandfather, and hometown, this moment strips him of both family and roots. In a moment of hopelessness and desperation, he facilitates his own enslavement, and as he delivers himself "into the unknown," a fate of uncertainty, he too becomes "unknown."

Later, a slave merchant leads him along with other slaves into a cathedral, where he feels "small and helpless." A priest "spoke in an ancient tongue [he] did not understand," before

²⁴ Reais or reals is the plural of real, the currency used in various Spanish-speaking countries.

proceeding to make the symbol of the cross in front of every man and woman in the shackled group. Only later does Estebanico understand the significance of the proceedings: “I had entered the church as the servant of God Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori; I left it as Esteban. Just Esteban – converted and orphaned in one gesture” (109). In this moment of involuntary conversion, the switch from Mustafa to Esteban leaves absolutely no trace of the man himself. The erasure of his name signifies the erasure of his cultural history and his religious identity; elsewhere he reflects on the value of a name and what is lost with the name given to him by his parents, “A name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world. Losing it meant losing my ties to all those things too” (7). He later looks back at this precise moment – when his agency is entirely removed, unlike when he voluntarily sold himself – as *the* defining point in his enslavement: “Back then, the priest had made the sign of the cross upon me and swiftly dispatched me into a life of bondage” (274). Significantly, Mustafa is “converted and orphaned” simultaneously; as the two acts are intertwined, the Church assumes a prominent role not only in his conversion, but in his “bondage” and subsequent erasure – much as it does in Omar ibn Said’s autobiography. Estebanico’s writing becomes an attempt to restore and reaffirm what has been forcibly taken and erased – his voice, identity, and (hi)story. His account also effectively centers his “language” (Arabic) as well as his “particular way of looking at the world,” which is shaped by his culture and faith as well as his upbringing and past experiences.

The story of Estebanico’s name undergoes further erasure when he is sold yet again to Dorantes, whom he accompanies to America. He describes how Dorantes proceeds to “record his slave” (147) and registers him “under the name he used with [him] ever since.” Once again, his name is carelessly dismissed: “I had entered the Casa de Contratacion [House of Commerce] as

Esteban, but I left it as Estebanico. Just Estebanico – converted, orphaned, and now dismissed with a boy’s nickname” (149). In addition to being converted and orphaned, he is emasculated and his basic identity as an adult man, capable of making decisions and in control of his own life, is undermined. The name Estebanico is symbolic of his relationship with Dorantes; as his role in life is reduced to that of slave, his position is “to be one step behind him [Dorantes],” serving as “witness for his ambitions” and an “audience, even when there was nothing for him to do but march” (19). Even the specificity of a name becomes superfluous: “all the things he called me were said without a hint of humor or irony: El Moro, El Negro, El Arabe. On most days, he did not even call me anything. He did not need to – I was always right behind him” (49). In a culmination of his erasure, Estebanico is rendered nameless. Further, just as Estebanico’s visibility and presence are subsumed by Dorantes’s ambitions so is his story. Beyond highlighting his servile status, however, the note that he was “always right behind him” also serves as an ironic reminder that Estebanico was indeed *there*, accompanying Dorantes in every step of the journey – even if History tends to overlook the significance of his role and contributions to this journey.

Lalami’s attention to Estebanico’s name recalls and comments on how he is originally identified in Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación* alongside his fellow survivors: “The fourth is named Estebanico; he is a black Arab and a native of Azamor” (108).²⁵ Unlike the other survivors, there

²⁵ Cabeza de Vaca writes in *La Relación*,

Since I have given an account of the ships, it will be fitting for me to tell who are the people whom our Lord was pleased to deliver from these afflictions and where in these kingdoms they are from. The first is Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, a native of Salamanca and son of Doctor Castillo and Doña Aldonza Maldonado. The second is Andrés Dorantes, son of Pablo Dorantes, a native of Béjar and resident of Gibrleón. The third is Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, son of Francisco de Vera and grandson of Pedro de Vera, who conquered the Canary Islands; his mother

is no mention of Estebancio's parents or ancestry and no sense of honor or accomplishment is attached to his name. Instead, "he is a black Arab" is offered as a superficial and racialized explanation of who he is, and this is apparently all we need to know, possibly all that the author knows; in fact, more often than not, Cabeza de Vaca refers to Estebanico in his writing simply as "el negro" or the black man. Additionally, rather than state that the fourth survivor *is* Estebanico, Cabeza de Vaca notes that he is *named* Estebanico, as if to acknowledge that this is not his true name nor is it a reflection of the man himself. In Lalami's novel, Estebanico expresses the disconnect between the name he was given and who he is, describing it as "a string of sounds whose foreignness still grated on my ears" (7).

The renaming of Mustafa as Estebanico is an example of Empire's tradition of (re)naming people, places, and things: "So they [the Spaniards] gave new names to everything around them, as though they were the All-Knowing God in the Garden of Eden" (18). Just as the conquerors created and promoted a "truth" by simply voicing or recording it, so too does a name serve as a created truth, imposing certain meanings on its object; most importantly, it subsumes the person or object into the expanse of Empire. Estebanico describes a group whose name reflects their complicit involvement in the imperial agenda, "Amigos were Aztecs who had allied with the Crown of Castile against other Aztecs – and for this betrayal they had earned the privilege of losing their tribe's true name, replacing it with a common and unthreatening Spanish noun" (305). The innocuous Spanish name "Amigos" (friends) is a mark of the individuals' betrayal to their tribe and Aztec identity; in allying themselves with the Spanish Crown, the

was named Doña Teresa Cabeza de Vaca, a native of Jerez de la Frontera. The fourth is named Estebanico; he is a black Arab and a native of Azamor. (108)

“privilege” they earn is in actuality a loss as they forfeit their “tribe’s true name,” severing themselves from their Aztec roots, history, and culture. The names given or imposed by the Spaniards – on the Amigos, Estebanico, Spanish settlements, etc. – are a mark of “the disease of empire,” which Estebanico describes as a transcultural and transgenerational affliction: “They [his Arab ancestors] had carried the disease of empire to Spain, the Spaniards had brought it to the new continent, and someday the people of the new continent would plant it elsewhere” (272). In America’s earliest days, Estebanico’s words are a warning to the generations to come and a prediction of the conquering nation being defined even then. He also reminds us that America’s story cannot be isolated from the story of the world, one that extends back beyond the 500-year history of conquest.

Like the Amigos, Estebanico is also tainted by his association with the Crown of Castile, despite his involuntary participation in its project of conquest. Admitting to being captivated by the constructed fantasy surrounding the New World, “a place that could have existed only in the imagination of itinerant storytellers,” he states, “This was how the journey across the Ocean of Fog and Darkness worked on you, even if you had never wanted to undertake it. The ambition of the others tainted you, slowly and irrevocably” (6). All who embark on the “journey across the Ocean of Fog and Darkness,” a journey of discovery and conquest – characterized by ambition, power, and greed – are inevitably tainted by it. Importantly, he is seduced by the image of a land that was woven together by storytellers over time; similarly, as he comes to realize, “[e]veryone in the expedition had believed Narváez’s story about the kingdom of gold and had eagerly followed him there.... the lie that had started everything” (223). Ultimately, these fictions are the driving force behind this journey and others like it. As Estebanico provides his account of the Spanish expedition, the question arises of how this *narrative* journey also leaves its mark on both

author and reader. How are we shaped, even tainted, by the narratives we tell? How are our narratives and our histories similarly marked by “Fog and Darkness,” obscuring various details and realities while highlighting others?

When Estebanico declares that he “could not continue to be involved with conquest,” he determines to break free from the tradition of empire by freeing himself from the bonds of slavery (272). In the fiction that Estebanico creates in the end, he sends news that there is “no gold in the northern territories” and that “the fierce Indians of Hawikuh had repelled his mission and killed Estebanico in the process.” Upon receiving this false news, he predicts, “The servants of empire would forget about the Seven Cities of Gold. The people of Hawikuh would be safe. Estebanico would be laid to rest. But Mustafa would remain, free to live a life of his choosing” (320). As he disrupts Empire’s myth about a kingdom of Gold, he predicts that the journey will also be disrupted. Appropriately, the fiction of his death facilitates the end to the fiction of “Estebanico,” a name and truth that was forced upon him. His freedom from the shackles of both slavery and empire is marked by this final return to “Mustafa.” Importantly, the “servant of God” outwits and liberates himself from the “servants of empire.”

A (Hi)story of (Hi)stories

Ultimately, in decentering Cabeza de Vaca’s account of the Spanish expedition and offering Estebanico’s version of events (albeit fictional), Lalami’s historiographic metafiction certainly does not propose to replace one account with the other. Estebanico concludes his narrative,

Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought. Maybe if our experiences, in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow added up, they would lead to the blinding light of the truth. To God belong the east and the west, whichever way you turn, there is the face of God.²⁶ God is great. (318)

Neither Estebanico nor Cabeza de Vaca can provide a complete and objective account of their journey; they are both shaped by their respective memories, beliefs, and experiences – as well as their motives. Just as the latter allegedly presented himself as the righteous hero of *La Relación*, it is probable that Estebanico has done the same in *The Moor's Account*. Nonetheless, both narratives are necessary if we hope to arrive at an approximation of History. Demonstrating the necessary intertextuality of History, *The Moor's Account* is a story of stories: each chapter is titled “The story of...” focusing on an aspect of his journey or his past leading up to it; his childhood is marked by memories of his mother, who “nourished [him] with stories, both real and imagined” (35); stories told by the Spaniards and the Indians; and the multiple accounts of the journey that inevitably vary depending on the narrator and audience. The final reminder of God’s ultimate ownership reiterates Estebanico’s subversion of the narratives of power that have enabled slavery, colonialism, and other hegemonic systems. Not only does *he* belong to God but so does the “east” and “west” regardless of who the world’s dominant power(s) may be and how far their power extends. Moreover, Estebanico asserts that in God’s omniscience and omnipresence, to Him alone belongs the knowledge and absolute truth of the world in all its

²⁶ Here, Estebanico references a Quranic verse (2:115).

“blinding light,” unmarred by the veil of fog and darkness that naturally limits our knowledge and taints our Histories.

Gordon-Reed reflects on the centrality of “white origin stories” that largely exclude stories of “Estebanico, the period of Spanish exploration, and years of Black and Indigenous history on the continent.” She observes,

The United States’ own nationalist-oriented history focuses intensely on what happened within the boundaries of the British colonies, and on the perspective of English-speaking people. The world enclosed in that way leaves out so much about the true nature of life in early America, about all the varied influences that shaped the people and circumstances during those times.

Since the earliest depictions of Muslims in the American imaginary, the Muslim American community has evolved in a myriad of ways, but what emerges across this history is a continuous narrative of resilience and faith. *The Moor’s Account* decenters the traditional Anglo-American origins narrative and instead depicts an inherently complex and intertextual History of an America that is Black/African, Spanish, Muslim, and Indigenous. It recalls early Latino/Spanish colonial presence and contributions that are pertinent to contemporary rhetoric surrounding the US-Mexico border. It highlights Arabic narratives of enslaved African Muslims in the Americas that are marked by their faith and a subversion of the systems that sought to demean and dehumanize them, systems that persist today. Further, Black Muslims like Estebanico were not merely victims of slavery, but were also active participants in America’s formation. By centering Estebanico, a 16th-century Black Arab Muslim, Lalami removes him from the margins of History, where he was (barely) represented, and gives him a voice to

represent himself. What emerges from the silence and darkness is a narrative of Muslim American origins.

Chapter Two:

Muslim American Journeys in the Global

a team of scientists have to shrink down to subatomic size and pilot a nanosubmarine through some guy's carotid artery to destroy a blood clot in his brain. Pilgrimage would be like that, but you're not only the microscopic explorers; you're also the body being explored. After making your way through the circulatory system and reaching the end of your mission, turns out it was just a journey to the center of *you*.

- Michael Muhammad Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*

Michael Muhammad Knight's memoir *Journey to the End of Islam* begins on a plane to Pakistan with a contemplation of what constitutes a *real* pilgrimage. In the above analogy, Knight brings together the reason of scientists and the fantastical imagination of science fiction, suggesting that any real pilgrimage or journey must embrace both elements. As both the microscopic explorers and the body being explored, he embodies both object and subject, self and other, and individual and communal selves; all of these components are intertwined, with each dependent on the other for its health and survival. As Knight eventually undertakes his journey around the Muslim world, he compares it to a deep exploration of the body. The mission he describes is a critical endeavor to save the brain and restore a healthy connection between heart and mind. This analogy is imbued with added meaning if we consider how it also echoes the following Prophetic Hadith:

You see the believers as regards their being merciful among themselves and showing love among themselves and being kind, resembling one body, so that, if any part of the body is not well then the whole body shares the sleeplessness (insomnia) and fever with it. (al-Bukhari)

This hadith similarly compares the community of believers to a body, where if one part of the body aches the entire body aches. This dynamic is founded in the mercy, love, and kindness that believers are supposed to feel and demonstrate towards one another. At the very least, this necessitates conscious awareness and empathy if not direct support of one's fellow believers. This connection is what allows the body of believers to function as a whole. In Knight's analogy, the journey of the self mirrors the journey of the Muslim *Umma*; a healthy, functioning self requires restoring a healthy connection between the self and the *Umma*.

Ultimately, Knight's journey through this body, across the Muslim world, is fundamentally a journey of self-knowledge, to the center of his own being. This understanding of the self in relation to the communal and global mirrors Umar Faruq Abd-Allah's argument, which maintains that a Muslim American culture that empowers the Muslim American with the freedom to be his or herself is also dependent on an understanding of this self, and its position within time and space, establishing a "continuity with what has been, is, and is likely to be" (12). What emerges in Knight's *Journey* is thus an understanding and a liberation of his individual, Muslim American self – a necessary step towards establishing a Muslim American modality.

Muslim American intellectuals and scholars of Islam in America across the disciplines have engaged in developing a continuously growing discourse that delves into Muslim American lives and communities, exploring the rich and complex diversity of their histories, practices,

values, and challenges. Nonetheless, popular rhetoric continues to portray Muslims and Muslim Americans as a monolithic and foreign community that threatens American ideals and lies beyond the boundaries of American identity. This chapter engages with the question of the Muslim American community's alleged "foreignness" by exploring various ways in which Muslim Americans express their American Islam and define themselves in relation to the broader community of Muslims around the world.

In his brief history of Muslims in America, Edward E. Curtis IV (2009) describes the impact of the global on American Islam: "Islam in America has been international and cross-cultural from its very beginning. Like most Americans in the New World, Muslim Americans have never known a world that was not affected by contact, exchange, and confrontation across racial, ethnic, social, and geographic boundaries." For instance, Curtis notes that "the revival of Islam in the 1970s around the globe influenced the Islamic awakening in the United States" (xiii). In short, it would be impossible to define or understand American Islam outside the context of its myriad links to the world beyond U.S. borders. Muslim Americans identify with different parts of the Muslim world that might represent an ancestral homeland and/or a locus of Islamic authority. More broadly, they may also feel a connection with Muslims around the world – empathizing with their struggles and advocating their humanitarian causes – simply because together they share the same faith and belong to the global *Umma*. Ultimately, what happens to Muslims globally, undoubtedly affects and shapes Muslims here in America.

As we explore how Muslim American writers express and define their *American* Islam in the context of its global counterpart, Sherman Jackson's argument pertaining to Muslim Americans' self-definition, particularly how they perceive themselves as part of the broader *Umma*, is valuable. Jackson notes that articulations of the *Umma* often exclude communities

where Muslims are a minority such as America; as a result, such communities suffer from a lack of confidence and a weakened position both in relation to their Muslimness and their Americanness (“Muslims as a Marginal Minority”). The “Muslim predicament” that Jackson describes is illustrative of Orientalist discourse and the Clash of Civilizations theory that separates East and West and defines Islam as antithetical to Western ideals of modernity. Coming to terms with this predicament and complicating existing rhetoric has become a characteristic feature of Muslim American expression as is demonstrated in this chapter. As I seek to reach a more complex understanding of American Islam via the global, the principal question is how do Muslims in the U.S. give content to *Muslim Americanness*, a distinctly American expression of Muslimness that may be distinguished from other cultural forms of Muslimness? Further, how is Muslim American identity informed by global Muslim solidarity? How are global expressions of the Muslim world simultaneously in dialogue and in tension with the American component?

This essay is particularly interested in the relationship between God (or religion), the individual, and the community. Various practices and traditions of Islam are imbued with the formation of a communal identity. Khan affirms,

Through various symbolic activities, like performing the *salah* (prayer) on Fridays, fasting, celebrating festivals, wearing traditional garb, and frequenting community places such as the mosque, the restaurant, and the parochial school, the Muslim individual reproduces the community, and these distinct practices give the community its meaning or identity. (107)

Regardless of religious obligation or feelings of piety, engaging in these religious acts affirms one’s belonging to the community; in addition to *reproducing* the community, the Muslim

individual also assumes an active role in *shaping* it. Cultivating this communal belonging and identity is especially significant for individuals who have converted to Islam and must locate themselves within their new faith community. Others who are born into Muslim families and/or environments do not have to look very far to find Muslim support in terms of fellowship, mentorship, etc. By visibly expressing their faith and participating in religious practices, new converts, especially, in many ways actualize their community belonging, making their community a tangible thing.

The Muslim American community, its expressions and representations, have been and continue to be deeply influenced by a number of factors including: U.S. racial politics; a large Muslim immigrant population with roots in their homelands; the perception that the East is a source of legitimate Islam; and U.S. foreign policies and national security agendas. This chapter builds upon conversations raised by immigrant Muslim narratives, where individuals locate their roots outside of the U.S. and may either embrace or reject these origins. Often, this is the story of a first or second generation Muslim American, who is attempting to come to terms with the faith and cultural traditions of his or her parents and ancestors. The discussion also extends more generally to narratives of Muslims in the West who frequently turn to the Middle East, for example, as a source of legitimate Islam. Additionally, it is not uncommon to find that anti-Muslim attitudes in the U.S. further encourage Muslim Americans to look to other parts of the Muslim world for a sense of belonging and community. Meanwhile, there are also Muslims whose response to Islamophobia is to turn their backs to and reject the Muslim world in favor of being deemed more patriotic as they align themselves with U.S. foreign policy. Relating to the Muslim world in various ways, these types of narratives – including Tamim Ansary’s *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story*, Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days*, Alex

Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* among others – are rooted in Muslim identity politics and frequently engage with the Clash of Civilizations theory and questions of Islam vs. the West as well as progressive vs. traditional Islam.

This chapter addresses a trope that frequently appears in Muslim American literary texts, specifically the journey abroad to parts of, what is recognized as, the “Muslim World.” To this end, I will be looking at G. Willow Wilson's *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam* (2010). Raised without religion, Wilson (1982--) discovers Islam during her college years and after graduation decides to take a teaching job in Cairo, where she formally converts to Islam. There, she also meets Omar, who introduces her to Egyptian culture, and the two eventually fall in love and get married. Wilson is a professional author, who has published comics, novels, and a graphic novel as well as various journal articles. She is perhaps best known for relaunching Marvel Comics's *Ms. Marvel* title featuring Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani Muslim American superhero. Other titles include *Cairo* (2007), *Alif the Unseen* (2012), and *The Bird King* (2019). Wilson's writings frequently engage with Islam and the Muslim world.

As it engages in processes that simultaneously negotiate, define, and delimit (American) Islam, Wilson's memoir *The Butterfly Mosque* presents a Muslim American journey in the Islamic world wherein the author attempts to position herself in relation to Islam and the global Muslim community or *Umma*. Significantly, this text is an autobiographical conversion narrative, representing Wilson's path to Islam and illustrating a simultaneous journey of the heart and mind. As such, this essay builds upon contemporary scholarship pertaining to American converts to Islam including the genre of conversion narratives, as well as essential themes and

critical texts within this genre. Prefacing the examination of Wilson's *The Butterfly Mosque* with a brief discussion of the autobiographical conversion narratives of Alexander Russell Webb (*Islam in America*, 1893) and Malcolm X (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965), this chapter highlights three distinct articulations of Muslim Americanness that are deeply impacted by their respective racial identities, gender, sociocultural backgrounds, historical contexts, political attitudes, and community activism. In contrast to Webb and Malcolm X, Wilson's journey is very much shaped by her specific position as a privileged white American woman who is living in Egypt and reimagining her beliefs and identity in a post-9/11 world. Her experiences illustrate the intersection between faith, self, and community, wherein her private internal experience of conversion develops into a public and communal expression of faith. Engaging with issues of Islam vs. West, American individualism and community belonging, private vs. public expression of religion, and American Islam in the context of the Global, the perspective of American convert to Islam offers a unique opportunity for a nuanced understanding of Muslim Americanness.

Conversion Narratives: (Re)Articulating Self and Community

Of particular significance to this discussion is the work of Marcia Hermansen, Professor of Islamic Studies and Theology at Loyola University Chicago, whose scholarship has greatly contributed to the fields of Islamic Thought, Sufism, Muslims in America, and Women in Islam. In her essay, "Roads to Mecca: Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims," Hermansen specifically examines the literary aspects of Westerners' narratives of their conversion to Islam. Focusing on autobiographical narratives, she identifies five basic

genres: the “pilgrimage account” (the most prevalent), the “short testimonial,” the “esoteric quest motif,” the “explanation,” and the “Sufi-oriented narrative”²⁷ (57). The latter is the most relevant to the present conversation; although Wilson does not explicitly identify as Sufi, her narrative privileges the inward journey of the self that is characteristic of Sufism. In the Sufi-oriented narrative, Hermansen notes, “Sufism is presented as the inner dimension of Islam and the path to inner transformation. At the same time, each of these Muslim Sufi authors is *shari’a*-oriented in the sense that becoming Muslim is essential” (76). The simultaneous focus on a journey of “inner transformation” as well as adherence to religious practices that are prescribed by *shari’a* is also reflected in Wilson’s conversion narrative.

Importantly, Wilson’s text also participates in a contemporary trend that Hermansen describes as the “broadening of conversion literature consistent with the emergence of an ‘indigenous’ American and to some extent European Muslim community”; essentially, the genre of conversion narratives has expanded to include texts by Muslim American converts that engage with various issues that are prevalent to Muslim communities in America or the West more broadly (87).

Professor of spiritual theology Bruce Hindmarsh draws attention to the relationship between conversion narratives and autobiography, how the “experience of religious conversion has led, that is, to creative re-reading of one’s own life in these new terms, a second conversion of life into text.” He affirms that both conversions – the religious and the textual – are “religious events” as well as defining moments for the author’s self-identity. An essential aspect of the

²⁷ “A recent (1990s) trend in ‘conversion narratives’ is illustrated by book-length Sufi accounts such as *The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path*, *The Sky is not the Limit: An Australian Woman’s Spiritual Journey Within the Traditions*, and *Embracing Islam*” (Hermansen 71).

identity that is constructed in the conversion narrative is its affiliation with a religious community. Hindmarsh observes,

If conversion narrative functions as what anthropologists call an ‘encapsulation ritual’ (like baptism or fetish burning) that helps to cement a convert into his or her new community by taking on the language and appropriating the narrative of that community, then there is much to gain by exploring the links between autobiography, narrative form, and self-identity. (357)

The dialectical relationship between individual and community that is manifested via religion will be explored in more detail below. Of particular significance here is the notion that the conversion narrative itself constitutes a performative act, an “encapsulation ritual,” that admits and “helps to cement” an individual into his new faith community. Wilson’s writing of *The Butterfly Mosque* articulates her belonging to the Islamic community. She assumes the community’s narrative by adopting its shared history, commitments, and struggles. Traditionally, an individual converts to Islam by declaring the *Shahada*: “I bear witness that there is no god [deity worthy of worship] but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”²⁸ This testimony of faith (*shahada* literally means “testimony” in Arabic) is the first pillar of Islam and constitutes the most fundamental belief for every Muslim. By taking the *Shahada* (akin to *taking* an oath), an individual commits herself to Islam and to embodying the meanings of this statement.

²⁸ The *Shahada* or testimony of faith is traditionally made in Arabic: “*Ashhadu an la Ilaaha illa Allah wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah.*”

In Wilson's *The Butterfly Mosque*, she describes the process by which foreigners – in Egypt – must legally declare and document their conversion to Islam. Irritated and insulted by the suggestion that “the *shaheda* [she] recited with God as [her] witness was not good enough for the dry old men in turbans who oversaw the intersection of religion and state” (91). She affirms, “Conversion is a personal process, and to bureaucratize it is, I still think, a little cruel” (92). After a brief conversation with a sheikh in the historic Al-Azhar mosque, despite her misgivings, she undergoes a brief yet transformative experience:

I was asked to sign a ledger thick with the signatures of other converts and the dates of their announcement. Seeing hundreds of names – British, German, Japanese, Spanish, Russian – I began to calm down. Until that moment, Islam had meant something very private to me – it defined my relationship with God and with Omar. I had never felt part of a world religion with over a billion adherents; during the silent inward process of conversion, I don't even think I realized that this is what Islam is. Yet here I was, looking at the names of men and women who were now *akh* and *ukht*, my theological brothers and sisters. The world seemed substantially smaller. (93)

Despite the formal bureaucracy of the scene, the act of publicly declaring her Islam in the mosque's ledger inadvertently introduces her to a world of Muslims, over a billion people that she could now claim as her brothers and sisters in faith. No longer “silent” or “inward,” in this moment, Wilson's Islam moves beyond the confines of her private home and the intimate circle of family and friends. By declaring herself as a member of this global community, her fears and insecurities are calmed; like other Muslim converts in the West, she is both deeply moved and empowered by her discovery of community and the ensuing sense of familial solidarity.

The Muslim conversion narrative functions in many ways as a symbolic *Shahada*, publicly declaring the author or subject's conversion and commitment to Islam as well as their belonging to the Muslim community.²⁹ Importantly, the Western Muslim conversion narrative also serves as a testimony *for* Islam. In a time and place when and where Islam may be perceived as an alien religion with violent tendencies and repressive practices, the convert's narrative offers an insider's perspective, often making claims about the "true" teachings of Islam and what it means to be Muslim, and further explaining what would motivate a person living in the West to embrace Islam as a religion and way of life.

Scholars of conversion discourse warn against taking conversion narratives, including the reported motives for conversion, at face-value. The fact that they are written *after* conversion has taken place naturally suggests that the narrative is colored by the subject's newfound religion and its distinct principles. The conversion narrative may also be shaped by the audience and a desire to justify the decision to convert and convince them of the new religion's appeal and worthiness. Nonetheless, the question of *how* and *why* individuals convert to Islam, or any religion, highlights a complex issue that is greatly influenced by one's subject position. Michael Muhammad Knight expounds upon the reimagination of self-identity that is necessitated by the conversion process.

²⁹ GhaneaBassiri elaborates on the "triangular relationship between God, individual, and community" that is manifested through taking the *Shahada*:

This individual attestation of belief in God and the prophethood of Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah establishes the principle of faith through which Muslim community (ummah) is conceived. It is the means by which individuals affirm belonging to the ummah and in the case of converts, the means by which other Muslims accept one as part of the ummah. The shahada... establish[es] the notion of a universal Muslim community through individual Muslims' profession of faith... (213)

For many converts, embracing Islam promises the reconstruction of a self through new narratives concerning identity, religious truth, and also the racialized and gendered body. This rewriting of personal history might also incorporate retellings of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which that history is embedded. (84)

Anthropologist and professor of contemporary Islam Karin van Nieuwkerk similarly describes conversion as “a multilayered, continuous process in which new identities and discourses are produced and reproduced.” In order to understand the complexities of conversion, she argues that the dual lenses of identity studies and discourse analyses are necessary to help “understand both the receivers and the messages.” She further states,

Islam and Islamic discourse may be plausible to individuals for different reasons. Individuals can be addressed by Islamic discourse in manifold aspects of their identities. People convert to Islam as persons with specific professional, religious, gender, racial, and ethnic identities. Various aspects of a person’s identity inform discourse, and discourse appeals to different aspects of their identity. (680)

The Muslim American conversion narratives discussed in this chapter including Alexander Russell Webb’s *Islam in America*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Wilson’s *The Butterfly Mosque* are undoubtedly shaped by gender and racial identities as well as social and political contexts.

Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916)

An early example of a conversion narrative that presents itself as a testimony for Islam is Alexander Russell Webb's *Islam in America: A Brief Statement of Mohammedanism and an Outline of the American Islamic Propaganda*, which was published in 1893. Although Webb was not the first American convert to Islam, he is the first known to write an account of his conversion. Often recognized as the "first prominent white convert to Islam" (Awad and Curtis 73), Webb converted to Islam in 1888 while he was serving as U.S. consul to the Philippines. In his introduction to *Islam in America*, Webb describes the distorted image of Islam that was perpetuated in the English-speaking world during his time:

There is no religious system of which so little is known, not only among the masses of English-speaking people, but among those who are considered the most learned, as the Islamic.... There is no character in the whole range of history that has been so persistently and grossly misrepresented and misunderstood by Christians, as Mohammed. There is not to-day in existence, in print, a single work in English that represents anything like a true conception of the character of the inspired Prophet of Arabia, nor of the nature of the doctrines he taught... (9)

Webb attributes this misrepresentation of Islam, in part, to "the strong prejudice which has, for the past eight or nine centuries, existed among Christians against Mohammedans and Mohammedanism" (9). Webb sought to rectify this long-held prejudice and rampant misrepresentation of Islam and Prophet Muhammad. In *Islam in America*, as well as his other works and lectures, he presents a "work in English" that endeavors to provide "a true conception of the character [and] ... doctrines" of Prophet Muhammad. With a firm belief that Americans

would be more receptive to Islam – and even convert – if only they were educated about its teachings and benefits to society, Webb founded the American Muslim Propagation Movement and the American Islamic Mission in New York City as well as the publications the *Moslem World* and the *Voice of Islam*. Notably, Webb participated as the representative of Islam in the first World's Parliament of Religions³⁰ held in Chicago in 1893, a defining moment in U.S. interfaith dialogue. He was also later named the honorary consul general of the Ottoman Empire to the U.S. by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1901.

In his opening chapter “Why I Became a Mussulman,” Webb addresses the question of his background and what would motivate him to convert to Islam: “I have been frequently asked why I, an American, born in a country which is nominally Christian, and reared ‘under the drippings’ of an orthodox Presbyterian pulpit, came to adopt the faith of Islam as my guide in life” (11). Born in America with a Christian upbringing, Webb relates to his audiences and establishes that he is hardly a stranger to American culture and society despite his Muslim faith. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, who authored the first comprehensive biography on Webb, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (2006), describes Webb’s absolute Americanness:

Webb’s life was steeped in Americana. Despite his later affinity to the Turks in particular and the Muslim world in general after his conversion to Islam, he continued indisputably

³⁰ “The parliament was an occasion for Western Christians to celebrate both their newfound commitment to religious pluralism as well as what they deemed the superiority of their own religious identity and practice. The parliament’s organizing committee labored to bring representatives from all world religions and well-known Christian sects to Chicago. The result was a two-week conference that focused on the themes of religion and its role in improving humanity and society around the world.” (Miglio 121)

to identify himself as an American. From his first years onward, Webb moved in proximity to many of the settings, symbols, and historic personages that shaped American identity and were crucial parts of the nation's history. (10)

According to Abd-Allah, Webb's conversion to Islam is a product of his experiences and values as a man in Victorian America.

Webb interpreted the Islamic faith as an affirmation of an essentially Victorian moral code, which allowed him a rational belief in God's unity, while looking upon the world in a manner which he regarded as in keeping with modern science. As such, Webb's adoption of the Islamic faith validated much of his former Christianity while shearing it of all "irrational" aspects of dogma. (67)

Abd-Allah refers to five key attractions to Islam that Larry Poston identifies in his study of Western converts to Islam. He observes that Webb's conversion, as described by Webb himself, appears to have been inspired by all five, namely Islam's "simplicity, rationality, divine unicity, practical morality, and a direct relation to God" (67). Webb is particularly attracted to the fourth principle of practical morality maintaining that American society stands to benefit greatly from Islam's practices and teachings:

I saw the practical results of Islam manifested in honesty, truthfulness, sobriety, tolerance, gentleness, and a degree of true brotherly love that was a surprise to me. The evils that we Americans complain of in our social system – drunkenness, prostitution, marital infidelity and cold selfishness – were almost entirely absent. ("Influence" 548)

Importantly, Islam's practical morality encompasses the notion of Muslim solidarity or "true brotherly love"; in fact, elsewhere, he even goes so far as to (erroneously) state that "the fourth pillar [of Islam] is Fraternity"³¹ (*Islam in America* 33). In his lecture "Spirit of Islam," he further reflects, "That fraternal idea impressed me more deeply, possibly, than anything else. I felt that I was among my brethren, and that Muslims were brothers the world over, and I know that belongs strictly to the spirit of Islam" (41). This attraction towards Islam's sense of community and brotherhood is a recurring theme in the conversion narratives discussed in this chapter.

Webb writes that the objective of *Islam in America* is "to give to the English-speaking world a brief but accurate and reliable description of the character and purpose of Mohammed, and a general outline of the Islamic system" (9). As a white American whose life is "steeped in Americana," according to Abd-Allah, and occupies a respected position in society, the reader is called upon to accept Webb's insider account as both "accurate and reliable." According to Awad and Curtis, *Islam in America* was "an attempt to normalize Islam as part of America's spiritual patchwork as well as the free white man's experience of a religion seen as foreign and exotic" (73). Webb boldly claims his identities as both Muslim and American; in his efforts to explain and "normalize" Islam, he reconciles and illustrates the compatibility of these two identities.

Webb's contributions, namely his efforts towards making Islam an accepted part of American society by building institutions and by educating and inviting other Americans to embrace Islam, are firmly rooted in a distinctly American Muslim cause. The stated purpose of

³¹ While it is an important concept in Islam, fraternity is not considered a pillar of Islam. To clarify, the five pillars of Islam include: the *shahadah* or Testimony of Faith (testifying that there is no god worthy of worship but God, and that Muhammad is His messenger); observance of prayer; paying zakat (almsgiving); fasting of Ramadan; and performing Hajj or pilgrimage.

his publication *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam* is “to spread the light of Islamic truth in the United States and to assist in uniting under a common brotherhood all who accept the Moslem faith, intelligently, honestly, unselfishly and sincerely” (Hussain 265). Webb’s faith extended beyond the personal and was deeply invested in creating a *community* of American Muslims.

While white Muslim Americans may represent a fraction of Muslim converts, Alyson Dickson states that they have nonetheless “made a significant impact on Islam in the United States” (581). She maintains that individuals like religious leader Hamza Yusuf, former ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) President and Islamic studies scholar Ingrid Mattson, Professor Jeffrey Lang (who documented his conversion narrative in *Struggling to Surrender*), and Robert Dickson Crane (Foreign Policy adviser to U.S. President Richard Nixon) among others have played an important role in shaping the American narrative pertaining to Islam and Muslims.

From defending the interests of Muslims [in the U.S. and abroad] to leading Muslim efforts after 9/11, the white minority of Muslim Americans has helped to shape the larger story of Muslim America. As the United States has become an increasingly important location of interaction and discussion in global Islam, white Muslim Americans are likely to continue their role in shaping the engagement between Islam and the broader American culture. (581)

Dickson further describes white Muslim Americans as “powerful defenders of Muslim interests,” who have “asserted the compatibility of Islam with common American values: a dedication to God and philanthropy, an emphasis on family, good deeds, and discipline, and a focus on

education and religious freedom.” Additionally, she observes that their conversion narratives “cite spirituality, mysticism, social justice, moral responsibility, family, and community as significant in their decision [to convert]” (581). While Dickson’s claims may overstate the role of white American converts in the Muslim American narrative, individuals like Alexander Russell Webb, Willow Wilson, and those previously mentioned are certainly in a unique position to participate in this narrative, serving as a “bridge between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans” (581). At the very least, their subject position as white Americans affords them unique insider privilege and a vantage point that is rooted in American culture; as such, their assertions that Islam is compatible with American values provide a valuable testimony for Islam and Muslims.

Malcom X (1925-1965)

The most popular text in Muslim American literature, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, is a conversion narrative that details Malcolm X’s background and the experiences that lead to his conversion first to the Nation of Islam and then to Sunni Islam.³² His autobiography narrates a story of personal growth as a spiritual man and an intellectual; Malcolm X’s evolving relationships with the Black Muslim movement, Black Nationalism and Black empowerment, pan-Africanism, and global Islam illustrate how his identity as a Black man in America critically shapes his conversion narrative.

³² While I examine *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* as an autobiographical conversion narrative, I acknowledge that questions have been raised about the authenticity of the text, particularly as it relates to the extent to which Alex Haley influenced the documented narrative, what was included or excluded, and how he shaped Malcolm’s authorial voice. For further discussion, see Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011).

A critical point in Malcolm's personal transformation takes place after he was arrested and convicted of burglary charges at the age of 20. While in jail, Malcolm embarks upon a journey towards both literacy and Islam. As he learns more about the Nation of Islam, Malcolm is also taking advantage of the extensive library at Norfolk Prison Colony, where he had been transferred. It is his frustration with not being able to articulate himself in his letters to Elijah Muhammad that initiates his remarkable feat of painstakingly studying and copying the dictionary. Malcolm articulates how his journey towards Islam and literacy were intertwined:

the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive... My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. (206)

His education, a means of self-empowerment, led him towards a deeper understanding of the history and circumstances that shaped the lives of Black Americans, the injustices of the White Man's system, and the devastating impact on the Black psyche and community. The relation between Islam and intellect is symbolized in Muhammad Ali's famous match against Sonny Liston in 1964. Malcolm X made it a point to support Ali as both spiritual advisor and friend: "I flew back to Miami feeling that it was Allah's intent for me to help Cassius prove Islam's superiority before the world – through proving that mind can win over brawn" (353). Thus, Malcolm perceived the superiority of Islam as intimately tied to a superiority of mind and intellect. Malcolm's personal transformation illustrates how Islam functions, according to Curtis, as a vehicle of "political self-determination" and "healing and wholeness." In a quiet moment, Malcolm reaches the following conclusion: "Awareness came surging up in me – how deeply the

religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been..." (330).

Malcolm X concludes his autobiography with the hope that his "life's account, read objectively... might prove to be a testimony of some social value" (436). As a powerful account of social uplift, empowerment, resistance, social justice, and spiritual growth, Malcolm X's *Autobiography* has indubitably had a lasting impact. For each of these reasons, it also holds a critical position within Muslim American cultural formations and productions. In various ways, Malcolm X represents a "black African past as a form of spiritual authority in the present," which Curtis describes as a characteristic element of Islam in the African diaspora (107), although his influence is by no means limited to African and African American Muslims. Michael Muhammad Knight describes *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as "American Islam's definitive conversion narrative" as it has "influenced the religious lives of not only converts but also born-and-raised Muslims of transnational backgrounds" (95).

The phenomenon of Black Islam in America and the historical trajectory of Islam in the United States across the mid to late-twentieth century, is uniquely represented in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. According to Sylvia Chan-Malik in her essay "Cultural and Literary Production of Muslim America,"

The early politics of Black nationalism, the racial mythology of the NOI, the move towards Sunnism, and finally to Malcolm's distinctly Muslim American ideological positioning through his simultaneous and passionate commitments to a Black nationalist politics and an ideology of Islamic universalism at the end of his life – these components

reflect the trajectory of Islam's cultural presence in America and reveal the distinctive interplay between race and religion in this formation. (287-288)

Sherman Jackson elaborates on this “interplay” between Islam and the Black movements and racial politics that marked the twentieth century in *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*. He argues that despite the tenuous connections of proto-Islamic movements – like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam – to traditional sources and historical Islam, these movements had “the seminal effect of transforming Islam itself, at least as an idea, into the cultural and ideological ‘property’ of Blackamericans as a whole” (5).

Jackson describes the “Blackamerican” (a term that he attributes to the late scholar of Black religion in America, C. Eric Lincoln) as a “sociohistorical” reality that brings together a “shared set of sociopolitical and historical circumstances, a common condition of circumscription, reaction, and contingency, all predicated upon the color of their skin” (14). Jackson explains his preference for the term Blackamerican in light of the unsuitability and inaccuracy of other conventional descriptors:

On the one hand, to speak simply of ‘black Americans’ as the counterparts of ‘white Americans’ is to strengthen the hand of those who wish to deny or hide white privilege. On the other hand, to speak of African Americans is to give short shrift to almost half a millennium of New World history.... in my view, the force of American history has essentially transformed these erstwhile Africans into a new people. This is especially so with regard to their *religious* orientation. Of course, I could have opted for the hyphenated convention ‘Black-American.’ But... the whole point of the hyphenated American is that the right side of the hyphen assumes the responsibility of protecting the

cultural, religious, and other idiosyncrasies of the left side... Blackamericans have rarely if ever enjoyed this protection on a par with other ethnic Americans. (17)

Briefly, Jackson's contraction of Black and American into 'Blackamerican' bears further contemplation as we consider how this rationale may be similarly applied to Muslims in America, who also share common "sociopolitical and historical circumstances" that are "predicated" on their Muslim faith. For instance, the reference to 'Muslim Americans' as opposed to 'Christian Americans' does indeed bolster the position that denies *Christian* privilege in American society and culture. Considering the political tension between Islam and America as well as the prevalence of systemic Islamophobia, the hyphenated 'Muslim-American' is also inappropriate according to the reasoning that in a hyphenated American identity, the 'American' side is responsible for "protecting the cultural, religious, and other idiosyncrasies of the left side." As the Muslim community continues to evolve and claim its position within American history and culture, the notion of a distinct 'Muslimamerican' identity and community adds nuance to the narrative of Islam in America and is undoubtedly worthy of additional consideration.

In the history of Blacks in America, Jackson maintains that the success of Islam among Blackamericans today is owed in large part to earlier proto-Islamic movements.³³ Central to this phenomenon is the function of "Black Religion," which is invested in the "desire to annihilate or

³³ Knight elaborates on the appeal of the Nation of Islam:

The Nation of Islam appealed to many potential converts through a promise of restoring the Black family... In NOI discourse, Black men were to achieve race respectability by reclaiming their rightful duties as provider, protector, and undisputed head of their households, while Black women achieved race respectability through dressing modestly, caring for the home, and recognizing the authority of the Black man as fundamentally divine. Sexuality factored significantly in the NOI message as it related to concerns for resisting genocidal white supremacy, regulating desire, and protecting Black women within Black patriarchy. ("Converts and Conversions," 92)

at least subvert white supremacy and anti-Black racism” and is “aimed at spiritual transformation from within, even as the world without remained corrupt” (Jackson 30). Ultimately, Islam and opposition to anti-Black racism together constitute Blackamerican Islam.

According to Chan-Malik, before the publication of Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*, “‘Islam’ had heretofore yet to be advanced within U.S. cultural production as an *explicit* symbol of racial resistance.” While Islam may have subtly influenced earlier literary and cultural productions (music, arts, etc.), Malcolm X’s autobiography marks the beginning of “a distinctly Muslim American *literary* presence.” Along with the subsequent writings of “the poets, writers, and playwrights of the Black Arts Movement.... the Islam of these literary expressions was bold and uncompromising, asserting the religion as integral to a Black American cultural identity, which lay at the heart of the era’s revolutionary zeitgeist” (Chan-Malik 287).

In his work, Jackson identifies a fundamental challenge to Blackamerican Islam: “the critical posture of Black Religion and Immigrant Islam toward America and ‘the West,’ respectively, would combine to create a Blackamerican self-definition that was practically dysfunctional, enabling Blackamerican Muslims neither as blacks nor as Americans nor, ultimately, as Muslims in America” (5). He argues that Immigrant Muslims tend to promote a “false universal” in the notion of a *true* Islam that is actually a product of their cultural experiences and interpretations and as such is frequently incongruous with the sociocultural and historical reality of Blackamerican Muslims. Jackson posits that the solution to the “dysfunctional” identity he describes is “Blackamerican Muslim mastery and appropriation of the Sunni super-tradition,” which he refers to as the “Third Resurrection” (5). According to him, a firm understanding and grounding in the Sunni tradition would help Blackamerican Muslims to distance themselves from the limitations of both Black Religion and Immigrant Islam and to

emerge as “self-authenticating subjects” (6). Interestingly, Jackson specifically imagines that if Malcolm X were alive today, “he would have come full-circle from a marginalized *consumer* of ‘Islamic’ ideas to being among the *producers* of the parameters of a properly constituted orthodox Islam in America” (168). Embracing every aspect of his multifaceted identity as a Blackamerican Sunni Muslim, “grounded in both American reality *and* the classical Tradition,” Jackson affirms,

Malcolm would be in a position not only to challenge the authority of articulations of the religion that are rooted in the vision and experiences of the modern Muslim world but to re-evaluate America as well, as a political arrangement to be embraced as part of an effort to “protect his protection” as a Muslim-American. (168)

This imagination of a contemporary Malcolm X – one whose life and narrative had not been abruptly ended, whose relationship to his Black, American, and Muslim identities had continued to evolve – appears to embody Jackson’s vision of a Blackamerican Islam that has undergone the Third Resurrection. Challenging dominant interpretations of both Islam and America, he actively shapes and re-articulates Blackamerican Islam and identity.

In his lifetime, Malcolm’s dual commitments to both his Black and Muslim communities is evident in the following statement addressed to an audience of Muslim youth in Cairo in 1964, wherein he describes the dynamics and inherent responsibilities of his subject position as a Blackamerican Muslim:

As a Muslim, I feel duty-bound to fight for the spread of Islam until all the world bows before Allah – but I am also one of the 22 million oppressed Afro-Americans, and I can never overlook the miserable plight of my people in America. Therefore, my fight is

twofold, my burden is double, my responsibilities multiple. . . material as well as spiritual, political as well as religious, racial as well as non-racial. I will never hesitate to let the entire world know the hell my people suffer from America's deceit, and her hypocrisy, as well as her oppression. (FBI 48)

A key moment in Malcolm X's personal journey is his pilgrimage to Mecca, when he embraced Sunni Islam. Notably, it is during his Hajj and his subsequent travels to other parts of the Muslim world that Malcolm's identity as both Muslim and American is highlighted. As he engages with the global Muslim community, he identifies himself and is identified by others as an American Muslim: first the Muslim pilot on the flight to Mecca is "delighted to meet an American Muslim" (372), and upon arriving, "'The Muslim from America' excited everywhere the most intense curiosity and interest" (394). Malcolm notes, "My being an American Muslim changed the attitudes from merely watching me to wanting to look out for me. Now, the others began smiling steadily. They came closer, they were frankly looking me up and down. Inspecting me. Very friendly. I was like a man from Mars" (377). While on one hand, he appeared to represent a novelty to the Muslims of the Middle East, he was also embraced by them as they sought to "look out" for him.

Malcolm also describes the "informal audiences of important men from many different countries who were curious to hear the 'American Muslim'" (397). Significantly, he takes the opportunity to share his experiences as a Black man in America and invite them to his cause:

In a hundred different conversations in the Holy Land with Muslims high and low, and from around the world – and, later, when I got to Black Africa – I don't have to tell you never once did I bite my tongue or miss a single opportunity to tell the truth about the crimes, the evils

and the indignities that are suffered by the black man in America. Through my interpreter, I lost no opportunity to advertise the American black man's real plight. I preached it on the mountain at Arafat, I preached it in the busy lobby of the Jeddah Palace Hotel. I would point at one after another – to bring it closer to home; “You... you... you – because of your dark skin, in America you, too, would be called ‘Negro.’ You could be bombed and shot and cattle-prodded and fire-hosed and beaten because of your complexions.” (396-397)

The striking image of Malcolm X standing on the mountain of Arafat, during the most critical moments of Hajj, preaching to his fellow Muslims from around the world – through an interpreter – about the “American black man's real plight” epitomizes the causes and experiences that have come to shape him until this moment. In a foreign land, unable to speak the language and quickly recognizing his lack of knowledge in Sunni Islam, he is far from intimidated. He is a Black American Muslim man boldly claiming his position as a member of the global Muslim *Umma*. He assigns both responsibility and blame to those around him. By educating the Muslims he meets about the injustices suffered by Blacks in America, he calls upon them to adopt this cause as their own.

Malcolm also reminds his fellow Muslims of their responsibility towards making “real Islam” (as opposed to the proto-Islamic movements) accessible in America: “While at Mecca, I reminded them that it was their fault, since they themselves hadn't done enough to make real Islam known in the West. Their silence left a vacuum into which any religious faker could step and mislead our people” (194). Beyond dedicating himself to his Black American and Muslim American communities, Malcolm X also assigns the fate and wellbeing of these communities as a responsibility of the Muslim *Umma*. In the words of Chan-Malik, “As we see through the story

of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, to be *both* a fiery advocate of racial and class liberation and a committed Muslim can be part and parcel of the cultural politics of American Islam” (288).

Willow Wilson (1982--)

Although Jackson’s *Islam and the Blackamerican* elaborates on the circumstances and challenges faced by Blackamerican Muslims, he affirms that his discussion also extends to nonblack Muslims; in particular, he notes that *white* American Muslims “must also find ways to come to terms with racism and other American realities without exposing themselves to the charge of ‘cultural or ethnic apostasy’” (21). When he argues for reimagining and reclaiming of Blackamerican Muslim identity, Jackson asserts that “certain structural features of classical Muslim ecumenicism” serve to “reconcile the competing interests of interpretive integrity and intrareligious pluralism” (7). This approach allows for diverse interpretations and various articulations of Islam and Muslimness – including “Blackamerican, white American, and Hispanic Islams” among others (assuming that they are grounded in the classical tradition). Jackson adds that his argument does not preclude the possibility of “an ecumenical American Islam as the preferred alternative” (20-21).

As I examine Willow Wilson’s conversion narrative, this chapter considers the dynamics of American Muslimness in a global Muslim context; more specifically, it also examines the question of white American Islam via an individual articulation of it. As we engage with this discussion, a closer look at studies pertaining to white Muslim Americans (particularly converts) and their experiences allows for a more nuanced approach. According to the 2019 American

Muslim Poll,³⁴ administered by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), 19% of American Muslims identify as white³⁵ (“American Muslims”). In an analysis of data published by Pew in 2017, ISPU concludes that the majority of white American Muslims were actually raised as Muslim and 64% were immigrants to the U.S. (largely hailing from Europe and Russia). Converts in particular only comprise about one third of Muslim Americans who identify as white; further, amongst white Muslim converts, most are men (62%) and one in five are foreign-born (Chouhoud). Significantly, according to ISPU’s American Muslim Poll in 2020, “white Muslims indeed diverge from their non-white counterparts in a number of ways,” demonstrating greater satisfaction with the direction of the country (48%) as well as greater support for former President Donald Trump³⁶ (50%) (Chouhoud). This racial divide in political opinion within the Muslim community reflects a similar trend amongst whites in the general American public.

According to the same 2020 poll, white Muslims were also “the most likely to report experiencing ‘regular’ religious discrimination (22% compared with between 8% and 12% among non-white Muslims)” (Mogahed and Ikramullah). This statistic suggests that white Muslims are either more sensitive to discriminatory aggressions perhaps because they are accustomed to a certain level of treatment and respect as white Americans (particularly if they

³⁴ ISPU reports that Muslims are “the most ethnically diverse faith community” in America. ISPU’s poll of Muslim Americans in 2019 reports that Muslims in America identify as follows: 28% Black or African American; 23% Asian; 19% White; 14% Arab; 8% Hispanic; 2% Native American; 5% Other (“American Muslims 101”).

³⁵ Notably, ISPU offers respondents the option of “Arab” as a category, unlike the census and other surveys that classify those of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) descent as being racially “white” (Chouhoud).

³⁶ “white Muslims were more likely to: 1. support former President Donald Trump (in terms of presidential job approval and favoring him as a candidate in the 2020 election) 2. favor building political coalitions with conservative groups 3. report experiencing religious discrimination ‘regularly’” (Chouhoud).

have converted), and/or they are indeed subject to greater levels of religious discrimination because they are perceived as race traitors.³⁷ In his study pertaining to how Muslim converts in Britain are (re)racialized, Leon Moosavi argues that white converts are “imagined as abandoning the nation and joining ‘the enemy’ by those who view Muslims as Other” (43). As they are “re-racialized,” they are seen as traitors to both their nation and their race and are subsequently subjected to “numerous instances when their religious identity is openly scrutinized” (43, 49). Moosavi further maintains that their experiences prior to Islam make converts better attuned to Islamophobia:

However, as well as converts being able to sense Islamophobia due to living their daily lives as Muslims, they are also well placed to identify Islamophobia.... they can draw upon memories to understand how non-Muslims perceive Muslims.... The converts’ ‘double-consciousness’ is therefore informed by having lived as a non-Muslim. (49)

White converts’ unique experience of Islamophobia is further complicated by ISPU’s observation that the 22% of white Muslims who reported that they regularly experience religious discrimination were also more likely to hold Islamophobic views (Mogahed and Ikramullah). This correlation highlights a critical conversation regarding the internalization of Islamophobic views by victims of Islamophobia and by white Muslim Americans in particular.

In her conversion narrative, Wilson frequently addresses the perception of Islam in the American imaginary – particularly in a post-9/11 world – and how this influences her transition

³⁷ In her study of converts to Islam, Juliette Galonnier argues, “Due to the specific history of Islam in Western societies, the border that converts go over by becoming Muslim is not simply religious, but also cultural, ethnic, and even racial.” She further reports that white converts in the U.S., whom she had interviewed, were “called the n-word, but also ‘wigger’ or ‘race traitor,’ which indicates they were seen as not behaving in conformity with their white status.”

to Islam. She first contemplates converting during a period of illness that she undergoes while at college, but the 9/11 attacks soon turn her against Islam: “I could not become a Muslim. Not after that. It would be a betrayal of the people I loved and an insult to what my country had suffered” (19). Later, when she does formally convert to Islam, she dreads sharing the news of her conversion with family and friends, whom she expects will react with feelings of betrayal, fear, and disgust. She is aware that by embracing Islam, she sacrifices – and is even perceived to betray – many of the privileges afforded to her as an educated, white American woman. Willow’s expectation echoes Moosavi’s observation that “upon converting to Islam, ‘white’ converts experience a re-racialization whereby they are no longer able to access white privilege in a way they once were” (42). Wilson reflects, “With them there was no space I could occupy besides that of a convert; Islam for the average American was never ordinary, could never be ordinary” (108-9). While dealing with the public reception of her conversion, ironically, she must also confront and come to terms with her own biases against Islam and Muslims.

The fact that Wilson is a woman who has chosen to convert to Islam is of particular significance. Rhetoric that builds upon the Clash of Civilizations theory, positing traditional Islam as antithetical to the West, too often focuses on the status of Muslim women. Islam and the Muslim world are depicted as savage and primitive in part because of their purported treatment of women; oppressed and vulnerable, Muslim women are to be pitied and saved. Haddad notes that “in a political environment of increasing hostility toward Islam, the manipulation of gender to reinforce the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’ portraying Islam as oppressive of women and the West as liberated – has placed Muslim women in Western societies in an extremely difficult position” (23). Muslim women converts are particularly challenged by this rhetoric as they are

suddenly placed in the midst of it, forced to respond to such notions that may be held by family and friends.

Haddad affirms, “Far from rejecting their identity as Americans, [female converts] find in Islam a more valid way of expressing the values that they believe to be consonant with the America they love” (50). Female converts are particularly attracted to “Islamic ideas related to sexuality, the construction of gender, and motherhood” (Nieuwkerk 676). The “importance of community, especially the urgency of maintaining strong family units” also signifies a strong appeal particularly as it offers “protection, communal identification, and support.” According to Haddad, the notion of community solidarity “contrast[s] vividly with the individuality of American society” (49). Arguably, the most valuable testimony that Wilson’s conversion narrative offers *for* Islam is precisely her perspective as a white American Muslim *woman* and the contentment she finds as a Muslim and as a member of her new faith community.

Bridging Islam and the West

Throughout *The Butterfly Mosque*, Wilson negotiates between cultures, often finding herself in the midst of a *perceived* clash between East and West, where she must define herself and her Islam against this clash. She remarks, “there is usually such noise when Egypt and Europe encounter each other... as if each culture must defend itself against the beauty of the other” (294). Assuming the role of cultural mediator, Wilson makes it her mission to bridge between and highlight the beauty of Eastern *and* Western cultures, both of which she comes to claim as her own.

As she encounters tensions between East and West, Wilson is also engaged in a personal struggle against herself:

in my mind, the idea that Middle Eastern men were dangerous misogynists was an established fact. I had been told as much on television and in newspapers and on film. My experiences being ogled and propositioned in Cairo confirmed it... It disturbed me that I couldn't unlump Omar from the faceless mass of Middle Eastern men I had been taught to fear... Were there layers of Omar's personality I couldn't see? (42-43)

Born, raised, and educated in the U.S., and having been subject to Western media and its stereotypes towards the Middle East, Willow immediately perceived Omar and other Middle Eastern men like him as misogynistic threats. The fact that they all appear to her as a "faceless mass" further highlights Western culture's monolithic and dehumanizing characterization of the Middle East and its inhabitants. Willow Wilson, as author, acknowledges young Willow's tendencies to fall victim to Orientalist rhetoric, her reluctance to challenge her preconceived notions and make the effort to judge Omar by his character and actions. Although he *seems* like a "nice" guy, she cannot help but perceive him via the ever-present potential for terror and violence as part of her expects to "discover the honor-killing wife-imprisoning fundamentalist reality beneath the facade," a lesson she learned from movies she watched and stories she read (43). Even after she converts to Islam, Wilson is surprised by "how much internalized prejudice [she] still had against Islam" (80). She recognizes the shame and guilt she feels for becoming Muslim, as if she had "committed a crime" and in the process betrayed her family, friends, and country. She notes, "on some level I believed that Bin Laden's Islam was the real Islam – that barbarism was waiting on the next page of the Quran or in the next hadith, that someday soon I would turn a page and be horrified" (81). When she and Omar disagree on matters of culture and

religion, they turn to Islam's two primary sources – Quran and Hadith – for answers, and Wilson is taken aback by how often Islam takes her side. Despite her attraction to and belief in the faith, she is unable to separate Islam from how it is portrayed by Western media and culture, a religion of violence and terror full of menacing potential. The fact that she is “disturbed” by these thoughts further highlights how popular culture's teachings – that Islam is barbaric and Middle Eastern men are to be feared – are deeply entrenched in her mind and difficult to overcome.

Even as Willow admits to her friend Jo that she has a crush on Omar, she is wary of acting on it, describing the situation as “too complicated” and “there would be too many cultural barriers” (42). The process of overcoming these cultural barriers pushes her beyond her comfort zone. Importantly, her relationship with Omar becomes symbolic of her reconciliation between East and West and/or between Islam and the West, and the subsequent merging of histories, cultures, and hemispheres. In fact, her relationship with Omar repeatedly reflects her relationship with Islam; the text's title further describes Wilson's narrative as a journey to both “love and Islam.” Appropriately, the Sufi literary tradition often uses romantic love to denote love for the divine.

Wilson's relationship with Islam involves a struggle – one that is unique to Muslims in the West, but the end results prove worth the effort. Wilson reflects, “The struggle for the Islam I loved and the struggle for the West I loved were the same struggle, and it was within that struggle that the clash of civilizations was eradicated” (141). In this statement, she positions herself equally between Islam and the West; in her love for both, she refuses to relinquish either and instead lays claim to them in her concurrent struggles. In so doing, Wilson overcomes the shadow and threat posed by the clash of civilizations; the same cultural barriers that would have kept her separate from Omar are dissolved. Wilson states, “Through [Omar], I was learning to be

unbothered by walls – to accept them as part of the landscape instead of struggling against them or pretending they didn't exist" (167). Her relationship with Omar teaches her to perceive humanity and the world as a whole; while there are undoubtedly differences and divisions between their respective cultures, these differences do not preclude the possibility for dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding.

Wilson further describes her personal growth: "despite the bewildering number of behaviors I had had to alter to survive in the public sphere in Egypt, I was not less myself – in fact, I was becoming a better self... I had gained so much more than I had lost" (140). Acknowledging that some level of compromise was required in her adjustment to life as a Muslim woman and in the process of building a bridge across cultures, she asserts that ultimately, she emerges as a "better self." Together, she and Omar create, what she refers to as, a third culture with "its own truths, its own language almost: Arabic and English bent and cobbled together to express a broader set of ideas" (139). This new language is necessary to facilitate understanding between the two sides. She learns that even "feelings that are universal... must be expressed in a mutually comprehensible way" (65). The fact that feelings are universal – generally, all humans feel love, joy, grief – does not mean that their expression will also be universal. Although her relationship with Omar is built on love and respect and they are brought together by "Islam and rock music," their relationship was still a challenge; it required that they develop a mutually comprehensible language and culture. She notes that "creating a peace for two in the midst of a war" was a "painful and exhausting" struggle. Wilson further describes the process of creating this peace, via a third culture, as a transformative one, "Sometimes it felt like I was being asked to unstring my bones and pass through the eye of a needle... Everything we thought, everything we did or said or wore or espoused unthinkingly, had to be brought forth and

reconciled” (66). In this process, she and Omar represent two warring cultures or civilizations, and the struggle to create a mutual language and culture reflects her inner struggle; having embraced Islam, the now Muslim and American parts of *herself* must also be reconciled.

Anthropologist Shabana Mir similarly expounds upon Homi Bhabha’s theorizing of a “third space” as it relates to Muslim Americans, noting that “marginal individuals use the cultural resources at their disposal... to perform and to reinvent identities, and to represent communities, ideologies, and themselves” (41). Mir thus characterizes this “third space” as a phenomenon born of a desperate need for survival in a world where Muslims simply do not belong (she is specifically referring to university campus). Wilson’s decision to begin wearing the hijab is a product of the third culture that she has created with Omar. The hijab is a “cultural resource” that she adopts to “perform” and “reinvent” her identity, and to “represent” her new Muslim faith and community. Wilson explains, “My decision, made as it was in that particular moment, was almost defensive; it was a way to say that anyone who could not see Omar as he was would not see me as I was” (99). The symbolic nature of their relationship suggests that this was a “defensive” and protective move directed towards Islam itself; if others could not see *Islam* for what it is, then they had no right to see her. She further maintains that this was a personal gesture intended for Omar, whom she tells, “I want to give you something bigger than anything I’ve given anyone else” (99). Her decision to wear hijab becomes symbolic of her commitment – to Omar and to Islam.

Furthermore, both Mir and Wilson characterize the third space and third culture they describe respectively as inherently transformative and requiring a reinvention of the self. In Wilson’s third culture, we see the possibility for a world that is larger and better than its individual parts. When Wilson and Omar eventually plan their wedding, she notes that “Rather

than catering to two sets of traditions [Egyptian and American], Omar and I decided to ignore them both.” Additionally, wanting “something airy and colorful,” they decide to hold an outdoor ceremony in a garden overlooking the Nile (235). Their wedding mirrors the third culture that they have constructed together; in an amalgamation of backgrounds and traditions, they create something new that is not limited or defined by walls or boundaries. It exists in the natural world as a whole, rather than in the confines of a specific nation or culture; “airy and colorful,” it cultivates a realm of beauty and possibility.

Mir further describes the third space where Muslim Americans are situated as a “nexus of political, religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, and transnational identities.... an in-between space awkwardly straddling recognized categories, fitting into none” (11). Wilson echoes this notion that she is actively straddling multiple categories while “fitting into none,” when she states, “It did not matter that there were Egyptians who were afraid of me because I was American, and that there would be Americans who were afraid of me because I was a Muslim” (141). Although it may not matter, throughout the text, Wilson is continuously aware of how she is perceived in the eyes of others. While her Muslim faith and the hijab she wears do not fit the “American” image, she will also always be a foreigner and an outsider in the Egyptian context. They see her as a “*khawagga*, the term most often used to describe a westerner in Egypt.” Although it originally referred to a “naturalized Egyptian,” she notes that its current usage is “dismissive, even a little derogatory.” At one point, this term is “feminized and made particular” when a fruit vendor refers to her as “*el khawagayya*”; even in this moment when she is granted approval by the local market where she shops, she is still marked as an outsider.

Acknowledging that she does not fit into recognized labels of Egyptian, American, or Muslim, Wilson perceives her life and destiny as functioning in the service of a greater purpose, towards a better future for all humanity. She affirms,

it no longer deeply mattered to me whose rules I followed, Arab or American or eastern or western, and the words themselves faded in significance... To live beyond the threshold of identity, to do so in the name of a peace that has not yet occurred but that is infinitely possible – this is exhilarating, necessary, and within reach. (117)

In resistance to the clash of civilizations narrative, the third culture that Wilson cultivates makes peace “infinitely possible.” It involves living beyond the rules and confines of what it might or should traditionally mean to be Arab, American, eastern, or western. By living beyond communal norms and setting her own rules, she establishes her individualism as a basis for her approach to life; in turn, this individualism comes to define her Muslim Americanness.

Private to Public

The positive value and idyllic potential of Wilson’s third culture do not negate the vulnerabilities and compromises that accompany this space. When she initially contemplates the possibility of a relationship with Omar, she is reluctant to do so and admits that she “like[d] having the luxury to avoid messy cross-cultural entanglements” (43). By entering into this relationship and, more significantly, by converting to Islam, she not only immerses herself into the mess of “cross-cultural entanglements,” but she also risks the “luxury” and privileges of her

original position as a white American woman. Early in the text, Wilson explains the sacrifice that she will eventually make:

I liked being a non-Muslim so much that I kept my new religion a secret and prayed alone behind a locked door... To the rest of the world, I was an upper-middle-class American white girl with bland politics and polite beliefs, and in this coveted social stratum I was happy. The status quo had been good to me. I was reluctant to abandon it – even for love, even for God. (43)

In the quote above, Wilson alludes to the consequences of expressing her faith and newfound love – for Omar and for God. She also highlights the demarcation between public and private; as long as she kept her Islam a “secret,” relegating it to her private space, she could continue to function and benefit from the privileges of being an “an upper-middle-class American white girl with bland politics and polite beliefs.” Haddad addresses the challenge of expressing a *public* Muslim identity; while a Muslim convert “may engage in the various duties and responsibilities of Islam privately... she also must decide to what extent she wants to publicly identify herself with Islam in terms of dress, prayer in the workplace, adopting a new name, and generally being recognized as having undergone a transformation.” Haddad further notes, “Many converts acknowledge that this rethinking of public identity... is one of the most challenging aspects of the process of becoming Muslim” (48).

Although Wilson has already converted at this point, her *Muslim* identity – relegated to the private sphere – exists in tension with her American or Western identity. Eventually, the move from private to public reconciles the two identities, allowing them to coexist in the same spheres. However, as soon as she *publicly* embraces Islam, her “bland politics and polite beliefs” also

become radical and uncomfortable. Thus, her *Muslimness* now overshadows the fact that she is still an “upper-middle-class American white girl.”

Although Wilson recognizes that by converting to Islam, she is also abandoning the “coveted” social position and privilege to which she had grown accustomed, the consequences of this loss are not immediately apparent. She is shocked to discover that she is under investigation by the FBI. Her friends Ben, who frequently travels between the U.S. and Egypt, and Mehdi, whose only crime as far as we know is being Persian, are also being investigated; in frustration, Ben states, “they think we’re terrorists, Willow.” Her only reaction is “But we’re the good guys” (174). This moment betrays the vulnerability of her new position; she realizes that she had “taken America for granted,” expecting that she could rely on her privileges as an American to protect and rescue her if necessary, especially if her safety was ever threatened while in Egypt (176). Instead, betrayed and abandoned by her own nation and home, she feels an acute loss:

I was afraid; at that moment, and for a long time afterward, I was afraid to return to my own country. It was a feeling so alien that I found myself unable to cope with it emotionally. I had always been a member of a comfortable majority – I was middle-class, educated, white, of no unusual political bent. I had always felt, though I would never have admitted it, that the laws protected me before anyone else. (175)

The fear to “return to [her] own country” highlights the emotional turmoil and instability of her situation; in her fear, Wilson has lost both home and refuge. Wilson’s repetition of “I was afraid” echoes earlier instances in the narrative when she mentions (and discounts) the fact that there are Egyptians who are afraid of her because she is American and, conversely, Americans who are afraid of her because she is Muslim. Now, *she* is afraid. Arguably, she fears the fact she is now

both Muslim *and* American. Willow's new Muslim status appears to nullify her belonging to the privileged majority, othering and relegating her to minority status; marked a race traitor and now a potential terrorist, she is definitely *not* seen as one of the "good guys." How does her Muslimness threaten her American belonging and what does she risk by attempting to embrace both identities?

Wilson's fear and vulnerability are illustrated in the nightmares she begins to have after discovering that she is under investigation:

I dreamed of getting shot and bleeding to death, of being lost in airports and unable to fly home, and once, that Omar and I were stuck in an invented borderland between Egypt, the United States, and Israel without our passports... We couldn't remember which country we had come from or where we were going, and no one would let us in. (177)

The image of her being shot alludes to the betrayal she experiences and the severe violence, suffered by Muslims and Arabs (in the U.S. and Israel), that she now imagines she too will experience. She worries that she no longer has access to any home or refuge, and thus occupies a perpetual state of loss and exile; they are stuck with nowhere to go and no one to claim them. The "invented borderland" she describes is arguably the third culture that she and Omar have created and occupy together. The fact that they do not fit any recognizable labels is once again expressed with the loss of their passports; they cannot claim any nation as their own. Moreover, the alien-ness of their position is such that nothing appears familiar and they have no memory of their origins or destination; lost in time and space, they belong nowhere. Whereas their third culture is described elsewhere as a space replete with the potential for peace, growth, and unity, in her nightmare they are "stuck" in this invented borderland and it is a lonely and scary place.

An American Islam

Although Wilson's American privilege and belonging is threatened by her conversion to Islam, her new faith is perhaps ironically defined by its Americanness. Her approach to hijab is an example of her *American Islam*. The common understanding of hijab among Americans and Westerners, according to Haddad et. al, is to view it as "a symbol of cultural difference (and thus inferiority), a threat to secularity, or simply as a personal expression of religiosity – it frames the female body as an icon of the 'clash of civilizations' and has far-reaching political and social implications" (39). Wilson's decision to don the hijab becomes a means of defying Western perceptions of Islam and Muslim women in particular. As an American Muslim woman who chooses to wear the hijab, the latter becomes a means of complicating the supposed tensions between her Muslim and American identities. It also serves to challenge the notion of compulsion, reaffirming the fact that for most Muslim American women, "dressing Islamically... is not about coercion but about making choices, about 'choosing' an identity and expressing a religiosity through their mode of dress" (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 10). To illustrate further this point, Wilson recalls, "The first scarf I ever bought and wore was apple red, a color that ensured my ultraconservative colleagues would be as shocked as my non-Muslim ones" (106). Ultimately, she shocks both her Muslim and non-Muslim colleagues; defying both East and West, Wilson's hijab constitutes an individual expression of herself. Deliberately forging her own path, Wilson's Muslimness is marked by an individuality and nonconformity that are inherently American.

Wilson's hijab plays an important role in the transition of her Islam from private to public. Mir affirms that hijab represents "an external sign of religiosity, an identifier for Muslim women, and a source of community honor." Further, it "could signify religious devotion,

community membership, ethnic heritage, or a mnemonic device for piety” (124). For Wilson, the decision to wear the hijab is a critical expression of her faith as it makes her Muslimness visible for all to see. In Egypt’s public sphere, it is the only sign that her foreignness and American identity are complicated by her concurrent Muslim identity. Importantly, as Mir notes, the hijab signifies her visible belonging to the Muslim community; while other Muslim women who do not wear the hijab also belong to this community, their belonging is simply less visibly apparent.

Mir further notes that women who wear the hijab risk the “potential loss of social connection with majority American peers,” particularly as non-Muslims “tended to be tense and uncomfortable around hijabis” (90, 99). She argues, “In a dialectical relationship with the observer’s stereotypes, hijab not only marked a woman externally as Muslim but it intensified her inward consciousness of difference and cultural distance” (91). Wilson mirrors this reality as she worries about how her family and friends will react to her hijab; she struggles to overcome this distance and maintain her relationships with her loved ones. She is painfully aware of the stereotypes associated with hijab, depicting the latter as a symbol of Muslim women’s subjugation, “associated with victimhood, but paradoxically, also with ‘terrorist-related things’” (Mir 91). “Inherently conspicuous,” on the one hand, hijab often reduces Muslim woman to their clothing in Western eyes as it seems to eclipse all other aspects of their identity. On the other hand, the hijab also invites awareness and potential dialogue. By defying both Eastern and Western conceptions of hijab, Wilson’s “apple red” scarf correlates with Mir’s description of how hijab operates in the third space as it successfully *dodges* the stereotypical image of Muslim woman, teaching them to “forsake their assumptions” about Islam, Muslims, and Muslim woman “and to listen to her” (Mir 100).

In many ways, Wilson's understanding of and approach to Islam privileges a personal, spiritual journey; while her personal approach may eventually lead her to a traditionally religious form of practice, this is not always the case. Reflecting on her decision to wear the hijab she states,

Mainstream Islam is too abstract and ordinary a thing to offer much comfort to the average initiate; it demands belief quietly and without celebration, offers few indisputable answers, and requires one to draw on inner spiritual resources far more often than communal ones. (108)

Relying on her own "inner spiritual resources," she had no reason to seek support or legitimacy from communal resources. She notes that her hijab confused the "ultraconservative teachers" and "fundamentalists" she encountered: "The way I wore my scarf, and the colors I chose, made it clear I was not crying out for help or seeking support" (108). Instead, she is paving her own path. In fact, Wilson notes that she "remain[s] unconvinced that *hijab* is *fard*, or obligatory." She articulates her personal definition and individual expression of hijab:

it has become a way to define intimacy in a wider sense, and in the circle of men who have seen my hair I have included some of Omar's and my close friends. When I am in the United States, I still go bareheaded in some circumstances. In other words, I have never been a model *muhajeba*. (99)

Whereas traditionally, hijab limits the intimate circle of men who can see a woman's hair to include only immediate male relatives (husband, son, father, brother, uncle), Wilson expands this circle to include close friends as well. In some instances, she chooses not to wear it at all. She readily admits that she is not a "model *muhajeba*" (referring to a woman who wears the hijab), but she also expresses no desire or compulsion to fit such a label. She describes her initial decision to cover as

an “impulse more spiritual than religious; hijab lent itself to my purposes, rather than I to its” (99). She maintains that it is her choice to wear it and to decide *how* to wear it. She covers not because she believes that she is required to do so or due to any external pressure or religious requirement, but as a *spiritual* expression born of her own will and as a means of subverting societal expectations.

Wilson’s proud assertion of control and agency in how she *chooses* to be Muslim is again a mark of her individual and American Islam. She displays a similar attitude when referring to her practice of prayer. Initially, she found prayer difficult as she “had never been taught to bow toward anything, or recite words when no one was around to hear them.” Therefore, instead of facing Mecca – “a place [she] had never seen, full of people [she] had never met” – she “faced west, toward home,” where she “had first spoken to God” (26). Finding neither value nor familiarity in Mecca, she prays in the direction of her home, America, instead. Her initial observance of prayer, one of the pillars of Islam, illustrates the tension between her individuality and Islam, which literally means submission as it calls for total submission to God. As Martin Nguyen observes, “no posture is more emblematic of ritual prayer in specific and Islam in general than the prostration of head to earth, *sajda*” (6).³⁸ The difficulty Willow finds in “bow[ing] toward anything” refers to more than the physical bowing and prostration that constitutes the Muslim ritual prayer; she is also expressing the challenge of submission in general.

Nieuwkerk delineates the duality of submission and agency with regards to the creation of a pious self. First, she observes that the “general process of modernization and individualization,

³⁸ In *Modern Muslim Theology: Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination*, Martin Nguyen thoroughly discusses the role of the Ka’ba, prayer, and prostration as he develops a “practical theology of prayer oriented towards righteous engagement” (10).

which makes the individual agent the center of his or her biography, has a direct bearing on conversion.” Religion has become a commodity and a matter of “individual choice,” wherein “actors choose from among several religious options the worldview that suits them best” (671). The process of exploring various belief systems and shopping around for a religion that fits best is reflected in the conversion narratives of both Webb and Wilson. Nieuwkerk further claims that adhering to religious practices of praying, fasting, etc. serve to embody Islam and help to create a more pious self, requiring “sacrifice, submission, and agency”; further, piety operates as a “technology of the self designed to produce religious excellence.” Importantly, rather than viewing an adherence to organized religion, particular communal religion, as undermining of individualism, Nieuwkerk holds that the “active construction of a pious self... is not passive obedience or submission but an active struggle to form a pious disposition, a fuller development of self by devotional practices” (681).

Wilson’s American Islam is defined by a struggle with herself. She explains that eventually she “wrestled [her] ego into obedience and faced Mecca” (73). According to Nieuwkerk, this act of submission – by praying towards Mecca – is in the service of the “active construction of a pious self.” The struggle with the ego also embodies aspects of the Sufi tradition, wherein one seeks annihilation of the ego so that one’s life and purpose are entirely devoted to God rather than to the pursuit of worldly desires. She discovers that “religion is an act of will” and aspects such as ritual prayer do not necessarily “flow naturally from belief, but... took practice” (26). Even in this focus on “will,” her American individuality is again highlighted. When she does push herself to face Mecca, she “began to understand the reason for ‘organized’ worship, in which ritual innovation is discouraged.” By willing herself to participate in “organized” religion, she finds merit in the practice, “When you join an organized religion, you do not worship in isolation, even when you

are alone. In Islam, prayer is a full-body experience... You become part of a mathematical algorithm linking earthly and heavenly bodies” (73). Prayer is a holistic experience, a “full-body experience” that deliberately situates the individual within the universe in a communal act of submission to God. Similarly, Nguyen characterizes prayer as a defining element of the Muslim community, which he imagines “as one united in a common inclination to God and for which prayer marks the means of knowing the way” (5). As Ngyuen and Wilson suggest, prayer is the thread that simultaneously links members of the Muslim community to each other and to God.

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri asserts that “Islamic acts of worship embody a triangular relationship between God, individual, and community.” With regards to prayer in particular, he notes that the consistencies of this act of worship – the “liturgy and physical movements” as well as the “common spatial and temporal orientation” (i.e. the set intervals of time and direction towards Mecca) – “all embody in the individual a sense of community even if one performs the act in solitude” (213-214). Hence, it is not until Willow faces Mecca (as opposed to her home in America) that she fully manifests her relationship to the *Umma*.

The spiritual journey that Wilson undertakes is both gradual and evolving, and it continues to take place on her own terms: “On my own, in small, quiet increments, I began to inhabit Islam” (73). The notion of *inhabiting* Islam portrays it as a home and refuge, a familiar source of comfort and security; furthermore, to inhabit a home is to be surrounded by it, to establish roots and grow beneath its roof. Wilson’s journey to Islam is thus a journey to inhabiting Islam, to embodying its essence and principals. Significantly, this home is also shared by a global community of Muslims, the *Umma* family.

As she gradually “inhabits” Islam, Wilson’s individual faith is also slowly moving outward and being expressed in stages. For instance, her journey to Islam appears to begin with a tattoo that says *Al Haq* in Arabic, which refers to one of the 99 names of Allah and which she explains as “Truth without untruth, truth without opposite. The real that encompasses even the unreal, the most-real.” She explains to Omar that she was not a Muslim when she got it, “I got it when I knew I would convert someday” (67). In her mind and heart, she recognizes that she would eventually convert, inspiring her to have one of Allah’s names inscribed on her body. The name of God – specifically the name *Al Haq* – on her body is literally a physical embodiment of “Truth” and the “most-real.” It is the initial manifestation of her budding faith (nevermind that tattoos are traditionally prohibited in Islam). When Willow eventually converts, she keeps it a secret and begins to participate in private acts of worship, praying behind closed doors. Later, her hijab marks the visible expression and declaration of her faith as she transcends the confines of her private space and publicly embraces Islam.

After Wilson shares the fact that she has converted with her immediate friends, one of the first religious practices that she engages in the fasting of Ramadan, which involves abstaining from eating, drinking, and sexual relations from dawn until dusk; the practice of fasting is meant to teach self-discipline and nurture one’s feelings of God-consciousness. Midway through her first day of fasting, Wilson feels the effects of lack of food and drink; she observes her friends’ reactions, “Omar and Jo, both of whom seemed at least partially convinced that fasting was incompatible with my Anglo-Saxon physiology” (62). Later, she describes the “euphoria of fast-breaking – part chemical, part spiritual” (63). This religious practice brings together the physical and the spiritual; moreover, the former facilitates the latter. She experiences joy and a measure of reassurance when she successfully completes her first day of fasting; in a way, it proved that fasting

was indeed compatible with her “Anglo-Saxon physiology.” More broadly, it served as an indicator that *she* was compatible with Islam. She further notes,

I had lived up to my choices. If I could fast one day, I could fast another twenty-eight – I could do it all again the next year. And the year after. For the first time since I converted, I saw a satisfying little glimmer of what the future might look like. (64)

On one hand, if she can fast one day, she can fast an entire month and all the Ramadans to come; similarly, if she can fast, she can comply and fulfill other aspects of the religion. The path of Islam to which she had committed herself begins to take shape.

The Ramadan experience is very much a communal one; Muslims around the world are participating in the fast, often gathering together with family and friends to break their fast as soon as the sun sets. Fasting also encourages empathy for the less fortunate around the world. In this stage of expression, Wilson’s Muslimness is firmly positioned within the community. Her participation in “organized” religion facilitates a bridge between herself and the broader community, and her acts of worship serve as an expression of communal belonging. She describes prayer,

For me, the ritual of prayer was transformed by this physicality. As I bowed and knelt and stood, there were shoulders against my shoulders, knees against my knees, the back of another hand against the back of my hand. The line levels everyone. (153)

The physicality of the prayer is enhanced by bodily contact along the line of Muslim women prostrating simultaneously, directing their prayers in the same direction. Standing with others, shoulder to shoulder, facing Mecca, and moving in unison, Wilson has a unifying communal

experience that reduces difference. In Wilson's gradual submission and incremental inhabiting of Islam, she also undergoes a fundamental transformation. She reflects,

If I left Islam tomorrow, I would remain chemically altered by it. Rituals that seem arbitrary to the irreligious – the precise wording and physical attitudes of prayer, the process of ablution – are carefully formulated tonics. Almost unconsciously, I was being changed by them. (74)

Wilson's reverent description of religious rituals and their value as "carefully formulated tonics" is in stark contrast to her earlier days as a Muslim, when facing Mecca seemed "arbitrary." Importantly, Wilson's experience of Islam is inherently reflexive. By inhabiting Islam, it in turn inhabits her and becomes a permanent part of her chemical makeup.³⁹ Khan elaborates on the reciprocal relationship between individual and collective identities, noting that "the process of reproducing collective identity" via collective practices also "involves the constitution of the individual self." As Wilson reproduces an Islamic community, she also "produces the Muslim personality" (107).

Delimiting Islam

Wilson's purpose throughout her conversion narrative emerges as a move to open understandings of Islam and free Muslimness from the stereotypes that confine it. This is reflected in her description of the Butterfly Mosque, her memoir's namesake:

³⁹ Nguyen makes a similar observation about Malcolm X's initial struggles with prayer and his evolving relationship with it, "In prayer Malcolm was transformed, but the process of that transformation, as his own words reveal, took a lifetime to unfold" (160).

the mosque, a little jewel-like thing that looks far older than the prison itself. Its corniced minaret stretches above the wall like a plea for help; the mosque, like the prisoners, was trapped there for no other reason than that it was in the way. I never learned its name... I began to call it the butterfly mosque, because it reminded me of a butterfly caught in a jar. I would fantasize about freeing it and imprisoning in its place the modern, ugly, loud mosque that was the focal point of Turan religious activity... (122)

The mosque is neighbor to a political prison that holds “journalists, reformists, and dissidents”; both are hidden and confined, kept out of the way, behind “wire-topped walls” (122). Here, the butterfly mosque appears to symbolize the “jewel” that is Islam. Like a butterfly trapped in a jar, the life, beauty, and magnificence of the faith are muted by the things that have come to surround and define it; Wilson dreams of freeing Islam from these walls. As she looks beyond the confines of the jar and the wall that separates and hides both the prison and mosque from view, she transcends the image of Islam as it has been and continues to be articulated by popular discourse as well as by fundamentalism and political religious repressions; this image is reflected in the “ugly, loud mosque” she seeks to imprison instead.

In freeing Islam from these confines and confronting the clash between Islam and the West, Wilson engages in what Geoffrey Nash describes as a process of deterritorializing and universalizing Islam (19). Early in the text, Wilson describes the moment of her conversion:

I discovered in the Quran what I already believed. But if conversion is entering into the service of an ideal, then I converted on that plane. In the darkness over the Mediterranean, in no country, under no law, I made peace with God... for the first time in my life, I felt unified... (23)

Wilson further frames this moment with the assertion that her conversion was an expression of “what [she] already believed.” Thus, if Islam is to be located in *any* specific place, it is within *herself*. Her conversion is merely an articulation of herself, the outward expression of her inner truth. This corresponds with her later statement, “Faith, to me, is not a leap but an affirmation of personal experience. With Islam I gave myself permission to live in the world as I saw it, not as I was told to see it” (76). Hermansen describes the gradual process of inner change as a defining characteristic of Western Muslim conversion narratives: “Islam is portrayed as emerging from natural and religious experiences” (76). Unlike conventional conversion narratives, there is a “lack of a radical moment of ‘snapping,’ or a total rejection of the previous identity.” Instead, the narratives of Muslim converts like Willow Wilson are marked by “a sense of returning to what one has always been”; for this reason, “reversion”⁴⁰ rather than “conversion” is often a more apt description of the process (79). Wilson is by no means the first to experience her conversion as an “affirmation of personal experience” and preexisting beliefs. Her narrative is aligned with what Hermansen identifies as “a consistency across gender and generation in the experience of Islam as being familiar and of recognition rather than conversion” (80).

In describing the moment she formally embraces Islam, she dissociates it from any law or land. What she depicts is an Islam in its pure form, where she is subject to nothing but God. It is in this moment that appears to transcend space and time, where she is able to make peace with God and herself. This image of Islam mirrors Abd-Allah’s use of the analogy that compares

⁴⁰ The idea of *reversion* alludes to the Islamic belief (based on Hadith) that all children are born in a state of *fitra* (i.e. Islam) until they are made Jewish, Christian, etc. by their parents; therefore, individuals who embrace Islam are ultimately returning or *reverting* to their original faith. The concept of *fitra*, which commonly refers to “the original state in which humans are created by God,” was “commonly invoked by Sufis, who often viewed their own quest as the means for restoring the original harmony of creation” (“Fitra”).

Islam to a “crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but – having no color of their own – reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow”⁴¹ (“Islam” 1). Sitting on a plane, flying over the Mediterranean, Wilson characterizes Islam as dynamic, moving through time across the world’s peoples, places, and cultures – like the pure flow of a river. While it may reflect the “bedrock” below – the specific customs, cultures, and histories it encounters, preserving its compatibility with humanity across time – it nonetheless transcends ethnic, national, and geographic divides, consistently embodying a more universal human truth.

The expression of Islam as an *individual* experience that privileges herself is arguably reflective of an American individualism that is often marked by a level of rebelliousness. She turns away from how she was “told to see” the world – by her family, American upbringing, popular culture and media, etc. Throughout the text, Wilson maintains that her practice of Islam is always *her* choice. In her adherence to the religion, she maintains control; as with hijab, religion “lent itself to [her] purposes, rather than [she] to its” (99). Similarly, Haddad et. al describe the experience of Muslim converts in America, “Far from rejecting their identity as Americans, they find in Islam a more valid way of expressing the values that they believe to be consonant with the America they love” (50). Wilson claims that her relationship to Islam is a manifestation of preexisting values and beliefs, rather than an embracing of something outside herself. In her deterritorialization of Islam, Wilson’s *American* Islam is inherently personal and individual.

⁴¹ Others, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have used this analogy of a “crystal clear river” to describe their respective religions.

Communal Identities and Solidarities

As we undertake the study of converts and their narratives of conversion, Michael Muhammad Knight cautions against the “division of American Muslims into ‘indigenous’ (i.e. converts and their descendants) and ‘immigrant’ experiences” as it “betrays the extent to which each is deeply embedded within the other” (95-96). This interconnectedness is highlighted by the global influence that is illustrated in the conversion narratives discussed in this chapter; the individual experiences of Alexander Russell Webb, Malcolm X, and Willow Wilson amongst others are each fundamentally shaped by their communal identities. Building institutions, educating others, and fostering community, each is invested in their role as bridge and cultural mediator in the West. Further, their respective relationships to both God and the Muslim *Umma* is undeniably intertwined. Nonetheless, each narrative is a product of its time – late 19th century, 1960’s, and post- 9/11 – reflecting the individual’s subject position as it is defined by their sociocultural and political contexts, as well as their specific race and gender. Their contrasting personalities and very different encounters with Islam, Muslims, and America depict a rich range of Muslim American experience.

The experience of being a part of a global community proves to be a defining moment in each of the conversion narratives that have been examined here. In concluding, I turn to Malcolm X’s reflection on the function of a communal, global identity as a fundamental source of empowerment:

I reflected many, many times to myself upon how the American Negro has been entirely brainwashed from ever seeing or thinking of himself, as he should, as a part of the non-white peoples of the world. The American Negro has no conception of the hundreds of

millions of other non-whites' concern for him: he has no conception of their feeling of brotherhood for and with him.... And the first thing the American power structure doesn't want any Negroes to start is thinking *internationally*. (398-399)

Malcolm suggests that as long as the “American Negro” remains unaware of this “feeling of brotherhood” and unable to identify with his international community, he will remain weak and disenfranchised. In the final pages of his *Autobiography*, on the subject of Black Nationalism and Black solidarity, he further states:

Even when I was a follower of Elijah Muhammad, I had been strongly aware of how the Black Nationalist political, economic and social philosophies had the ability to instill within black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the black race needs today to get up off its knees... (431)

This rationale may be extended to Muslims in America and the West more broadly. Black or Muslim, the potential yet immeasurable value of community solidarity – whether it is local, national, and/or global – is the “dignity,” “incentive,” and “confidence” that it instills in the individual, empowering this community of individuals to rise, act, and claim their narrative.

Chapter Three:

Breathing Through the Dust in Samira Ahmed's *Internment*

"I've seen people abused into taking up no space, disappearing to avoid attacks. They shrink from their God given right to be fully here, to speak their mind, to share their needs, to be seen. If this happened to you, know this: you are worthy of claiming your place, your voice, your full breath."

– Dalia Mogahed

In the wake of the Trump administration's Muslim Ban and in the broader contexts of globalized detention of Muslims, Samira Ahmed's novel *Internment* imagines a near-future America where American Muslims are stripped of their civil rights and forced into internment camps. The above quote by Dalia Mogahed (Director of Research at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and former advisor on Muslim affairs to President Obama) encapsulates the novel's message: how a community, specifically the Muslim American community, is marginalized and alienated, and how the Muslim American individual is too often rendered both invisible and silent. The novel is also a story of resilience and resistance, wherein a community of people fight to reclaim their place, their voice, and their full breath.

The fictional scenario that Ahmed illustrates can be understood as the logical and horrifying development of the fear of Muslim Americans that Moustafa Bayoumi identifies as a characteristic feature of "War on Terror culture":

War on Terror culture has meant that we [Muslims] are now regularly seen as dangerous outsiders, that our daily actions are constantly viewed with suspicion, that our complex histories in this country are neglected or occluded, and that our very presence and our houses of worship have become issues of local, regional, and national politics. (254)

In turn, Muslims in America are forced to carry the burdensome weight of being at the center of such suspicion and a rhetoric that continuously ignores their histories, contributions, and even their human complexities. As a widely-published journalist, professor of English, and author of the award-winning book *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America*, Bayoumi writes about issues and challenges pertaining to Muslims and Arabs, in the U.S. and abroad. Frequently, he addresses how the experiences of these communities are shaped by U.S. politics and culture. In *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror*, published in 2015, Bayoumi expounds on the underlying history, politics, theory, and culture of the War on Terror – and its consequences for Muslims in America as well as for the future of America more broadly. In his characterization of War on Terror culture, he observes: “Under the guise of common sense, the vilification of Muslims is normalized and naturalized by a broad swath of the population, including leading politicians, law enforcement officials, petty bureaucrats, and the media... It’s part of our mainstream” (151). Bayoumi’s language – “common sense,” “normalized,” “naturalized,” “mainstream” – underscores the pervasiveness and deeply-rooted acceptance of Islamophobia in U.S. culture. Samira Ahmed’s depiction of a time when the government has recourse to the massive internment of Muslim Americans is predicated on this mainstream Islamophobia, raising several important questions about the current status of Muslims in the U.S. In what ways do Muslims in America respond to the question of if or how they should express their Muslimness? What is risked by the decision to

identify as a member of the Muslim community? How does a nation-wide climate of Islamophobia encourage Muslim solidarity while it also highlights tensions and prejudices internal to both the Muslim American individual and community? Samira Ahmed's novel suggests that the condition of internment is both a literal future, one that is premised on the U.S. government's historic responses to perceived threats, as well as an apt metaphor for the reality of Muslim Americans today.

Ahmed's *Internment*, published in 2019, positions itself in a larger discourse concerning Islam as an identity marker as well as a source of alienation and exile. In *Writing Muslim Identity*, Geoffrey Nash, a professor of English who explores the relationship between Islam and the West, specifically examines how contemporary Muslim authors in the West either reify or counter notions of Western cultural superiority and claims to moral authority. In particular, he describes the increased usage of Islam as a primary identity marker:

In spite of their originating from a wide diversity of nations and cultures, there has been an increasing tendency among Muslim migrants to cohere around the signifier 'Muslim' as a commonality in response to their minority status within liberal societies in which, though cultural make-up is allowed to be diverse, the dominant view is secular. (7)

Ahmed et. al similarly explain that for Muslim diasporas in the West, "a heightened sense of separate Muslim identity... is part of a reaction toward a negative scapegoating of Muslim individuals and societies" (9-10). Thus, as Islamophobic rhetoric escalates, Muslims are more likely to identify as such.⁴² On one hand, this affirmation of Muslim identity is simultaneously an

⁴² Eboo Patel's "The American Ummah in the Era of Islamophobia" elaborates on the phenomenon wherein individuals, whom he describes as non-traditional Muslims, began to identify publicly as Muslim specifically because of and in response to Islamophobia.

act of defiance and survival. Edward Said described the dual purpose of Muslim identity in his 1981 work *Covering Islam*, wherein he discusses how Western media distorts the image of Islam and Muslims; he observes, “For almost every Muslim, the mere assertion of an Islamic identity becomes an act of nearly cosmic defiance and a necessity for survival” (76). We witness such an act of conscious defiance early in Ahmed’s text, when Layla Amin, the novel’s teenage protagonist, and her family choose to assert and claim their Muslim religious belonging on the census.

While the decision to identify as Muslim may often be a personal choice, Nash argues that religious identity is also “imposed upon Muslims by a variety of factors including political, societal and media pressure, cultural chauvinism, and Muslims’ own perceived need for self-definition” (Nash 9). The “Muslim” identity that is imposed by U.S. political and media pressures is typically characterized as a violent, cultural, and ideological threat to Western ideals of democracy and modernity. Alienated by a public discourse that defines Islam as fundamentally incompatible with American society, Muslims struggle to (re)claim their religious identity as complex, and one that, like any other religion, can co-exist within broader American society.

An extreme manifestation of this alienation of the Muslim individual is the physical removal of Muslims from society and their internment in detention camps. While Muslim internment camps do not exist in America today, Ahmed’s book nonetheless calls forth very real challenges and pressures faced by the Muslim American community. In this chapter, I begin by discussing the significance of this novel as speculative fiction that was primarily written for a young adult audience. *Internment* effectively highlights historical and contemporary abuses that have and continue to take place in America and around the world, warning of a dark future for

Muslims in America if matters go unchecked. I also delve into questions of citizenship, identity, and representation as I consider the role of the U.S. Census in the novel as it echoes recent politics, whereby in theory it facilitates access to fair representation and distribution of resources, but in reality it can potentially be used to target certain groups. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Bayoumi's work (particularly essays published in *This Muslim American Life*) as it provides important context and a non-fictional counterpoint to the fictional narrative offered by *Internment*. After Layla's family chooses to identify as Muslim, they are forcibly removed from their homes and communities and placed in an internment camp. In exile and defined by their potential for terror, they are subject to erasure and relegated to occupying empty spaces. Layla uses her voice to resist, to reclaim both her identity and her freedom. I further argue that the physical internment of Muslims in the novel serves as a metaphor for the marginalization of Muslims in the U.S. The suffocating dust that characterizes the internment camp symbolizes the burdens of Islamophobia; both leave their mark on their victims. Constantly at risk of being rendered silent, invisible, and alien, Muslims in America occupy a state of precarity, where they must grapple with these burdens and engage with the risks of *being* Muslim in the War on Terror culture. Ultimately, Layla's struggle to breathe through the dust is a struggle for the survival of her Muslim American identity.

Genre, Audience, and a Call to Action

Samira Ahmed's *Internment* is a dystopian Young Adult novel that depicts a dark near-future wherein the United States government adopts increasingly anti-Muslim policies that eventually lead to the mass internment of Muslim Americans. It may also be classified as an

example of speculative fiction in its various meanings.⁴³ Broadly defined, speculative fiction refers to a “super category” that encompasses all genres, including dystopian narratives, that do not mimic the “‘consensus reality’ of everyday experience.” More pertinent to this discussion is Margaret Atwood’s narrower definition of speculative fiction as a category that “refers to narratives about things that can potentially take place, even though they have not yet happened at the time of the writing.” According to her, it is the element of possibility that distinguishes this genre from science fiction (Oziewicz).

A brief, contextual look at Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers a deeper understanding of speculative fiction as she defines it. Published in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian novel that imagines a near-future New England, where the totalitarian country of Gilead is established and governed by Christian fundamentalists whose solution to widespread infertility is to assign a fertile woman, a handmaid, to each of the elite Commanders for the purpose of bearing them children. Atwood affirms that this dystopian future was deliberately grounded in reality:

I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist. I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human

⁴³ Literary scholar Marek Oziewicz states:

The term “speculative fiction” has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating “consensus reality” of everyday experience. In this latter sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more.

potential for deplorable behaviour. The group-activated hangings, the tearing apart of human beings, the clothing specific to castes and classes, the forced childbearing and the appropriation of the results, the children stolen by regimes and placed for upbringing with high-ranking officials, the forbidding of literacy, the denial of property rights: all had precedents, and many were to be found not in other cultures and religions, but within western society, and within the "Christian" tradition, itself.

The fact that the events of the novel have occurred in other times and places makes the possibility of a future Gilead that brings these events together in present-day America all the more plausible. Atwood further reflects, "Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren't there already." Similarly, the radical government of Gilead is built upon the "deep foundation of the US," which she describes as "the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England, with its marked bias against women, which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself." This period of social chaos is provoked in the novel by "the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency" (Atwood 174). Initially blamed on "Islamic fanatics," what is revealed to be a military coup leads to rampant fear amongst the public, paving the way for the subsequent establishment of a Christian fundamentalist theocracy. The novel's sense of urgency is exacerbated by its mirroring of the United States' contemporaneous "embrace of conservatism... as well as the increasing power of the Christian right," effectively drawing attention to potentially dangerous consequences of the political attitudes and trends of the 1980s (Armstrong).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which premiered in 2017, has also been viewed as a commentary on contemporary rhetoric and politics that gained traction under the Trump administration.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ahmed's *Internment* also exists in the realm of possibility, illustrating a potential future that is grounded in events or attitudes that have been witnessed in the present or recent past. While there may be no history of a mass detention of Muslim Americans in the U.S., the precondition for such an alarming development nonetheless exists in the anti-Muslim rhetoric and governmental policies that are features of contemporary War on Terror culture. Despite being fiction, the events that take place in *Internment* have also occurred in other times and places; it offers an amalgamation of the various instances in American and world history when the rights of minorities have been stripped and ethnic and religious groups have been massively detained. The protagonist Layla is cognizant of the fact that there is precedent for her family's internment, and she repeatedly compares the Muslim American internees' circumstances to the detention of Japanese Americans during World War II. As she realizes that Muslims are no longer protected by the law, she recalls those who have been detained by the U.S. and held in Guantanamo Bay for years without due process. She also makes references to the WWII concentration camps and draws inspiration from the White Roses, who resisted the Nazis.⁴⁵

The possibility of Muslim American internment is undeniably attached to our contemporary time, and Ahmed's text speaks to abuses taking place both in America and around the world. Today, the U.S. manages the "world's largest immigrant detention center," with over 52,000 detainees including legal migrants and asylum seekers. There have been increasing

Bestselling author Jennifer Keishin Armstrong writes, "the series felt all the more chilling because of the massive shift in US politics with the election of Donald Trump... Suddenly, the book and series' major flashpoints felt more possible than ever... [They] dovetailed with fears of Trump's authoritarian tendencies and his vice president's anti-gay and anti-abortion beliefs." On the other hand, the Hulu adaptation is also being read by some as a critique of the Islamic world.

⁴⁵ Each of these references is analyzed in more detail below.

reports of families being separated at the U.S.-Mexico border, detained for unpredictable and varying lengths of time, and subjected to neglect as well as both physical and sexual abuse (Kassie). In China, 1.8 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been placed in mass detention centers since spring of 2017. The targeting of Uyghurs is an attack against their culture and Muslim belief as reports indicate that Chinese authorities seek to “forcibly assimilate Uyghurs” via “repetitive political indoctrination, Sinification through Chinese language and culture sessions, and compulsory denunciations of Uyghur culture and belief in Islam” (UHRP).⁴⁶ The targeting of Muslims has also reached new heights in India, where 10 mass detention centers are being built to house 1.9 million “illegals,” mostly Muslims who have lived in India for decades and whose citizenship was stripped overnight when the new Citizenship Act effectively removed them from the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Banerji (*Independent*) describes “a global sort of Islamophobia” that enables the abuse and detention of Muslims in India and China.

Perhaps because it is non-realist, speculative fiction, *Internment* serves as an effective vehicle for “looking at the workings of society and social/political systems” (“Why Speculate?”). While it may indeed look to the future, the novel is very much a commentary on the present. By amplifying and exaggerating the current state of Muslim Americans, pushing it to an extreme where internment becomes their reality, Ahmed creates a sense of urgency and draws attention to contemporary injustices that have been normalized. The story of *Internment* may be read as an allegory of the present as, in many ways, it represents the current Muslim American experience. I

⁴⁶ Ironically (considering the concurrent abuses reportedly taking place in the U.S.’s own detention centers), in December 2019, the U.S. House and Senate passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, condemning Chinese abuses and calling for the closure of the detention centers as well as sanctions against those responsible (Eckert).

explore in more detail below how Muslim Americans experience a form of internment wherein their freedom to express their identities and to live simultaneously as both Muslim and American is policed.

As *Internment* highlights abuses taking place in the U.S. and around the world, it calls upon readers, particularly its Young Adult audience, to question the attitudes, systems, and policies that enable such a disregard for human dignity and life. For the most part, the plot is driven by Layla and other young Muslim Americans; unlike the older generation, they refuse to acquiesce and surrender to their internment. It is the young people who are responsible for the resistance that takes place, eventually inspiring their elders to join their ranks as they fight for their collective freedom. The novel likewise urges its young audience to act, to resist the status quo and fight for change. It offers a grim image of what tomorrow might look like if they do not.

A Tradition of Detentions

When Exclusion Guards come to remove the Amin family from their home, they are told to pack a bag that they will be taking with them to a relocation center located near Manzanar. Layla is shocked, noting, “He used Manzanar like a landmark. Like the word was so everyday” (39). Manzanar is one of ten war relocation centers that were built to house 120,000 Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor “intensified racial prejudices and led to fear of potential sabotage and espionage by Japanese Americans among some in the government, military, news media, and public” (“Japanese Americans”). Those of Japanese ancestry were interned in camps like Manzanar between 1942 and 1945. From the moment she is detained, Layla is conscious of the Japanese American experience during World War II as it relates to her

own present internment. She reflects, “I don’t think I’ve had a single good night’s sleep at Mobius. I can’t imagine what it was like for the internees at Manzanar. We can’t see the former camp from here, but we know it’s there. A reminder. A warning” (281). The history of internment camps, the past treatment of Japanese Americans, is a reminder of America’s capacity to violate the rights and freedoms of an entire population of citizens, on the basis of fear and suspicion. While on the way to Mobius, the internment camp where Layla and her family are placed, they pass by Manzanar and Layla recalls, “I glance back as we drive on. A tattered American flag still flies atop a pole in the center of the camp. Everything looks sepia-toned except the flag, with its faded red stripes and blue field of stars” (62). Glancing back at the old camp, Layla revisits a dark moment from American history and suddenly past and present are conflated as the “sepia-toned” picture she observes becomes her reality; the injustices to which Japanese Americans were subjected are no longer relegated to the past. Furthermore, at the center of these injustices flies the American flag, a reminder that these injustices, both past and present belong to America. Perhaps because of these injustices and the violation of people’s rights and freedoms, both the American flag and the ideals it represents appear faded and tattered.

In his essay “A Bloody Stupid War,” Bayoumi draws comparisons between Japanese internment and the War on Terror, which has produced a culture of “hatred, fear, and suspicion” towards Muslims (*This Muslim American Life* 151). He observes that “[n]either questions of loyalty nor intimations of internment,” to which the Japanese were subjected, “are absent from contemporary discussions surrounding the War on Terror” (84). In July 2002, less than a year after the 9/11 attacks and amidst strong anti-Arab and Muslim sentiments, Peter Kirsanow, recently appointed by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

(USCCR), attended a commission meeting in Detroit, Michigan, home to the largest Arab population in the U.S. When asked about the possibility of U.S. citizens once again being placed in internment camps, like they were during World War II, Kirsanow responded:

I believe no matter how many laws we have, how many agencies we have, how many police officers we have monitoring civil rights, that if there's another terrorist attack and if it's from a certain ethnic community or certain ethnicities that the terrorists are from, you can forget civil rights in this country. I think we will have a return to Karamatsu [sic -referring to Japanese American Fred Korematsu, who was imprisoned for defying evacuation orders] and I think the best way we can thwart that is to make sure that there is a balance between protecting civil rights, but also protecting safety at the same time.

(Assaf)

He later elaborated that if security is threatened, “Not too many people will be crying in their beer if there are more detentions, more stops, more profiling. There will be a groundswell of public opinion to banish civil rights” (Assaf). Kirsanow’s statements are alarming not least because they were made by an individual in a position of authority and, ironically, one who holds the responsibility of protecting civil rights in the United States⁴⁷; twice, he suggests that these

⁴⁷ A few days after the USCCR meeting in Detroit, the commission addressed Kirsanow’s statements with a press release that was issued on July 24: “Civil Rights Commission Reaffirms Commitment to Protecting Rights of Arab Americans and Muslims.” Chairperson Mary Frances Berry stated,

Whatever views may have been expressed recently by any member of the Commission to the contrary, the agency has been in the forefront of demonstrating that combating terrorism should never become a war against Arab Americans or Muslims, or any group based on religion or national origin... Maintaining a secure homeland does not justify discrimination against Arab Americans and others today, any more than World War II justified the internment of innocent Japanese Americans over a half century ago... Although individual Commissioners are entitled to their own views, the Commission is charged with the vital mission of serving as a vigilant watchdog of the civil rights of all Americans.

same civil rights *could* be banished. In reaction to this incident, Bayoumi remarks that “the quasi-official provenance of such ideas, and the frequency with which they circulate, is troubling indeed” (84). Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) national executive director John Tateishi also reminds us of how easily such comments can escalate; in a letter to President Bush asking that Kirsanow be removed from the civil rights commission, he stated, “Our community has a clear recollection of the weeks following Pearl Harbor when initial calls for tolerance gave way to suggestions for mass internment.... It is a precarious slope made slippery by prejudice, intolerance and fear” (quoted in Assaf). The fact that Kirsanow made these statements at the end of a four-hour USCCR meeting attended by “activists, members of the press, local community leaders, and representatives of USCCR's six Midwest Regional State Advisory Committees (SACs)” in order to “air Arab and Muslim concerns and grievances” is not only insensitive, but also adds a threatening quality to his words.

Kirsanow’s remarks also highlight the negotiation between civil rights and security, an issue that is central to understanding the dynamics that led to the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII as well as the very real structural Islamophobia⁴⁸ that facilitates the fictional internment of Muslims in Ahmed’s novel. The Director essentially echoes Kirsanow’s sentiments when he responds to the public’s call to free the internees by assuring Layla that in the event of another terrorist attack, “people will be chanting for your heads, again. And you’ll

⁴⁸ Khaled Beydoun defines structural Islamophobia, the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of institutions—most notably, government agencies—that is manifested through the enactment and advancement of policies.... [that] are built upon the presumption that Muslim identity is associated with a national security threat, and while they are usually framed in a facially neutral fashion, such policies disproportionately target Muslim subjects and disparately jeopardize, chill, and curtail their civil liberties. (“Islamophobia” 114)

Two primary examples of such government policies are the PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of 2001 and CVE (countering violent extremism) policing programs.

be right back here while the president soothes the jangled nerves of the masses who will gladly exchange their freedom for security” (328). The notion that the suspension of our freedoms and civil rights as Americans is tolerable if it translates into a promise of security did not begin with the internment of an entire demographic of Americans. The invasive government surveillance tactics that were legalized by policies such as the PATRIOT Act and the countering violent extremism (CVE) program in the name of national security were enabled by a similar exchange of freedom for security. The Director affirms that this exchange is “already done. We know everything. What books you check out. Who you text. Who you sleep with.... Since 9/11, the fear of the entire nation allowed us to pass laws that brought us into your homes and your bedrooms and your thoughts” (328-329). Ahmed suggests that the compromise of our freedoms and the suspension of our civil rights is a dangerous and slippery slope.

The compromises and abuses that are carried out in the name of national security are portrayed in the pre-9/11 American film *The Siege* (1998), which predates Ahmed’s novel in its fictional depiction of Muslim internment on U.S. land. The plot develops around the threat of terrorist cells in New York City and, eventually, the U.S. government responds to a series of attacks with militarized law enforcement, extrajudicial torture of innocents, and rounding up all Arab and Muslim men into stadiums and cages. For former Guantanamo detainee Yunis Abdurrahman Shokuri, *The Siege* became a grim reality. In an excerpt from Guantanamo military tribunal transcripts, Shokuri states:

When I first saw myself in Kandahar, it was like I was in a cinema or a movie. I saw a 1996 [*sic*] movie called *The Siege*. The movie was about terrorists carrying out terrorist attacks in the United States.... [In the movie] the CIA and FBI were not successful in finding that terrorist group and the United States Army interfered and gathered all the

people of Arabic descent and put them in a land cage or camp just like it happened in Kandahar. I was shocked, thinking, “Am I in that movie or on a stage in Hollywood?”...Sometimes I laugh at myself and say, “When does that movie end?” (Gilson)

When he was captured, Shokur was held in a U.S. detention center in Kandahar, Afghanistan before being transferred to Guantanamo Bay. Detained for 14 years and subjected to various forms of horrific torture, “he was never formally charged with a crime or faced trial.” He was finally released after “[s]ix U.S. security agencies, including the CIA, FBI and Department of Homeland Security, eventually found no evidence to keep him in detention.” Even then, the horrors of “that movie” have yet to “end” for Shokur as he “remains shackled” by his memories and traumatic experiences of detainment (Raghavan).

While there may be no historical precedent for mass Muslim internment on *American* soil, Ahmed’s *Internment* certainly draws upon a history of Muslim detentions carried out by the American government without due process. Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp was opened in 2002 with the erroneous assumption that “its location outside U.S. borders would allow it to operate without any legal constraints.” As such, “It became a laboratory for the torture methods associated with that administration’s so-called war on terror and for improvised judicial proceedings that violate basic principles of due process and justice”⁴⁹ (Yachot). Despite claims

⁴⁹ According to ACLU editor Noa Yachot,

The torture of detainees at Guantánamo was not an aberration. It was policy, approved at the highest levels of the Bush administration, and a prime motivation for opening the prison in the first place. Detainees were subjected to many of the methods the military and CIA used in Abu Ghraib and secret prisons around the world — including beatings, sleep deprivation, stress positions, extreme temperatures, and prolonged isolation. The abuse was so severe that it spurred complaints by FBI agents who witnessed it... Guantánamo military commissions, created to try the suspects of the 9/11 attacks, suffered from the same foundational flaw as the prison itself: the

that Guantanamo was meant to hold only the most violent and dangerous of terrorists⁵⁰, Bayoumi affirms, “The bald truth of the contemporary confinements is that, without competent systems of adjudication, we have no way of knowing how many innocent civilians are being held captive” (82). Over the years, Guantanamo has held about 780 prisoners and “fewer than 4 percent have faced or will face some kind of formal charge” (83). Additionally, hundreds of men were released by the Bush and Obama administrations when they were “ultimately found to pose no risk to the United States,” *after* they had undergone brutal torture. Still today, “41 men remain. Five have been cleared for release. Twenty-eight have never been charged with a crime” (Yachot).

In 2009, President Obama signed executive orders to review the status of Guantanamo detainees, prosecute them accordingly, and close the Guantanamo Bay detention center within one year.⁵¹ Nine years later, in a reversal of Obama’s orders, President Trump signed another executive order to keep the military prison open. Contrary to reports, the order describes the prison’s operations as “legal, safe, humane, and conducted consistent with United States and international law.” Later, during his 2018 State of the Union address, Trump promised to “send future captives to the prison, a decade after the last detainee arrived there” (Yachot). The threat of Guantanamo remains alive.

assumption they could function outside the bounds of the law. The commissions were initially designed to allow the military to use evidence obtained by torture and abuse, which would be inadmissible in federal courts.

⁵⁰ “While the Bush administration initially insisted it sent only the most violent terrorists to the prison — the ‘worst of the worst,’ according to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld — this claim quickly proved false. The vast majority of detainees had been sold to U.S. forces for bounty by Pakistani and Afghan officials, militia, and warlords” (Yachot).

⁵¹ Yachot notes that Obama “failed to close the prison, in part because of congressional restrictions designed primarily to score political points.”

Like Manzanar, Guantanamo also operates in Ahmed's text as a specter of what may happen. After arriving at the Mobius detention center, everyone is required to attend an orientation wherein the Director *welcomes* them to the camp. Layla is astonished by his words, "Welcome?... He makes it seem like we had a choice." He depicts the camp as an idyllic setting, "we want to make life here as peaceful and enjoyable as possible... there are a lot of opportunities here... recreation areas... a vegetable garden... we'll take our dinners together as a community" (91). On a surface level, this setting indubitably bears a stark difference to Guantanamo's harsh conditions. As the Director proceeds to introduce the "mindes," members of the Muslim community placed among the internees purportedly to help ease their transition but who will inevitably report back to camp authorities, a woman yells out "Traitors! Fascists!" As she incites the beginnings of protest from other members of the crowd, not only does she dare to disrupt the Director's address but what ensues belies the "peaceful and enjoyable" life he had just described. Immediately, Exclusion Guards appear to "yank the woman from her seat and drag her to the aisle." When she "spits in the face of the second guard," he "responds with a slap so hard that she falls to the floor." And when she "flails at him and kicks him in the shin" in an attempt to escape his hold, he tases her, twice. The guards then "grab her arms, hoist her up, and drag her limp body out of the auditorium" (94). In a merciless show of power, all protest is silenced; the woman and everyone in attendance are rendered entirely helpless. Layla reflects, "I think we're all shaken – not only at the cruelty of what we witnessed, but at the everydayness of it. How the Director didn't flinch; how the guards delivered those volts with such ease" (95). The violence shown and the total repression of their voices and freedoms are normalized, adding a new layer of horror.

Layla continues, “I wonder where the woman was taken – if that display was merely the tip of the iceberg” (95). She wonders what else lies in store for both the woman who dared to speak up and the rest of the internees. As she and her friend Ayesha ponder the woman’s fate, they are horrified by the sudden realization, “It’s like Guantanamo, except in California. I’m scared of what will happen if we get stuck here” (99). At Mobius, like Guantanamo, they are deprived of both their civil liberties as well as any lawyers who could advocate for them in a judicial process. The notion that they may “get stuck” in Mobius is underlined by the reminder that other innocents have been unjustly detained and tortured without an end in sight and with no rights to protect them; the fear of torture and indefinite detainment among other horrors becomes increasingly real and possible for Layla and the other Muslims detained at Mobius.

The ACLU describes the Guantanamo Bay camp,

Originally intended to be an “island outside the law” where terrorism suspects could be detained without process and interrogated without restraint, the prison and military commissions at Guantánamo Bay are catastrophic failures. At home and around the world, Guantánamo has become a symbol of injustice, abuse, and disregard for the rule of law. (“Guantánamo”)

This depiction of an “island outside the law” that operates with a policy of torture is echoed in Jake’s description of the Mobius camp:

Here, in this camp, once they take you into custody – this land is a designated war zone. Rules don’t apply... It’s not about violating your constitutional rights. If you’re caught and taken to a black-ops site for interrogation, they will do things to you. Things you

can't imagine... I'm talking torture. You know those guys who go missing? Why do you think they never come back? (187)

Jake is a guard at the camp, who from the very beginning uses the authority and privilege of his position to help Layla. He is working secretly with the resistance and in solidarity with Muslims to overturn Islamophobic policies and bring an end to the internment camp. He plays a central role in protecting Layla as she emerges as the virtual leader of the resistance movement within and beyond Mobius.

Later, as Layla and her friends plan to refrain from eating during one of the meals in an act of civil disobedience, they consider the possible ramifications of their resistance – specifically torture: “None of us can hold up to anything serious. Didn’t you read about what they did to those guys at Guantanamo?” (236). Again, Guantanamo becomes a point of reference that underscores the severity of their situation. During the protest that proceeds to take place, Suhail declares, “We’re protesting the illegality of Mobius... violation of the civil rights of the Muslim community. We want the world to know that there are internees who have been tortured and disappeared. Here. On American soil. We are being held without cause or trial” (243). The abuses that we witness in Ahmed’s text serve to do more than imagine the possibility of a chilling future for Muslims in America. Importantly, the novel also calls attention to the ongoing abuses taking place in Guantanamo Bay as well as in other locations under American mandate even if they are not “on American soil.”⁵² The text is “protesting the illegality” of such camps as

⁵² According to Bayoumi,

Press reports also indicate that the U.S. government has routinely threatened captives on other battlefronts, as well as suspected ‘enemy combatants,’ with indefinite detention (or, sometimes, transfer to Guantanamo Bay) if they did not cooperate sufficiently with American authorities. Coercion and torture have taken place in Iraq, where at one point the United States was holding some thirteen thousand people in the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison without legal

well as the “violation of the civil rights” of Muslims around the world, who are detained, tortured, and disappeared without due process. *Internment* stands as a form of protest and a call for action in its own right.

Census Question: Alienates and Eliminates

The fact that the Muslims detained in Mobius are *American citizens* raises an important issue about the function and promise of citizenship. Bayoumi maintains that while citizenship is largely recognized as “a marker of identity, as proof of belonging that manifests itself in demands for inclusion in the narrative of history, say, or in the literary canon,” it is also a legal condition that denotes the “right to have rights,” in the words of Hannah Arendt (87). Beyond the privilege of being able to identify as American, for example, American citizenship ostensibly offers a level of guarantee to certain human rights. Accordingly, Bayoumi continues, “For better or worse, our human rights are premised on us having a nation, a territory, a place to make laws and lives, and citizenship is the mechanism by which we can claim being grounded in the world.” Accordingly, human rights, citizenship, and the physical space and boundaries that shape a nation are intertwined. However, he argues, this promise is negated by the actions of the State in response to the identities of some of its subjects, which render citizenship “essentially worthless.” In the cases of Japanese Americans during WWII and Muslim Americans in Mobius, the “desert locations of internment, nowhere from anywhere, were not chosen capriciously but were dictated by the logic of a policy of expulsion” (87). Their removal to internment camps

recourse. Torture has also been reported at the Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, where hundreds of others were held. (81)

signifies a loss of *somewhere* that they call home, a consequence of their loss of citizenship and national belonging; the subsequent loss of their human rights is inevitable.

Layla provides a chronology of the sequence of events that eventually lead to the internment of Muslims in the text:

Two and half years since the election. Two years since the Nazis marched on DC.

Eighteen months since the Muslim ban. One year since our answers on the census landed us on the registry. Nine months since the first book burning. Six months since the Exclusion Laws were enacted. Five months since the attorney general... established precedent for relocation of citizens during times of war. Three months since they started firing Muslims from public-sector jobs. Two months since a virulent Islamophobe was sworn in as secretary of war... One month since the president... declar[ed] ‘Muslims are a threat to America.’ (2)

Here, the presidential election represents a watershed moment, after which nothing is the same. While Samira Ahmed does not explicitly identify *who* the President of the United States is, other references (i.e. Muslim Ban and sentiments such as “America first” and “Make America great again”) made throughout the text imply that he is a fictional analogue of Donald Trump. Following President Trump’s election in November 2016, the U.S. witnessed a resurgence of white supremacist and neo-Nazi activity. In August 2018 there was indeed a white supremacist rally held near the White House commemorating the “Unite the Right” rally that took place in Charlottesville in August 2017 and resulted in violence and the death of counter protester Heather Heyer (Heim, et al.). Additionally, less than a year into President Trump’s term, the Muslim Ban was introduced, restricting immigration from several Muslim-majority countries.

These initial events are immediately recognizable to contemporary readers, and Layla's recounting of subsequent moments create a reasonable, yet stark image of how easily anti-Muslim attitudes can escalate to a level where Muslims are declared a threat and their internment is legally justified.

Significantly, Layla does mention that there is at least some resistance to the anti-Muslim attitudes and policies that are becoming increasingly visible and threatening to Muslims' safety and wellbeing; even in her small college town, there were "well-meaning protests of liberals," but they were quickly shut down by "armed military personnel and pepper spray" (2). She notes, "The Resistance is alive, some say, but not in my town, and not on the nightly news" (3). There is some hope in the notion that the "Resistance is alive" and it serves as an important reminder that there will always be those who will stand in support of others, against injustice. However, this "Resistance" – that "some say" continues – remains in the realm of hearsay; to Layla, it is intangible as she neither witnesses it in her immediate surroundings nor in the news, rendering it almost meaningless. Here, Lalami underscores the role of the media and the power it has to bolster a movement or silence it. In reality, Trump's Muslim Ban in 2017 was met with "[t]housands of protestors who gathered and marched in cities and at airports across the US" (Gambino, et al.). Although a version of the Muslim Ban would take effect, there was nonetheless a clear sense of solidarity with Muslims that was visible across the U.S. and was well-documented in social media and U.S. news. What Lalami demonstrates is how this situation, under different circumstances, *could* have devolved into mayhem and disaster.

In the midst of the downward spiral that Layla describes above, the census represents a critical turning point for her family. It is their very deliberate "answers on the census [that] landed [them] on the registry" (2), unknowingly facilitating their eventual internment. When

Layla accuses her parents of succumbing to their situation and remaining silent rather than fighting back against the book burnings and the new laws that infringed upon their civil liberties, her father, a writer and mild-mannered university professor, Ali Amin replies, “we’re not ignoring the reality of our lives. We’re not hiding. We didn’t deny who we are when we had the chance... We answered the census truthfully. We are Muslims. We are Americans. And we will continue to live our lives knowing that those two identities aren’t mutually exclusive” (21-22). Although her father had initially feared that identifying as Muslim on the census would threaten his family’s safety, when Layla suggests that “Maybe it’s dumb to hold on to principles when your beliefs can get you in trouble,” he asserts that they “can’t live a lie” (23) and that they had “a moral and ethical obligation to tell the truth” (24). Thus, the census represents an act of self-assertion and defiance; in spite of their precarious situation following the election and the Muslim Ban, it was a means of claiming their identity as both Muslim *and* American.

In fact, the mere act of participating in the census signifies their larger participation in American democracy as well as their hope and belief in the “American ideals of equality and freedom” (24). William Frey, a demographer and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, sheds light on the importance of the census and what is risked by a lack of representation. He describes the U.S. census as “a hallowed institution that lies at the heart of our democracy. It is a giant civic engagement project that allows people to proclaim that they are residents of this great land and, by virtue of the Constitution, which mandates it, ensures that they will be fairly represented in Congress.” The role of the census in Ahmed’s book highlights recent conversations regarding the 2020 census. While the census in *Internment* appears to have been

amended to include a question about religious affiliation (currently prohibited)⁵³, recent political debates have revolved around citizenship. In early 2018, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross announced that a citizenship question would be added to the upcoming census. Frey explains that the “Trump Justice Department’s broader objective... seems to be to further fan the flames of its signature immigrant deportation issue and scare off fearful immigrants and their families from completing the census.” More specifically, the groups most likely to refrain from participating in the census due to a citizenship question would be “segments of the noncitizen Hispanic, Asian, and Muslim populations” (Frey). The inclusion of questions on the census (whether the question ascertains citizenship status or religious affiliation, as is the case in *Internment*) that risk the participation of specific communities (e.g. immigrant and/or Muslim), effectively alienate these groups from the political process, rendering them silent and invisible, and consequently undermines the integrity of the “hallowed institution.” Fittingly, in light of these consequences, U.S. house speaker Nancy Pelosi commented that President Trump’s attempt to include a citizenship question stems from his desire to “make American white again” (“Nancy Pelosi”).

Frey delineates the negative impacts of “selective under-enumeration,” which include “a skewed reapportionment of congressional seats... [that] would become more slanted toward rural and small-town areas,” as opposed to urban areas where the aforementioned groups are more likely to reside. As a result, their interests would be unfairly represented in legislation. Further, a faulty census would result in a serious misallocation of government funding, “affect[ing] a wide range of programs, including those directed to housing, health, education, and community

⁵³ In 1976, “Congress enacted a law containing... a prohibition against any mandatory question concerning a person’s ‘religious beliefs or to membership in a religious body.’” The reasoning behind this prohibition was that such a question would “infringe upon the traditional separation of church and state” (Rosen).

infrastructure.” Ultimately, Frey suggests that the census is at risk of turning into “a political event... about who should not be counted or thought of as real Americans.”

After a yearlong battle in the courts, Trump eventually announced in July 2019 that he would no longer fight to include the citizenship question. Nonetheless, the 2020 census remained a contentious issue for many Muslims in America. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence as well as the Muslim Ban under the Trump administration renewed fears among the Muslim immigrant population in particular: “For many, U.S. Census forms recall registration requirements imposed by authoritarian regimes in their native countries — not to mention the ‘special registration’ that the U.S. government imposed on some immigrants after 9/11” (Henderson). In addition to skeptical feelings about whether government funding would actually be used to support the needs of their community, a 2019 Census Bureau report notes that individuals “expressed [a] lack of confidence in the confidentiality of information they might give to the Census Bureau” (Henderson). The suspicion that individual information collected via the census would be shared with other government agencies – such as the FBI, ICE, and Homeland Security – is certainly not unfounded considering the instrumental role that the Census Bureau played in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁵⁴ As with the Muslim population surveyed above, the

⁵⁴ According to former Census Bureau director Kenneth Prewitt, in an apology he issued in 2000 on behalf of the bureau, “The historical record is clear that senior Census Bureau staff proactively cooperated with the internment, and that census tabulations were directly implicated in the denial of civil rights to citizens of the United States who happened also to be of Japanese ancestry.” Additionally,

Internal government documents uncovered by the researchers [Anderson and Seltzer] show that as part of an investigation for the “protection” of Roosevelt, the Census Bureau gave the Secret Service in 1943 a list of the names, addresses, citizenship status and other personal information of people of Japanese ancestry living in the Washington, D.C., area. Releasing the data was legal at the time, as the Second War Powers Act had temporarily suspended the confidentiality of census information identifying individuals “for use in connection with the conduct of the war.” (“Some Japanese-Americans”)

fictional characters in *Internment* manifest a legitimate fear that the census is an instrument of surveillance and that America would once again witness a violation of its democratic ideals as the government targets and infringes upon the rights of a particular community.

Early in the text, Layla appears to foretell that her family's faith in the government and the decision to engage in the democratic system by identifying as Muslim on the census would come at a heavy cost: "There are whispers of Muslims who have disappeared. Muslims like us, who answered the census truthfully when asked about our religion. Muslims who refused to hide" (15-16). The tragic and ironic implication here is that Muslims who "refused to hide" are made to disappear. Moreover, this reference to "Muslims who refused to hide" extends far beyond those who simply (or not so simply) identify as Muslim on the census; it encompasses those who identify as such via their everyday actions by frequenting the mosque, wearing the hijab, growing a beard, praying in public, etc. To hide or not to hide, to identify and express one's self as Muslim – or not – is a continuous act.⁵⁵ One way or another – whether they opt to hide their religious identities or are eliminated from society for failing to assimilate and hide their Muslimness – the erasure of Muslims in *Internment* is rendered inevitable.

Invisible in Exile

Ahmed et. al argue that Muslim diaspora is a "concept which lies at the heart of Muslim writing [and]... The notion of exile common to most diasporas is historically a formative experience in shaping Muslim identity" (9). Junaid Rana, an anthropologist whose research focuses on global capitalism, diaspora, racism, and social protest movements, has published a range of works that analyze the dynamics of anti-Muslim racism. In Rana's *Terrifying Muslims:*

⁵⁵ See Beydoun's "Acting Muslim."

Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora, he comments specifically on how exile or deportation and detention are used to mark the Muslim body as a site for the enforcement and enactment of state sovereignty: “social processes are inscribed into, and disciplined on, the immigrant body through the detention and deportation regime and the process of return migration” (21). Samira Ahmed thoroughly explores Layla’s visceral experiences of exile and detention, which threaten to render her invisible (paradoxically, these experiences also make her more visible as she emerges as the heroine of the novel and her voice extends across the world). Immediately after the Amin family is forcibly removed from their home, Layla begins to notice traces of their erasure. As the police car pulls away from the curb in front of their home, Layla sees David in the distance:

I yell David’s name, but the chief doesn’t respond. It’s like no one can hear me. I strain to see, but the chief has the light on inside the car, and all I can see is the reflection of a girl who doesn’t really look like me. I try to roll the window down, but it won’t roll down. I look at the girl in the window; her face is puffy and red, and her watery reflection looks like a ghost. I look at my parents; they’re ghosts, too. The world has shattered, and all that’s left is this alternate universe full of broken people with nothing to hold on to. (43)

In this moment, Layla is absolutely powerless as any attempts on her part prove futile; her yells go unheard, she cannot see anything beyond her own reflection, and she is unable to even roll down the window that separates her and David. Her physical weakness and vulnerability are reinforced by her ghostlike appearance. Moreover, her “broken” state extends beyond the physical to denote a desperate state of mind as her life is removed beyond her control. She barely recognizes herself and definitely does not reconcile this jarring new world with her own. Later, Layla expounds upon her ghostlike condition when she wonders if Japanese Americans

imprisoned during World War II also felt like ghosts, “Did they also feel this surreal separation from the experience, like they were detached from their bodies, watching themselves enter this camp, like ghosts, shades of who they were? Did they wonder how long they would be here?... I feel like my real life is already a million miles away” (63). As a specter, Layla is able to witness the world around her unfold, but is unable to exercise any control or free will over her situation. Unable to truly inhabit this world, she is relegated to the role of observer and outsider.

Throughout the text, Layla continues to compare the Muslims’ internment at Mobius to that of the Japanese Americans at Manzanar. Reflecting on the burden of being deemed a threat and an enemy to your own country, she states, “being called an enemy of your country, the feeling that you are hated – they [Japanese Americans] probably felt that, too. I wonder if the weight of that ever goes away” (282). Bayoumi affirms that one of the greatest challenges faced by Muslim Americans today is that they are defined by their potential for terror and violence: “This idea that you are seen not as a complex human being but only as a purveyor of possible future violence illustrates the extraordinary predicament of the heart of contemporary Muslim American life. To be a Muslim American today is to be full of potential” (9). Layla’s ghostlike state, her physical and mental powerlessness, are a product of her dehumanization as she is deemed an enemy to her people and is subsequently removed from society and life as she knew it.

Various moments illustrate how Layla and other Muslims like her are stripped of their humanity. Layla remarks upon the Exclusion Guards’ refusal to make eye contact, “I wonder if it’s in their regulations: no eye contact with the Muslims” (49). At one point, she notes, “he seems to look through me, like I’m not there” (56). The lack of eye contact serves to deny Layla and other Muslim detainees of the dignity, even legitimacy, of a human connection; it is an

attempt to erase their presence and individual being. In fact, Layla makes it a point to mention the multiple occasions when Captain Jake Reynolds *does* make eye contact with her. The simple act is an acknowledgement of her person and immediately creates a bond between them; it also foretells the critical support that he will come to offer Layla. Conversely, when she observes that Abdul – one of the Muslim youths who was privy to their plans for protest – refuses to acknowledge her and instead “looks through me like the physical space I occupy is empty” (293), we are able to foretell his imminent betrayal. When the Director later taunts Layla with the information that “[o]ne of your little friends was all too happy to make a deal and save himself from the consequences of your so-called protest,” she is sure that it is Abdul.

Bayoumi further comments on the relationship between citizenship and place, and how expulsion from home and nation also signify expulsion from humanity: “Japanese internment and the War on Terror teach us that citizenship and place are inextricably linked, and when the place is nowhere, the person has been expelled not just from a nation but in a sense from humanity itself” (87). Mobius is essentially “nowhere” as life there is entirely unrecognizable to them. Layla describes the camp, “It’s not like being in another country, where you feel a weird sort of thrill when you find a piece of home, a person from your city, say, or even a vintage Coke sign. This place isn’t foreign; it’s forced. It’s poison being shoved down our throats” (89). Mobius camp is and is *not* America; devoid of any trace of home or familiarity, like poison, their environment is inimical to their very existence. It is an inversion of the American ideal, a life denying place. Ayesha refers to her trailer home as a “tomb” (76), a fitting description as it seems that the purpose of the Mobius camp is to bury them alive, removing all traces of their Muslim identity.

Layla often refers to the stark desert that surrounds the camp, “I realize how large Mobius is. Yet its size is dwarfed by the vastness of the desert around us. There’s noise, but not city noise. No planes overhead... No sirens... a lot of eerie silence” (79). Thus, they find themselves surrounded and confined by an emptiness that is marked by a bleak absence of noise and life. This image echoes Bayoumi’s description of life in other camps like Guantanamo and Japanese internments, where people found themselves “lost somewhere in a land of scorching heat, seemingly outside of both time and place.” He notes that Guantanamo is located “on the island of Cuba, but it might as well be on Mars” (79). Bayoumi continues,

None of these places exist in any meaningful sense of the word. They are empty spaces, because they have become administrative dumping grounds for superfluous bodies in the government’s prosecution of its war. Outside of time and space, yet regulated like a prison, these are not the ends of the earth but more like floating penal colonies for the uncondemned (for even the condemned get a hearing where they are condemned). In these places, there is no means of challenging one’s fate. Rights have evaporated like a kettle whistling itself dry. (87)

The Muslim Americans in Mobius are part of these “superfluous” and “uncondemned” people, displaced from their homes and relegated to a government dumping ground. Layla describes their new, uncertain existence, “People walking around aimlessly... Searching. Looking. Wondering if there’s a way out. But all we see are guards and guns and a fence whose sole purpose is to keep us locked in here – that, or kill us” (79). Vilified and characterized as purveyors of violence, they are casualties of the War on Terror. Outside of time and space, they have nowhere to go beyond the electric fence of the Mobius camp, and within its confines they can claim no rights.

When Layla is taken to an unknown location to meet with the Director, she imagines the “secret sites, hidden away, places where they can erase your existence.” Although she is aware of the terrors that exist in the camp, she “thought someone would stop it... this couldn’t happen here.” She considers the recurring image of America as it has long been depicted in popular culture: “America is a melting pot... a mixed salad... a shining city on a hill. America is the country where a skinny kid with a funny name can defeat the odds and become president.” Then, in disillusionment, she continues, “But America doesn’t seem like any of those things anymore. Maybe it never was” (317). As the erasure of Layla’s self is threatened, America’s own identity falters as well.

I Speak, I Resist

In the opening pages of *Internment*, the first ominous sign that matters are not as they should be is the “funnel of smoke rising into the air” (1). The town is holding a book burning and Layla is both horrified and heartbroken when she realizes that her dad’s books are being burned: “They’re burning his poems. He pretends it’s not happening. But those words *are* him. He’s trying to hide it, but I know it’s killing him. Both of my parents. All of us. Is this how the end begins?” (11). Ali Amin’s words and poems are an intrinsic part of him; the burning of his poems, the muffling of his voice, kills a part of him. Layla describes the book burning, “Over the tops of the roofs a column of smoke still rises, higher now than before. Blackish-gray wisps of words and ideas and spirits, a burnt *qurbani* ascending to heaven for acceptance. I can’t tell if the tears in my eyes are on account of smoke or grief” (13). Layla thus grieves over her father’s poems and describes them as “a burnt *qurbani*.” *Qurban* refers to the animal sacrifice that

Muslims make during Hajj and during the corresponding Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) “in commemoration of the ram substituted by God when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, as a test of faith” (“Id al-Adha”). The reference to *qurbani* compares the sacrifice of Amin’s poems to Abraham’s sacrifice of his beloved son Ishmael. It also serves as a reminder that the Amin family and other Muslims in America are similarly undergoing a “test of faith.” At the heart of their persecution is the question of how they choose to proclaim their faith in God; and it is a sign of their commitment to God and their faith that they would continue to proclaim their Muslim identities despite the consequences. Ultimately, the burnt poems represent Muslim Americans’ larger sacrifice as they risk their acceptance by society, their families’ safety, and their very lives in order to remain true to themselves.

The following poem by Amin serves as the epigraph for *Internment* and it expresses his determination to voice his identity:

Though you muffle my voice, I speak.

Though you clip my wings and cage me, I fly.

And though you batter my body,

commanding me to kneel before you,

I resist.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, a prominent Islamic scholar of the 13th century who was imprisoned multiple times during his life for his controversial views, is famously reported for saying the following during imprisonment: What can my enemies do to me? My paradise is in my heart; it accompanies me wherever

The power of such words is evident when the Exclusion Guards who come to their home ask Amin to verify that he is the author of the poems in question; Layla marvels, “His poems. They’re coming after us because of poetry?” (32). Throughout the text, she notes the constant silencing of their voices and the simultaneous struggle to reclaim them. Layla assumes the commitment to “speak” and “resist,” despite attempts to muffle her voice and cage her body within the confines of Mobius. Inspired by the story of the White Roses, a brother and sister whose writings sparked anti-Nazi resistance during WWII, Layla declares, “I want to write stories that will rile people up on the outside... we have to stop talking and start reminding people of who we are. Americans. Human beings” (165). Again, the objective is to restore their very humanity. Ultimately, it is the stories she presents to the outside world that garner attention and support for their cause and the Occupy Mobius movement.

Blizzard of Dust: Burdens of Islamophobia

The call to live and express your truth despite the pressures that threaten to silence and suffocate you are echoed in Ali Amin’s poem “Revolution”:

Speak to me with your tongue while it is still
free,
while your body is still yours.

I go. To imprison me is to provide me with seclusion with my Lord. To kill me is to make me a martyr and to exile me from my land is a spiritual journey (translated from Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 48).

Let your words travel through the air,
uncontrolled
spontaneous
necessary
tumbling through clouds of dust that dim
the sun. (33)

Early in the text, Amin's words foretell their imminent internment, when their tongues are no longer free and their speech is silenced, when their bodies are physically confined within the walls of the camp. He urges people to voice the truth and let it move freely and naturally, "uncontrolled" and "spontaneous." He further describes these words as "necessary," for if they deny and repress their truth, their existence is diminished and their identities erased. Importantly, as these words are freely expressed, they must burst through "clouds of dust" that would otherwise encumber their breathing and keep them in the dark.

The rampant Islamophobia that afflicts Muslim Americans, in and out of the text, is evoked by the dust from Amin's poem above and that characterizes Mobius camp. Layla's first image of the internment camp is obscured by all the dust that is kicked up by the buses. As she takes in her surroundings and the "rows of FEMA trailers" traditionally used in the event of natural disasters, she reflects, "But now the natural disaster is being Muslim. My vision clouds. I blink against the dust, and my knees buckle a little" (64). The notion that her very identity is equated to a natural disaster is enervating, and although she attempts to "blink against the dust" and thereby reject the camp and its implications, still her knees buckle, and she must reach to her dad for support. The dust is nearly always accompanied by the debilitating effects of the camp and the Islamophobia that it symbolizes. As Layla looks around the camp, she sees "Little kids

play[ing] outside, kicking up dust while their parents mill around, faces drawn and blank, fear in their eyes. Not sure what to do or how to be” (76). Loss of security, fear and doubt regarding their fate, and confusion as to whether and how they should or should not *be* Muslim describe not only the emotional and mental state of the internees but also that of Muslims in today’s America. This is the burden of Islamophobia, and no one is exempt for even the children, in their innocent play, are surrounded by the dust.

After an encounter with the Director, who serves as an angry and hateful embodiment of everything that the internment camp stands for, Layla notes the “threats lingering in the *dust* of his wake” as he walks away (192, emphasis added). Additionally, anytime anti-Muslim sentiment and violence appears to reach a climax in the plot, dust appears to fill the scene. For instance, in the frenzied chaos that takes place when three Muslim women fight back against the Exclusion Guards, who are ruthless in their attack and eventually drag the women away, the scene is marked by “screaming and dirt getting kicked up and clouds of fine dust filling the air” (173). Later, a protest organized by a group of teenagers is ruthlessly quashed by the Exclusion Guards and the Director, who silences Soheil with a punch to the face. In the mayhem that follows, “the sounds of helicopter blades and sirens mute [Layla’s] screams in the blizzard of dust,” which drastically impairs visibility and makes it difficult to breathe (246). In this “blizzard of dust,” Layla and the other internees are rendered mute, blind, and barely able to breathe. Later, in the ultimate show of resistance that brings an end to their internment, Layla looks up, “praying for a storm, a rain to wash away the hate and dust and pain. An epic flood to wipe Mobius off the map and let us start the world anew” (362). Again and again, the narrative suggests that the dust that overlays the camp carries with it Islamophobia’s burden of hate, pain,

fear, and anxiety, depicting a deeper, sinister story about the Muslims Americans' internment both in the text and in reality.

Infiltrating every space, the burden of the camp's dust is unrelenting as the internees constantly try to wash it off to no avail: "All my clothes feel dirty... even after the wash, nothing I wear feels clean. It's like the dust in Mobius is woven into the fiber of every article of clothing that touches my skin" (177). Beyond their clothes, Layla further describes how the dust permeates her body, "I can taste the dust in the air. I feel the tiny particles swirling about and coating me like a second skin... the dust fills my nostrils" (316). Like a second skin, the burden of the dust and likewise that of Islamophobia is inescapable, trapping them; its presence is constantly felt, and it taints the very air they breathe, threatening to suffocate them.

Bayoumi states that "being a Muslim in America today is to embody, quite literally, some of America's most contested political and cultural debates" (*This Muslim American Life* 130). He delineates the burden of Islamophobia that is carried by *young* Arab and Muslim Americans in particular:

What they want most is what the majority of young adults desire: opportunity, marriage, happiness, and the chance to fulfill their potential. But what they have now are extra loads to carry, burdens that often include workplace discrimination, warfare in their countries of origin, government surveillance, the disappearance of friends or family, threats of vigilante violence, a host of cultural misunderstandings, and all kinds of other problems that thrive in the age of terror. (*How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?* 12)

In Ahmed's novel, Layla and her friends must deal with anti-Muslim discrimination that has escalated into labeling them and their community as enemies to the United States, their home.

The fictional internment camp highlights many of the burdens that Bayoumi describes above: discrimination, surveillance, friends disappearing, verbal and physical violence, etc. The cruel reality of their situation is the burden that Layla wears like a second skin. Still, she dreams of a *normal* life, free of the burdens and worries she carries due to her Muslim identity. At one point, Ayesha laughs, “I love how prom is on the list right after freedom and breathing.” Layla reflects, “There are these moments when I still think this place isn’t real – like it’s a horrible dream. And for that minute, my mind feels free to think about, like, prom.” Thoughts of prom and other normal teenage concerns serve to affirm her humanity; without those moments, “the weight of this place would crush us” (112). The fact that Layla’s mind turns to her boyfriend and her high school prom when she isn’t preoccupied with the need to be free of the internment camp, to be able to live and breathe, offers a stark juxtaposition and further highlights the violence being committed against her and her youth.

Inevitably, the burdens that the internees carry leave a mark. On more than one occasion, Layla blames the dust when she is not herself, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s the dust. It’s the isolation. It’s the fence” (111). Subject to the dust’s incessant influence, not only are they impacted by the dust, but they also risk becoming nothing *but* dust. After the peaceful protest turns violent, Layla’s parents walk into their trailer “like phantoms made of dust” (249). The vulnerability and powerlessness denoted by their phantom-like state is marked by the dust that envelops them after the blizzard of dust they have just endured.⁵⁷ Overcome with fear and anger that Layla and her friends would risk the Director’s wrath by disobeying him and questioning his authority, her parents have succumbed to the latter’s attempts to control them; in this moment,

⁵⁷ See previous discussion of Layla and her family’s ghostlike state.

they would rather surrender to their internment than risk the consequences. Their fear, carefully orchestrated by the Director, effectively controls them and suppresses any trace of resistance.

Internalizing Islamophobia: Betrayals and Self-Surveillance

As Layla and her community face the question of *how* they should identify with their faith and the concomitant challenges of being alienated, silenced, and rendered invisible, they also experience various internalizations of Islamophobia – both on an individual and a community level. According to Sherman Jackson, Muslims in the United States face two basic challenges of *self-definition* and *self-determination*. The process of *self-definition* necessitates a complicated consideration of the heterogeneity of the Muslim American community, while *self-determination* calls for participation in the social and political spheres in order to “gain public recognition and respect” (3). Jackson argues that Muslim Americans are debilitated by the effects of double consciousness, which creates a “contradiction of double aims” that challenges them to be and not be Muslim simultaneously, preventing them from achieving either, and further creates doubt and a reluctance to adhere to religion.

Khaled Beydoun further addresses the predicament of being Muslim – to be and/or not to be – in his definition of Islamophobia as a “dialectic between state policy and the American people” with a “twofold effect”:

First, for non-Muslim Americans, Islamophobic policy endorses stereotypes of Islam, emboldening privately held animus and violence. Second, for Muslim Americans, Islamophobic policy triggers the process of Acting Muslim in ways that either confirm

one's Muslim identity in line with the Free Exercise Clause or negate it to diminish counterterror suspicion. ("Acting Muslim" 19-20)

As victims of Islamophobia, Muslims are forced into a position where they must negotiate state suspicion with their freedom to exercise their religion. Beydoun identifies four types of "Acting Muslim" that may result from this negotiation: Confirming, Conforming, Covering, and Concealing Islam (9). *Internment* engages with the notion of Acting Muslim as it depicts various ways in which Muslim Americans negotiate and express their individual identities in today's War on Terror culture.

One of the challenges faced by Muslim Americans is the betrayal of other Muslims who act as intermediaries between the state and the Muslim community. The Director introduces the minders at Mobius, "These fine people share your background, understand your concerns. They come from your community, and they have kindly volunteered their time to help ease your transition into life at Mobius" (93). The Director's description of them as "fine people" highlights the notion that these are "good" Muslims in the eyes of the state; their purpose is to use their intimate knowledge of and experience with the Muslim community to serve the government's agenda. The minders – who are notably reminiscent of the Nazi camps' *Kapos*, inmates appointed to help run the camp by supervising other camp prisoners, for which they received special privileges ("SS Concentration") – are immediately labeled by other Muslims as traitors to their own community. Expressing feelings of bitter betrayal, Layla notes, "They are us: some in hijab, some in topis, some in jeans and t-shirts. Every race and ethnicity represented at the camp. Who needs your government to bring you down when your own people will do it for them?" (93). Essentially functioning as collaborators, the minders are an example of Beydoun's

category of Conforming Islam, whereby an individual “alters and assimilates a disfavored Muslim trait, expression, or one’s identity at large in line with positive counterterror stereotypes” (13). Nash describes native informants who often adopt and reify notions of Western cultural superiority as those who “possess connections – usually through race – with peoples of Muslim culture, but they construct Islam and Muslims – whether traditionalist or revivalist – by employing recycled Orientalist tropes cast in the insider’s voice. Muslims are represented largely in terms of female-disabling, fanatical, and aggressive characters” (26). Those who Conform Islam do so in a desire to “mitigate or eliminate state suspicion” and/or to gain personal benefit from the state. Additionally, by “voluntarily compromising their Free Exercise rights,” they are also “collaterally endangering these rights for Muslim Americans at large” (Beydoun 13).

In an early encounter with Layla’s block minders, Saleem and Fauzia, we see an example of how they alter their Muslim expression when the latter concludes her introduction with the Urdu parting phrase “*Khudafis*” meaning “God protect you.” Layla notices that “Saleem grabs her [Fauzia’s] hand and squeezes; she bites her lip and clears her throat. ‘I mean, have a good night’” (101). Apparently, the simple phrase is too Muslim, too foreign-sounding, and it certainly does not serve their efforts to allay state suspicion regarding their true loyalties. Hence, they opt to compromise their right to freely exercise their religion. As Saleem squeezes Fauzia’s hand, and she bites her lip and clears her throat, the physical and strained effort required to retract her Muslimness reveals a deeper, internal struggle. Saleem’s demeanor is also forced and further highlights his lack of belonging as a result of his betrayal of his community: “Saleem tries to make eye contact with as many people as possible while he speaks. He’s so rigid and rehearsed, he sounds like a talking manual” (100-101). The fact that he *tries* to make eye contact and cannot do so naturally denotes that a violence has been committed, similar to that of the Exclusion

Guards whose lack of eye contact expresses a dehumanization of the Muslim internees.

Importantly, the violence committed by Saleem is both to his community and to himself; the self-harm he has inflicted is immediately apparent as he already sounds less human and more “like a talking manual.”

Beydoun argues that the War on Terror is *enabled* by “Muslim identity entrepreneurs” or native informants, who choose to Conform Islam for personal benefit (“Acting Muslim” 14). Layla describes the cold exchange that takes place as the minders use their position as Muslims to gain acceptance and approval from the state, “What they’ve made themselves party to. What they allow to happen to other human beings so that they can have the illusion of power, the barest whiff of control.” She compares them to Ursula Le Guin’s “adults of Omelas, the ones who smile and go about their day and revel in the false illusion of freedom while their souls are withered, desolate things” (283). Any semblance of power or freedom gained by the minders is nothing more than a “false illusion.” Moreover, the cost of this exchange is the wrecking of their souls.

On more than one occasion, Layla is placed in the position of deciding between herself and her community. Desperate to save Layla and extract her from the camp, her boyfriend David suggests that she and her family “cooperate” with the government. Layla is hurt, furious, and horrified at the thought of “informing on other Muslims to save [them]selves,” thereby “condemning people to internment – or worse” (155-156). She recalls her dad’s words, “In the quiet of night, the heart knows the lies you told to survive” (156). David misinterprets this to imply that “sometimes you have to do what you need to do to survive,” but Layla corrects him, “It means that you can never escape your lies” (157). This moment highlights the question of

survival versus truth, the inevitably *empty* life gained by the denial of one's self and identity via the betrayal of one's community.

Later, the Director himself offers Layla the opportunity to save herself and her family by sharing the names of those responsible for the resistance taking place in the camp and by helping things "settle down." Underscoring their disparate positions of captor and captive, he even promises her the luxury of "unlimited hot water" and a visit from her boyfriend (321); despite any perks or freedoms that she may potentially gain, she remains a prisoner, limited to the confines of the internment camp and living at the mercy of the Director. In reality, for those who engage in the act of conforming Islam outside of the text, attempts to prove one's patriotism and role as a "good" Muslim by leveraging their identity to attack the Muslim community can only result in the mere illusion of freedom and power. Ultimately, they remain at the mercy of the state authority and society at large, and in voluntarily compromising their right to *be* Muslim, they have only succeeded in limiting other Muslims' freedom to live by their faith.

As Muslims resist the external threat of Islamophobic attitudes and policies, fighting for the freedom to exercise their freedoms and establish their place as American citizens, they are simultaneously engaging in an individual struggle against the internalization of this very threat. Shabana Mir argues, "double consciousness and the internalization of stereotypes can be a useful tool for comprehensive control by the modern nation-state.... a system of internalized psychological self-surveillance can cause marginal groups to feel as though they are always being watched, with a minimum of state effort" (35). On one hand, the minders portray an example of self-surveillance on a community level. Perhaps the greater risk is an internalized self-surveillance on an individual level that could result in a crippling mix of fear and hopelessness, rendering the individual silent and unable to act.

When Layla faces the Director, he attempts to physically intimidate and subjugate her. At one point, Layla describes the physical impact of his voice: “he bellows so loudly that I feel his voice inside my body” (311). In the text, the Director is the face and voice of Islamophobia, embodying the ultimate threat to her humanity and the essence of who she is; his voice inside her body is a violent jolt to her being. She describes the crippling effect of the Director’s attack: “my body and mind feel like they might both collapse, and I can barely get any words out.... I feel broken and lost and helpless” (312).

Soon after this incident, Layla’s head is covered and she is escorted from her cell to an unknown location. Consumed by fear, the adrenaline in her body urges her to “Scream. Run. Fight.” However, she expresses the futility of her resistance and her utter helplessness, “there is nowhere to flee. And there is no fight I can win.” As she attempts to absorb her outdoor surroundings, she reflects, “night is refuge, a kind of mental sanctuary. But being outside right now, under the cloak of darkness, offers the very opposite. My fears hurtle to the front of my mind” (316). In this moment, Layla is defeated, albeit temporarily. Her name is derived from the Arabic *layl* or night. She *is* night, and the fact that she can no longer find refuge or sanctuary in the night, rather it is now cause for immense fear, is evidence of the extent to which her very essence has been violated. Not only has she been displaced from her home, she has now been displaced from her very self.

Breathing Through the Dust

One of the devastating effects of the camp’s dust is its suffocating influence. After a harrowing encounter with the Director, Layla feels particularly vulnerable and in a moment of

escape, she imagines herself on the beach, free of the camp's confines: "I want to breathe in the salt air and let the water wash the dust off my body and rinse the fear from my soul" (220). The fact that the dust – and the burden it signifies – prevents her from breathing is reiterated when she "wash[es] off the dust and the stress and the hurt of the day" and as the "muddied water" washes down the drain, she is finally able to "take [her] first unencumbered breath" (226). The notion of being unable to breathe is first expressed early in the text, when Layla reminds her parents of the violent acts that had been committed against the Muslim community, "Nabra, and those Muslim students at Chapel Hill, and that seventy-year old New Yorker who was almost beaten to death... those mosques that were burned down in Texas and Seattle... those 'Punish a Muslim Day' flyers." Wondering if they should conceal their Muslim identity in order to protect themselves and recognizing that they cannot be true to themselves without severe consequence, she states, "I feel like we can't even breathe" (23).

This sentiment, being unable to breathe and simply *be*, establishes a link between the internment of Muslim Americans and police violence against African Americans, specifically the death of Eric Garner, an unarmed Black man who died in a chokehold by a NYPD officer in 2014. Garner's tragic death highlighted the problem of racist policing in America, especially the dehumanization of Blacks that too often leads to unwarranted brutality and even death. Garner's final words, "I can't breathe," would become a "rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement that protested around the US in the wake of Garner's death and the death of black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a month later" (Laughland). In establishing this link to the BLM movement, a form of connectedness and solidarity is encouraged between the Black and Muslim communities; the fight for social justice and a political voice is one.

During her internment, Layla frequently remarks upon the need to breathe: “I miss breathing” (287), “And, God, how I wish I could stop having to remind myself to breathe” (307). Missing breathing, she misses existing as her true self, free to exercise her faith without restraint and without fear of consequence. When she *is* able to breathe, Layla gains control over herself and her situation, “I close my eyes, try to breathe through the dread. I inhale and focus on my own breath traveling through my body before exhaling. I feel its resonance in my bones. I mute the Director’s breathing and tapping until it disappears” (309). By breathing, she centers herself, and by muting the Director’s loud breathing and tapping, she is successfully able to block the external threat he represents, enabling her to hear the voices of her parents, Jake, and Ayesha telling her, “You’re not alone.” Here, Layla evokes the power of community against the alienating and suffocating effects of Islamophobia. The knowledge that she is not alone gives her the strength and courage to stand her ground against the Director.

Despite her resistance, Layla recognizes the dust’s permanence. Even as she hopes that water will “seep into [her] pores so [she] can feel clean and free,” she is unsure “if that will ever be possible again”; she notes, “maybe I’ll never leave this place” (301). Doubting if she will ever be able to eliminate all traces of the camp’s dust, she suspects that part of her will remain confined by the camp, even if she is physically freed. Layla’s sentiments hint at the experiences of former detainees like Yunis Shokuri, who three years after his release shared that “he remains shackled by constant nightmares, flashbacks and insomnia.... His future remains so uncertain, his past grips him so tightly, that he often feels as if he hasn’t left the prison where he was held for 14 years.” In a tragic statement, Shokuri said, “I am still in Gitmo” (Raghavan).

When the gates to Mobius are indeed opened, Layla is unable to leave behind the dust, which she continues to carry with her as Jake’s “blood still mingles with the dust under [her]

fingernails” (369). She cannot erase the memories of what took place in the camp – the violence, sacrifices, betrayals, and deaths. Further, she recognizes that when she walks out of the camp, she will be walking into the “heat and sun and dust” (372). The dust continues to exist beyond the camp’s gates, and they will have to live with it. While they are no longer being physically detained, the Islamophobic attitudes that led to their detainment in the first place still exist. Layla describes the uncertain future that lies ahead,

I walk out, unsure of what lies ahead. Of how to recover from this camp that burned itself onto my skin. Blood and dust and razor wire. How will life ever be normal again? I’m not even sure if my body remembers how to take a real breath. If I will ever stop glancing over my shoulder. Ever feel free. (373)

Muslims in America are similarly traumatized by their experiences of Islamophobia. As a community, it is difficult – not to mention foolish – to forget or ignore policies like the Muslim Ban, calls for a Muslim registry, detainments, deportations, and hateful rhetoric and constant scapegoating. “Normal” life for Muslim Americans is inevitably marked by the burden of Islamophobia. The questions that Layla ponders apply to the broader community; will it ever be possible for Muslim Americans to “take a real breath” unencumbered by fear and anxiety over their fate, to “stop glancing over [their] shoulder” expecting that they will be targeted again as terrorists, and to “feel free” to *be* both Muslim and American? Although Layla is scarred by her experience – “I feel like all I’m made of now is dust” (371) – she resolves to move forward, wherever her journey may lead her. This final act is a critical affirmation of life, lest the considerable sacrifices made and the lives lost be in vain. Further, it is a commitment to resistance and a testimony of hope for a better America.

Conclusion:

Critically Engaged: Muslim Americans in Society

“My name is *Kamala Khan* and I'm here to take out the *trash*.”

“I am a shape-changing, mask-wearing, sixteen-year-old

super ‘Moozlim’ from Jersey City.”

– *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*

Since its inception, the Muslim community has participated in a narrative of social and political engagement with others. This is evidenced in the “Constitution of Medina,” which Saïd Amir Arjomand describes as “one of the oldest extant documents in Islamic history [that] records a set of deeds executed by Muhammad after his migration (*hijra*) in 622” (555). This document establishes a covenant between Muslims⁵⁸ and “those who follow them as clients, join them, reside with them, and strive along with them.” Essentially, it brings together Medina’s inhabitants – Muslims, Jews, and polytheists – and affirms that together “they constitute a single community (*umma wahida*) apart from other people” (562). Arjomand describes this as “the most important article of unification, creating a single community.... a confederate community

* A portion of this conclusion was previously published in my essay “Super Moozlim Battles Islamophobia” in *Contesting Islamophobia: Anti-Muslim Prejudice in Media, Culture and Politics* (2019). Please refer to this earlier essay for a more thorough analysis of *Ms. Marvel* as a Muslim superhero comic.

⁵⁸ Muslims included those who had emigrated from Mecca (*Muhajiroon*) as well as their local hosts who had converted to Islam (*Ansar*).

of clans”⁵⁹ (565). While this work has focused on the popular definition of *Umma* as a community of Muslims, this early text’s depiction of *Umma* as an ideologically-heterogenous and politically-allied community cannot be dismissed.

In concluding my examination of how contemporary Muslim American literature depicts Muslim-identification with a broader *Muslim Umma* – nationally and globally, and across history – I turn to how Muslim Americans imagine their role as members of society at large and as citizens of the nation. By sustaining and cultivating their participation as members of the American landscape, Muslim Americans are increasingly able to assert their rights to self-definition and self-representation. In an interview that delineates his “vision for Muslim American political activism that encompass[s] religious ideals and political strategies,” Zahid Bukhari (Executive Director of ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America) Council for Social Justice and former Director of Muslims in American Public Square (MAPS)), identifies three primary roles for the Muslim American community:

One is to function as a minority group seeking to protect its rights. Another is to represent the larger Muslim Ummah [the global community of Muslims] by struggling to help out Muslims around the world in difficult times. The third responsibility of Muslims and the Muslim Ummah in America is to bring the wisdom of Islam to promote social justice and political responsibility in America for all citizens, as well as to participate in ecumenical efforts to restore America’s spiritual underpinnings. The combination of these three roles

⁵⁹ Arjomand further notes, “The lasting effect of the constitutional recognition of the Jews’ religion was the institution of religious pluralism in Islam” (560).

has made the Muslim community a multiple agenda group instead of a single-agenda political-community. (464)

The position of Muslims in America as a “minority group” is a defining reality that shapes many of their engagements and cultural expressions. Ahmed’s *Internment* directly addresses the community’s *need* “to protect its rights” against systemic Islamophobia and pervasive War on Terror culture. Lalami’s *Moor’s Account* and Wilson’s *Butterfly Mosque* also respond to Muslims’ minority status as they struggle against Anglo-European historiography and the deeply entrenched narrative of Islam vs. West, both of which contribute to the racialization of Muslims (and other minorities) and the marginalization of their voices and contributions.

The three roles that Bukhari describes above thus reflect the various iterations of *Umma* that I examine: the community of Muslims in America, and Muslim Americans as members of both a global *faith* community and a *national* community (discussed here). Bukhari elaborates further on Muslim Americans’ “responsibility” to apply “the wisdom of Islam” in order to make a positive impact on American society. Towards this end, he affirms the need to build institutions that strive for social justice (in addition to universities, hospitals, think tanks and research centers):

The next stage, however, is to establish institutions working for social justice, not only for Muslims but also for the whole society. There is obvious *zulm* [wrong-doing and oppression] in the society in the shape of police brutality, hunger, homelessness, and broken families. The country also faces natural disasters of various types. The Muslim community, especially the relief organizations, should act collectively to eradicate the

zulm and compete with other like-minded people and groups in promoting the good.

(465)

Bukhari reiterates the idea that Muslims via these institutions should serve society as a whole rather than just Muslims. The Muslim American community has evolved in many ways since this interview with Bukhari was published in 2000, over twenty years ago; it has indeed invested in a number of projects and institutions and also formed coalitions to address America's social dilemmas.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the underpinnings of Bukhari's vision for the Muslim American community remains relevant. Ultimately, he describes a balance of "[i]nward unity and outward caring for the society"; before Muslim Americans can collectively and thus effectively "care," such that they actively participate in the betterment of society and leave a lasting impact, they must first strengthen their "inward unity" as a community. By directing their efforts towards cultivating both inward unity and outward caring, they are in a position to better serve their Muslim American, Muslim (global), *and* American counterparts.

In "Understanding Our Present and Looking to Our Future," Sherman Jackson articulates a similar argument for "critical engagement," which he describes as his right as a member of society and an integral element if Muslim Americans are to avoid "assimilating to somebody else's definition of America or rejecting America wholesale" and instead craft their "own modality of being American." He affirms that "the very complex problems, challenges, dislocations and exploitations that exist in [our society], this is the job of us all." As he

⁶⁰ For a detailed study of Muslim Americans' political engagement, including voting and coalition-building, refer to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's (ISPU) "American Muslim Poll 2020: Amid Pandemic and Protest" (Mogahed and Ikramullah). A previous poll conducted in 2018 also contributed to the publication of "American Muslim Philanthropy" (Mahmood), which analyzes how and why Muslim American support philanthropic causes.

urges Muslims to embrace their Muslim American identity and claim their rights in society, Jackson reminds them that as members in society they must also assume the necessary responsibility of tackling its problems and challenges. In expressing what the process of critical engagement entails, Jackson asserts, “I don’t want to be a part of any society in which I cannot critically engage. That is to say, where I cannot stand up and to say, wrong is wrong, injustice is injustice, selfishness is selfishness, and greed is greed.” Both Jackson and Bukhari’s visions for the Muslim American community rely on critical engagement, solidarity, and collective action that are inspired by Islamic commitments to morality and social justice. Importantly, this elevates the understanding of *Umma* as a global Muslim community beyond cross-cultural affiliations based on common religious practices and spiritual beliefs. Moreover, this conscious commitment to *others* embodies the Quranic characterization of *Umma*: “You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah” (3:110). Accordingly, the “best nation” or *Umma* was created – not just for Muslims – but for mankind.⁶¹ Its characterization as the “best” is directly related to a *moral* purpose and duty on earth, “enjoin[ing] what is right and forbid[ding] what is wrong”; this is echoed in Jackson’s call to “stand up” against “injustice” and Bukhari’s to “eradicate the zulm” (wrongdoing and oppression) and to promote the good. While this verse stipulates belief in God as necessary to be considered amongst the best of nations, this belief must also manifest into actions.⁶²

⁶¹ The cited translation of verse 3:110 is by Sahih International. A slightly different translation by Shakir reads, “You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) men...”

⁶² This fundamental link between belief in God and righteous actions is expressed in a number of Quranic verses that refer to “those who believe and do righteous deeds.”

In considering literary portrayals of Islamic commitment to social justice that shapes civic engagement, particularly as Muslim Americans struggle for their rights and self-representation as a minority group, while also seeking to impact their broader American and Muslim communities, Muslim superhero comics is a growing literary field that offers a unique space to explore this dynamic. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (2014) encounters questions of dual identity, visibility, and representation as its protagonist Kamala Khan grapples with her identity as a teenage Pakistani Muslim American. *Ms. Marvel* illustrates the rich diversity, complexity, and humanity of the Muslim American community, complicating existing discourse on Muslim Americans and highlighting their experiences and contributions as integral to the American landscape.⁶³

The casting of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel contributes to a narrative of national identity that embraces her intersectionality as Muslim, Pakistani, daughter of immigrants, and American. In *Secret Identity Crisis*, Matthew Costello specifically examines the relationship between superhero comics and national identity in a post-Cold War America. He observes, "The heroic narrative describes a story of value and virtue, defines good and evil, and offers a guide to proper action by which redemption can be achieved" (15). A heroic narrative thus necessarily identifies the values and ideals of a society or nation and further distinguishes between good and evil, between that which is admired and feared. When Kamala Khan is depicted as a superhero – the central protagonist of the comic, no less – she is immediately granted a credible level of moral authority. In a reversal of roles, contrary to essentialized depictions of Muslims as dangerous and

⁶³ Author and comic artist Huda Fahmy also engages with these issues in her comics and graphic novel *Yes, I'm Hot in This: The Hilarious Truth about Life in a Hijab* (2018) and *That Can Be Arranged: A Muslim Love Story* (2020).

criminal, she is admired not feared, good not evil. Moreover, it is she to whom we look to uphold the values of our society, to defend us and our ideals as a nation.

In addition to a heroic narrative's response to social values, Costello identifies "the mechanism of the dual identity" as a "revealing avenue for the exploration of national identity" (15). Early in the comic, Kamala bemoans the aspects of her identity that mark her as different, namely her Muslim faith and Pakistani culture: "I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird *food rules* and the *crazy family*." As she gradually comes to terms with these visible marks of difference, readers are also asked to see and appreciate both the different *and* the familiar, and to locate the familiar *in* the different. When Kamala is given her superhero powers, she is on her way home from a party, where she does indeed encounter "strange" boys and drinking as her father feared. She is intercepted by the tall, blond, blue-eyed Captain Marvel (formerly Ms. Marvel), accompanied by Captain America and Iron Man; the three classic, all-American superheroes arrive singing – in Urdu – about a yellow mustard seed and mango bud that are blooming. Kamala is at a crossroads and these three superheroes are staging an intervention; in the disapproving words of Captain America, "You thought that if you disobeyed your parents -- your culture, your religion -- your classmates would *accept* you." He aptly addresses Kamala's desire for normalcy, to *not* be different, at the expense of defying her parents, culture, and religion. There is a direct connection between where Kamala stands in terms of these three elements and the superpowers she is granted arguably as a chance to reassess the decisions she is making and determine the direction she will take at this crossroads.

When Kamala questions their ability to speak Urdu, the superheroes identify themselves by declaring, “We are *faith*. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship.” This moment epitomizes the visual representation and physical embodiment of faith and its commitment to social justice. The scene is a manifestation of Kamala’s unique desires and background, as the all-American superheroes whom Kamala idolizes stage an intervention. While they appear in their traditional superhero costumes, they are also singing in Urdu and claiming to *be* faith; without tension or contradiction, they present a rich image that is filled with pride and strength. Addressing her inner conflicts, they mirror the complexity and multiplicity of her own character while suggesting the powerful potential that lies in embracing it.

After she is abruptly introduced to her supernatural powers, Kamala witnesses from a distance as her friend Zoe falls drunkenly into the water and is in danger of drowning. As Kamala processes the situation, she recalls, “There’s this ayah from the *Quran* that my dad always quotes when he sees something *bad* on TV. A fire or a flood or a bombing. Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind —” Then, with a look of determination on her face, she continues, “—and whoever *saves* one person, it is as if he has *saved all of mankind*,” and she rushes to the rescue. In another scene, she reflects, “Ammi and Abu taught me to always think about the *greater good*. To defend people who can’t defend themselves, even if it means putting yourself at *risk*.” In moments of crisis, the reader witnesses Kamala’s return to elements that she had previously defied, her parents and her religion; importantly, it is these that guide her heroic actions as Ms. Marvel. In the process, the tensions of Kamala’s public and private personas, the struggle between her Muslim and American selves, are reconciled in a moment of overlap where one compliments the other.

On an individual level, Kamala cultivates the balance between inward unity or cohesion and outward caring for her society. *Ms. Marvel* highlights the significance of Muslim American cultural production and self-representation particularly as they are contextualized within broader circles of connection and various definitions of community. Committed to protecting their communities and making the world a better place for all, Ms. Marvel and other Muslim superheroes like her offer a *fantastic* example of Muslim American expressions of critical engagement and commitment to social justice.

In his conception of a modern Muslim theology of engagement, Martin Nguyen affirms, “Faith must seek engagement – engagement with the Divine, engagement with the world, engagement with different orders of society, engagement with one another, and engagement with our own humanity” (6). This multifaceted understanding of faith as engagement is reflected in the literary expressions of Muslimness that are analyzed in this project. As Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* intervenes in the Western narrativization of the past to center the marginalized historical figure of Estebanico in a Muslim American origins narrative, she reimagines an inherently intertextual literary tradition and an intersectional national identity. In *The Butterfly Mosque*, Wilson’s journey to Islam and visible Muslimness demonstrate how faith, self, and community are intertwined as her Muslim and American identities are reconciled. Despite this reconciliation, Muslims continue to face many challenges as a minority group in America; Ahmed’s *Internment* illustrates how they bear this burden while simultaneously fighting to claim their voices and humanity. As Muslim Americans, in all their heterogeneity, situate themselves within broader histories and cultures, their individual engagements with Islam, their respective communities, and the world at large are interwoven into their narratives and embedded deeply into a broader narrative of America.

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