

Engaged Surrender

In 1991, when I ventured onto the grounds of Masjid Ummah, a mosque in Southern California, I was not new to African American Sunni Islam.¹ In college, I had attempted to understand the “evolution” of the Muslim movement by examining the Nation of Islam’s journal *Muhammad Speaks* from the early 1960s through its transformation into the *Muslim Journal*, a Sunni Muslim weekly.

What began my love of and fascination with the African American Sunni Muslim community is what I now see as an important but naive observation. In 1986, while riding on a bus in Chester, Pennsylvania, in ninety-nine degree weather, I observed a woman walking on the sidewalk and wearing dark brown, polyester *bijab* and veil.² She had two young children in tow, a boy and a girl, each with the proper, gendered head coverings: a skull cap for the boy and a scarf for the girl. I thought to myself, “Why would a woman in America choose not to be a feminist?” Or “Why would a woman in America choose not to have choices?”

With respect to the first question, in the feminist literature of the 1970s, the psychological, symbolic, and neo-Marxist approaches to the study of gender asked why women are universally oppressed.³ The assumption of course is that in every society women are considered infe-

rior, an assumption that has been challenged in what is often described as “third wave feminism.”⁴ At the time I asked these questions, in the mid- and late 1980s, I was unfamiliar with the works of, for example, Chandra Mohanty, bell hooks, and Moraga and Anzaldúa, who around the same time were articulating the importance of race, class, and nation in terms of women’s experiences with gender. These authors challenged the idea that to be a feminist requires adopting an ideology and political agenda defined mainly by European American women, whose race, class, and education influenced the scope and breadth of their feminist ideals. Indeed, there were numerous reasons poor people of color would choose not to call themselves feminists, but those reasons would only become clear to me well after I asked them on the bus in Chester.

So then, “Why would a woman in America choose not to have choices?” The ideas of choice and rationality are discussed much more frequently within the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and, because choice and rationality dovetail with ideals of freedom, studies of democracy. While I am poorly equipped to enter into serious dialogue with philosophers and psychologists, I have revisited the anthropological project of cultural relativism and its meaning not simply as a strategy for engaging with our informants, but at the level of unmaking ourselves by challenging our own assumptions. I appreciate the relativist approach, which is not to judge one set of cultural values relative to another; however, it has caused me a great deal of paralysis when trying to address questions about liberation and empowerment. Within a relativist framework, for example, must we agree that a Muslim woman who is physically abused by her husband, but thinks she is liberated, is indeed liberated? In response to my paralysis, I chose to fall back upon the wisdom of a judge who said, “I know illegal pornography when I see it.”⁵ This approach acknowledges that to make a determination of “decent” or “indecent” is not a science but an art. I adopted this approach when interpreting Muslim women’s comments about their own empowerment. Statements like “I’m liberated,” or “America is a freedom loving country,” can be as exhibitionist as pornography, and the anthropologist must

determine the representational values of those personal and political declarations with respect to some referential truth. Freedom always has constraints, and methodologically we must locate the constraints in order to define the freedom, not the other way around.

Since my aborted first attempt in 1986/87 and subsequent resumption in 1991, I have focused my research on Muslim converts on the deconstruction of the theoretical assumptions and biases that informed my initial two questions. After identifying the problems with my initial response, I shifted my focus and began asking, What is feminism? And what choices do women have in America? I decided the best approach toward understanding choices was to abandon the comfort of my secular “Western” worldview in order to relate to a consciousness that often ignores the social, political, and even material environment for intangible rewards. Or are they intangible? They are intangible for people who do not share the same epistemology. For most American women, a Muslim woman’s choice to dress in *hijab* is as destructive as suttee or foot binding.⁶ But if we only acknowledged one worldview as legitimate, 99 percent of the population could be faulted for ignorance, stupidity, and/or irrationality. Relativists defend, on a theoretical level, cultural choices like hammering off the fingers of Dani girls in New Guinea after a male relative dies. Universalists, however, believe the ideology supporting such acts is indeed problematic. I heard an anthropologist describe the tug-of-war between universalists and relativists as analogous to the American struggle between equality and justice. Put another way, American society has competing social ideals of recognizing others as social and political equals while also believing in universal forms of justice. The universalist part of the American psyche believes in political and moral universals like democracy and social justice while the relativist believes that people must be allowed to be different and to respect those differences as equal. The conflict between these two ideals becomes especially interesting in cases where the Ku Klux Klan wants to march on public property, or when a majority of parents want their children to pray in school. I, like my American counterparts, have the same bifurcated

utopian ideal. Therefore, I recognize that my research has been driven in part by the desire to reconcile my belief that these women are my equals in their capacity to make “rational” decisions with my belief that Western feminism and Western freedom are in fact good things.

My interest in understanding “rational” behavior comes from my interest in resistance consciousness and strategies for overcoming oppression. Being African American, I am not unique in my desire to try to understand the puzzle of race and oppression, or in my desire for progressive social change. My initial field notes outline questions and codes that at the time, I believed, would help me determine if African American women who convert to Islam are reproducing their oppression. Questions included: Are you wealthier now than before you converted? What material contributions have you made to the Sunni community? I wanted to know if the Muslim women’s religious practices and ideology produced the intended results. Finally, I realized that I was using a modernist sensibility in trying to understand human intentions and action, and my methods could only lead to a determination that my informants were falsely conscious. To accept my methods and data was to accept a universalist social-science approach that takes for granted the idea that people are objective and act rationally, that cultures evolve in a unilinear fashion, and that economic class organizes intentions, actions, identity, and consciousness—a kind of economic reductionism. Ideas of rational praxis are, after all, firmly grounded in history, and the historical production of knowledge, which means even the theories of praxis, most notably Marx’s, are tied to powerful epistemologies. I wanted to avoid a teleology that begins and ends with the same determination of what ought to be, a common subtext in political economy theory. Instead, I traced consciousness lineages, if you will, in order to determine not whether the Sunni Muslim resistance consciousness is “rational,” in a positivist sense, but how resistance consciousness emanates from and acts upon the American phenomena of racism, sexism, and poverty.⁷

Most expositions on African American Muslims have very limited information on the experiences of women. Paula Giddings challenges Eli-

jah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America*, in which he said, "Allah, himself, has said that we cannot return to our land until we have a thorough knowledge of our own selves. This first step is the control and the protection of our own women."⁸ Giddings says:

Well, that was one way to solve the difficult problem of male-female relationships and assure "Black manhood": revert to nineteenth-century White society's handling of it. However, the irony was lost on many Blacks at the time. C. Eric Lincoln's study *Black Muslims in America* concluded that the organization's most significant achievement was its promotion of men as the dominant force in the family and the mosque.⁹

Barbara Sizemore argues that *Message to the Blackman in America* basically positions women as evil and men as righteous, and therefore it is the religious obligation of black men to "keep women from the streets."¹⁰ Doris Witt argues that Elijah Muhammad associated black women with "filth" and asserts that some of the most well-known male black nationalist leaders of the 1960s and 1970s were misogynists.¹¹

There are some exceptions to the overwhelmingly negative expositions on patriarchy in American Muslim movements. In her autobiography *Little X*, Sonyrea Tate gives readers a much more nuanced portrait of women's roles and perspectives in the Nation of Islam. In *African-American Islam*, Amina Beverly McCloud describes Sunni Islam as empowering to women. Most recently, Robert Dannin describes in ethnographic detail how Muslim women challenge patriarchy in a community in New York. Nevertheless, even the explicit affirmations made by African American Muslim women about their sense of agency are often ignored. Claude Clegg, for example, in his excellent but male-centered history of the Nation of Islam, says about the women:

The image of virtuous black womanhood presented to the public through Muslim displays of chivalry and propaganda often gave outsiders the impression that female believers actually held a superior

place in the temple. However, the reality of Muslim power arrangements and gender relations confirmed for the insider and the keen observer that the pedestals on which women were placed had been constructed by men and could be cast aside when a female believer needed a good “smack in the face” for challenging the will of her male counterpart. In future decades, women would continue to play an ambiguous role in the Nation and would be both the beneficiaries of glorification and the victims of objectification.¹²

With that comment, Clegg brackets the role of women in the movement, and moves on to discuss the men, who readers might think *were* the movement.¹³

In a departure from earlier works, this ethnography describes why African American women choose to be part of what I loosely define as the Sunni Muslim movement. Since looking out the window of that bus in Chester, I have developed an appreciation for the desire for cultural membership in a community with clear rules of engagement. Using religious exegesis, or religious interpretation (*tafsir*), women open up a space for themselves within the community. In particular, it is through the authorizing discourse of Islam that women negotiate and empower themselves within their community. Far from being “chattel,” as Barbara Sizemore contends, Muslim women are enlisted along with the men in the creation of an alternative social and moral space. Historically, within the various African American Muslim communities there have been instances of sexism toward women, but for the most part, women have rarely, if ever, been systematically discounted as “filth.”

ENTRÉE

My first visit to Masjid Ummah was culturally disorienting. While I was trying to decide which entrance and exit was for women, I was also trying to determine a good entrée into the community.¹⁴ Ultimately that day, all a priori calculations regarding what to wear and how to introduce myself seemed meaningless given that the only thing I really had control

over was my desire to get to know the community; a desire that has compelled me to ask American women from the rural Southwest to the urban Northeast the same question, “Why did you convert?” That first day, on a bench just outside the women’s entrance, I sat next to an elderly woman. She was wearing a conservative dark blue dress and a white headscarf that was pinned in the back before it was given the freedom to drape over her shoulders. The majority of the other women at Masjid Ummah had dresses cut from colorful African textiles with matching headscarves. While the elderly woman was dressed in clothing reminiscent of that worn by female members of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, the other women expressed an identity not available to most Muslim converts until the mid-1970s, when it became fashionable to identify as both African and American.¹⁵ The West African clothing is seen to be feminine, modest, and a professional accoutrement. In this clothing the women feel that they can be Muslims, women, African Americans, professionals, and mothers, while at the same time demonstrate support for the local economy of South Central, an area with numerous black-owned clothing stores. In contrast, the elderly woman who occupied the same bench outside Masjid Ummah represented in clothing an identification tied to a particular utopian consciousness.

Having noticed a number of children in school uniforms, I asked the woman where the school office was located. Without putting much thought into methods or self-representation, I decided I would volunteer at the school in order to “give back” to the community from which I was going to extract information for personal gain. In the office the principal, Miriam, asked me what I could teach.¹⁶ Knowing the community’s mandate to de-center Europe and Europeans from the canons, I said that I could teach African American history. She dismissed that suggestion saying, “We have a lot of people who can teach African American history.” At the time I chastised myself for being so naïve, and in a sense condescending. Clearly, if this is one of their stated mandates, they are finding ways to fulfill it. Miriam proceeded to ask if I could tutor children in math and reading. I was happy to accept the job. Then she asked what

continues to be, for me, an extremely difficult question to answer: "Have you taken the *shabada*?" The *shabada* is the "witness of faith" that a person takes in order to convert to Sunni Islam. My unrehearsed reply was that I was taking the job to conduct fieldwork for a class project and to learn more about Islam so that I could decide if I wanted to convert.

In recalling my entrée, I can see that in some respects my research within the Sunni Muslim community has meandered. I initially set out to conduct four months of research for a class, but the experience turned into a job and a long-term relationship with a number of women who frequent one of two masjids. With the exception of my eight-month stint as a teacher, I have been quite marginal within the community. In the years I have studied Sunni Islam I have harbored many different personal views about the faith and the community. I appreciate the rigor involved in being Muslim, the need to be fluent in Arabic, Islamic history, Qur'anic exegesis, and the importance of daily ritual, but the rigor is not for me. My journey, I tell my Muslim sisters, is taking me in other directions that have been shaped in significant ways by the Muslim agenda to seek a non-contradictory social justice that begins and ends at the level of the personal, at the level of the body that is, most importantly, a social body.

Finding the roots of my determination to know and understand why women convert to Sunni Islam would require significant self-exploration. Perhaps the best way to sum it up is to say that I admire the *muhajjabah* (women who wear *hijab*) and who make no apologies for disagreeing with the American mainstream, who are predominantly Christian, and keepers of the American dream of economic and social mobility. After all, how mobile is a black woman in a headscarf? The way Americans presently reward certain physical types, a headscarf has the potential to lower the glass ceiling with respect to job promotion and retention. For African Americans to socially acknowledge their Islamic faith through certain types of dress is like carrying a United States exit visa; it is a sign marking the closure of access to certain social and material rewards. In addition, people confuse Sunni Muslims with converts to the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam, a black nationalist move-

ment/religion founded by Elijah Muhammad, is now led by Louis Farrakhan, who has made public anti-Jewish comments. The confusion among the public about the distinction between the two groups often means that African American Sunni Muslims are often presumed to be anti-Jewish.

Ultimately, choosing to adopt a minority faith, and choosing to perform that faith in public spaces, could be considered a form of social suicide.¹⁷ Or maybe not. What if the tenets of Islam, which include economic redistribution and brotherhood, are eventually adopted by the American mainstream? Perhaps there would be a revolution in how social and material rewards are distributed. Or what if through conversion the American mainstream reduced forms of overconsumption, including alcoholism? They might change the number of alcohol-related car fatalities and the frequency of domestic abuse. I use these hypothetical examples to highlight that popular beliefs can have almost as much material force in shaping social relations as ownership of economic capital.¹⁸ Therefore, performing an Islamic identity in the United States, so to speak, may in the long run change social relations. Until these ideas gain popular acceptance, however, what empowerment or agency do female converts have? The women I know who practice their faith struggle daily with biases and/or stereotypes that limit their access to social rewards. Nevertheless, they continue to enter voluntarily into the struggle in order to express their faith. Why? Because for them the rewards include the possibility of a more just community and society, more successful interpersonal relationships including marriage, and, most importantly, the knowledge that one is living according to the will of Allah.

In the daily performance of their beliefs, converts challenge the legitimacy of American assumptions about race, gender, class, family, and community. In the following chapters, I will describe how each of these social issues is filtered through the prism of Islam and inflected with new meaning. Race, for example, is understood as neither a symbol around which the community should unite (many even oppose affirmative action), nor as a meaningless historical, personal, and social fact. In other

words, they view race as simultaneously salient and not salient. One finds, therefore, a number of predominantly African American masjids that are in no way exclusively black. These masjids offer greater opportunities for African Americans to assume leadership roles, but at the same time these masjids are racially and ethnically diverse. The community's approach to race is neither reactionary nor exclusionary; it is not what Omi and Winant would call a "racial project."¹⁹ Instead race is constructed according to the Prophet's last sermon during which he says that Allah created different races for the purposes of identification and not oppression.²⁰ Similarly, the race ethic in the community is based on the utopian ideal of tribal harmony and integration, much like Islamic history portrays Mecca shortly after it fell to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers in 630 C.E. This means, in effect, that for this African American Muslim community, religious praxis is the strategic deployment of alternative approaches to issues including racism, classism, and sexism.

THE SISTERS

My informants were African American women, Muslima who, with the exception of most of the children born into the religion, have had a spiritual, social, political, and personal epiphany. They are members of an African American Sunni Muslim community in Southern California. I explore issues of empowerment and agency from the perspective of women who strive to perfect the practice of their faith through (1) Qur'anic exegesis requiring knowledge of the Qur'an, hadith (words and deeds of the Prophet), Islamic history, Islamic jurisprudence, and Arabic; (2) adherence to the five pillars of Islam; and (3) personal growth through increasing self-awareness. I emphasize that the community is Sunni Muslim, one of the two major branches of Islam, because as I mentioned earlier many people think that most African American Muslims worship with the Nation of Islam and follow Louis Farrakhan.²¹ The Muslim community at Masjid Ummah practices "traditional" Islam, which means they believe that the Prophet Muhammad is the last messenger and slave

servant to Allah, and that the Qur'an is from Allah as told to the Prophet through the Angel Gabriel.²² Accordingly, the Sunni Muslim community practices the five pillars of Islam, including: *shahada* (witness of faith); *salat* (five obligatory daily prayers per day); *sawm* (fasting); *zakat* (charity); and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).

Although no formal surveys have been conducted, most African American Muslim women choose to wear headscarves only in the masjids and during prayer, when it is required. Women who do not wear *bijab* outside of religious observances struggle against hegemony from a different “war of position” than women who do wear *bijab*.²³ The differences are subtle but important enough that I chose to focus my research on female Muslims who express their faith through dress—the *muhajjabab*. This book explores the lives of several women who through overt displays of their faith use their bodies as sites of resistance. These sisters challenge hegemonic discourse about race, gender, community, and faith at the level of the everyday.

MASJIDUMMAH

Sister Clara Muhammad School was a private elementary and junior high school located at Masjid Ummah. I taught math, reading, and eventually video production at the school. The teachers and administrators at Sister Clara Muhammad went beyond the educational basics and encouraged their students to develop a deep appreciation for African American history as well as learn what is required to be a good Muslim—Qur'an, hadith, Arabic, Islamic history, and the rituals of the faith. Given the dismal state of schools in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods, Sister Clara Muhammad offered families a positive alternative. Positive in the sense that the students had textbooks that were intact, there was no school violence, and all the students were encouraged and expected to excel.

The school/masjid was on an acre of land with a large dirt yard in front. The front space acted at times as a parking lot, and at other times

as a market for vendors to sell ethnic clothing, jewelry, perfumes, books, and other items. Bordering the dirt yard was an asphalt parking lot with two large trailers converted into classrooms; a large, portable storage container converted into the school office; and of course the masjid, which was a plain white, one-story stucco building, an odd assortment of functional indoor space.

The masjid was on a north-/southbound street running from the city's downtown into the heart of the poorest and most segregated community. Although the masjid was located in what some people describe as a bad neighborhood, the streets were fairly quiet. Every few nights, however, the sound of a helicopter hinted that either the daytime quiet belied a sinister truth, or that the helicopters were used by the police to intimidate this poor and less powerful community. My conclusion after living in one of these "bad" neighborhoods is that there are multiple truths to which one must attend. This urban community is in one of the most segregated cities in the United States with a tremendous amount of violence and social suffering. While I have no way of knowing how this Southern California community differs qualitatively from other large American cities, many of my informants had plans for "getting out." At the same time that my informants spoke of a need to escape, however, most were investing in new businesses, engaging in long-term projects to improve their communities, and/or deeply enmeshed in extensive social networks built over years. In other words, within the Sunni Muslim community there was significant ambivalence about the city.

The masjid was in a section of town where streets with single family homes ran perpendicular to a street zoned for commerce. The character of this commercial district has changed considerably since 1991. Most notably, large conglomerates like the drugstore chain CVS and the grocery store chain Ralphs have since driven out the mom-and-pop shops. Demographically there is also a shift in the racial/ethnic population from predominantly black to Latino. In contrast, in 1991 the buildings surrounding the masjid included a fried chicken restaurant, a firehouse, and a gas station. Kitty-corner to the masjid was a liquor store parking lot

where every day a group of men sat drinking and talking. Further down the street there were several stores selling cheap, imported clothing, accessories, toys, and candy. To the south, on almost every block, stood one or two storefront churches that I imagined received barely enough in donations to meet their monthly rents.

Everyday before classes started, students would gather in the masjid's prayer space and form rows according to age and gender and proceed to sing the "Sister Clara Muhammad" song. Sister Clara Muhammad was the wife of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and although the parents who attended this masjid were Sunni Muslims, the name of the school honored the first person to institutionalize African American Muslim education. The girls would be dressed in long burgundy jumpers, white blouses, and white headscarves; the boys would be dressed in white dress shirts and dark blue slacks. Following the song and announcements, the younger students would be led to their classrooms just off the largely unadorned prayer space. The older students, fourth through eighth grade, would make their way to two large trailers in the parking lot of the masjid.

Around noon the children and teachers would break from schoolwork and head back to the masjid. The boys would enter the masjid on the north side of the building and the girls would enter the south side of the building, where each performed *wudu*, or ritual cleansing. After performing *wudu*, the boys would take their place in front of the girls, and a male student would perform the *adhan*, or call to prayer. Following the *adhan* they would begin *zubr* prayer, or early afternoon prayer, led by a male teacher.

I met Imani when I was teaching three of her then seven children at Sister Clara Muhammad. For one semester in 1991, I taught her sons math, and in the summer I taught her oldest son, Hamza, video production. At the time, Imani was living in a one-room apartment next to a junkyard. The room was dark and the children's space was demarcated by several overstuffed chests of drawers. One corner housed the "kitchen," which had a sink and a small stove. Over the stove was a sign reading,

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Imani was investing a tremendous amount of time organizing her children’s rap group, which sang Islamicly inspired songs. She would transport all the kids to rehearsals, auditions, and performances. It seemed at the time as though Imani’s involvement with her children was going to bring them success.

Imani herself had grown up in poverty in Washington, D.C., and at thirteen years old radically shifted her worldview after listening to a report on the radio about the discovery that red dye number four was a carcinogen. Like most epiphanies, the report confirmed what at some level she already felt, that intellectual and physical “poisons” marred her environment, slowly destroying her body. Freedom, she determined, would come only through knowledge and purification. Eventually as a teenager, Imani became a vegetarian and convinced her mother to adopt the same eating restrictions. Shortly afterward, Imani converted to Islam and by example convinced her mother to do the same. As a Muslim, Imani maintains strict control over her children’s diet. Hamza refused my offer of M&Ms, saying, “They cause a disease that you don’t get right away, but maybe ten years from now.” Clearly, Imani had already explained carcinogens to her young children. Despite destitution, Imani went to a popular and expensive natural food store in an upper-middle class district to buy medicinal herbs that were almost impossible to find in grocery stores in her neighborhood.

The last time I met Imani was at a 1998 *Eid*, or celebration, following Ramadan.²⁴ Imani drove to the park in an old Suburban truck with eight of her then nine children. The truck was so loaded with stuff there seemed to be no room for the children. The car was as disorderly as the children were orderly. They were all wearing their best matching *Eid* clothes. All the members of the family wore their hair in dreadlocks, and Imani, who used to hide her hair in a tight scarf, had put a loose scarf over her long dreads. Her husband was there. They had separated a few years before, but had since reconciled. When I asked if she plans on having any more children she said, “Allah knows,” which is a common response from people who try to live sunnah, or according to the practices of the

Prophet Muhammad. Her husband sold used books, and so they had brought dozens of boxes of used books and videos, many about Islam, to hand out to the children attending the *Eid*. Imani told me that recently they had moved to a remote, and somewhat rural region of Southern California, to a rental property situated on two acres of land; a significant contrast from the one-room space the entire family occupied in South Central. She said the kids had space in which to run around and animals. With the initial picture painted by Imani it seemed as though she had finally found an enclave in which, unfettered, she could live naturally and Islamically after years of having to contend with the urban artifice of South Central.

I asked if her son Hamza was at the *Eid*. Imani said Hamza was in Juvenile Hall. She said he started hanging around the “wrong crowd,” staying out late, and eventually he stopped coming home. I asked if Islam was helping him to rethink his life, and without skipping a beat she and her husband said, “No.” This family’s struggles are typical of the struggles of many inner-city families, but for those who take a rigorous and less accommodationist approach to living Islamically, it is surprising that Imani’s empowerment was not passed down to her son, or that Imani’s sense of her own freedom was rarely revealed through any overt signs of personal agency and empowerment.

Hamza’s descent into gang-banging was ethnographically important to me because it brought up so many issues related to my initial fieldwork question: Was conversion empowering or, as my Marxist advisor had said, was it merely false consciousness? Indeed most Americans, Marxist or not, understand Islam to be the opposite of a faith that liberates. In the West, people who know very little about the faith are given permission to condemn it publicly as a theology that promotes violence and oppresses women. Louis Farrakhan, who preaches a nontraditional form of Islam, has done his part to perpetuate these misconceptions. Nevertheless, that does not excuse the fact that even after years of describing my research to my professional colleagues, I discover that they too collapse race and faith, thereby losing the distinction between being in the Nation of Islam and being a Sunni Muslim.

Accompanying this ignorance is another set of misperceptions. Women and men who believe in dividing some domestic labor according to gender are often criticized for re-essentializing gender. Similarly, in scholarly writings, many feminists and womanists collapse Islam with nationalism, and so Muslims are sometimes accused of re-essentializing race.²⁵ These scholars are correct in positing the Nation of Islam as a nationalist movement, and part of its doctrine was the belief that there is an authentic black male and black female. Slavery, Eurocentrism, and white supremacy, it was thought, made blacks act in ways that Nation members consider detrimental to their economic, political, and personal success: divorce, women working outside the home, homosexuality.²⁶ The problem is that scholars take these statements at face value and argue that the increasing number of converts to Islam reflects a resurgence of male patriarchy and homophobia, which threatens the potential of black women to liberate themselves and their communities.²⁷ The problem with accepting the rhetoric of Muslim leaders as fact, is that discourse is not always congruous with deeply held social dispositions and practices. The rhetoric of patriarchy, for example, may be deployed not to make women submissive, but to instill in men a sense of responsibility. So as scholars we need to ask Muslim women if patriarchy is relevant in their daily lives. While popular ideas, such as patriarchy, have material force, ideas by themselves have much less power than cultural practice. With respect to patriarchy, there are often significant disconnects between what men and women say, and what men and women do. Put another way, there is “official” gender ideology, and then there is “practical” gender organization.²⁸

For many non-Muslims, clothing, segregated spaces, and prayer rituals define the practice of Islam. In this way, people often view the faith as a performance: the performance of the submission of women to men and the submission of the community to God. The theology that gives rise to these performances, however, is extremely complex, at times contradictory, and always subject to interpretation. One needs to spend very lit-

tle time in a masjid to recognize that most women are not passive recipients of male authority.

Contrary to the stereotypes, women such as Imani told me repeatedly that Islam had positively and profoundly changed their lives. Conversion for my informants happened in response to police violence against Muslims during the 1965 Watts riots, in sympathy with black nationalist struggles, and in response to incarceration or drug dependency. In other words, conversion was almost always tied to political consciousness, the desire for social change through resistance, and individual empowerment. While informants such as Imani say that Islam has empowered them, my research was driven by a desire to interrogate those claims.

For Imani, it is her struggle for Islamic purity that has been put to the test by her oldest son, who has been seduced by the secular community. Is it possible that her son's choices have been influenced more by the secular world than the parents' religious practice? Imani's rejection of polluted food and ideas seems rational in light of her own experiences growing up in the ghetto, but how those ideas have informed her economic and social choices may simply work poorly for her children in their environment. Sharing beyond what one can afford, and having as many children as Allah decides, represents an orientation to Islam that is not optimal if one wants to improve the next generation's chances for material success. Hamza and his brother Yusef both had significant academic gifts. Unfortunately, the economic deprivation of their neighborhood, and the poor resources in the public schools they attended after the 1993 earthquake, meant that these gifts received very little recognition or nurturance.²⁹ Even with tremendous parental involvement, there are a number of material impediments to academic success in poor neighborhoods. In this respect, the trajectory of Imani's oldest son is not unfamiliar in this environment, therefore instead of debating whether Islamic conversion represents false consciousness, a more salient discussion would entail asking how Islam empowers some and not others, and in what contexts.

COMMUNITY PRAXIS

The Muslim community has a blueprint for a moral world based upon the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad.³⁰ They attempt to express in every detail of their lives their worship (*ibadah*) of Allah while working to fit under one rubric self, identity, faith, education, economic action, and social and political consciousness, a Herculean task given the contradictions within and between these various personal and social domains. Since I began studying the community, I have shifted my focus away from trying to determine if the women are falsely conscious and toward trying to understand people's desire to create moral worlds. Specifically, I have become interested in how the Muslim community attempts to develop consistent paradigms of moral and religious praxis. My use of the term *praxis* pays homage to Karl Marx.³¹ Marx argues that a revolutionary leap is impossible "unless the 'theoretical' criticism of politics is conjoined to the experience of a definite social grouping whose position in society renders them revolutionary."³² In other words, praxis is the joining of belief with practice, and while I do not use praxis in the Marxist revolutionary sense, the joining of ideology and action is what, I believe, empowers Muslims and gives them agency. The problem is that not everyone agrees about what that praxis should be, and the result is personal ambivalence. This ambivalence, which may be directed at the leadership, the community's Islamic exegesis, or community praxis, aids in shaping, through dialectical and dialogic processes, new theological, political, and personal transformations.³³

In order to understand Imani's sense of her own agency, it is important to know how she fits into the larger Muslim community. The uniqueness of this study is that it explores a community in which praxis lies somewhere between individual agency and group activism. Individuals shape the community's discourses and political agendas using a particular set of methods of engagement, notably *tafsir*, or religious interpretation. These negotiated political and religious discourses, inspired by individuals and religious texts, continue to lay the groundwork for trans-

formational group action. What the community does in the process of trying to create consensus through Qur'anic exegesis, is to establish the borders of their "community of practice".³⁴ The ideal community is propagated through *khutbahs*, texts (primary and secondary sources), and study groups. Nevertheless, agreement varies, even with a concerted effort to build consensus, and converts must contend with a community where individuals interpret the edicts of Islam differently. Ultimately, as social realities and community objectives change, so do ideas of social inclusion, membership, and *tafsir*.

There are female converts who read the Qur'an as a feminist text. At the same time there are men in the community who believe that within the Qur'an Allah has given husbands permission to beat their disobeying wives. Both sets of these converts claim to belong to the same faith, but many female converts do not accept that these men have any authority to speak on behalf of the community. These men are viewed as marginal members, and their marginal status is reinforced when the women come together and produce "feminist" Qur'anic exegesis.

What I hope to instill in the reader with these stories of conversion is not the sense that by surrendering to Islam female converts are trying to make one dimensional the otherwise dynamic aspects of their postmodern selves, but that they are engaging in a particular project, if you will, by deciding to be part of a particular community of practice. As members of a community engaged in creating a moral world, they chose to follow certain rules for cultural membership. They do so without necessarily embracing those rules or doctrines as legitimate, but to signify that they are cultural members and therefore have the right to be taken seriously.

In the end, conversion is neither false consciousness nor liberation. Instead the women's choice to engage within this community of practice has the potential to reshape social relationships at the local level. The potential of this movement is that it provides a platform from which men and women can negotiate an agenda for the circulation, "like blood," of

wealth in the community; develop methods for community and familial support through exchange and barter; and propagate a moral paradigm for social justice.

Islam speaks to the converts' personal sense of who they are at the same time that it provides a language to transform the personal into the political. In Chapter 6, for example, Zipporah describes how she is an assertive woman and that she believes Islam supports the rights of women to be assertive. Islam is an authorized discourse, a third party through which men and women can negotiate. Islam is their common ground, their moral frame, without which negotiation is impossible. Women's ambivalence toward particular interpretations of the Qur'an usually inspires a formal challenge through engagement with particular texts. These scholarly challenges open a space for the women to insert a critical voice into what constitutes legitimate religious worship beyond the obligatory five pillars of the faith. As such, women are empowered to create a Muslim community where men and women's equality is understood to be a form of worship.

Significantly, African American women who convert have "surrendered" to Islam—but "surrendered" in a way that engages their political consciousness and produces not only a spiritual but a social epiphany. Surrender empowers them to live new lives, even if it is marked by ambivalence toward certain interpretations of Islam—an ambivalence resulting from personal struggles to come to terms with the restrictions as well as the freedoms they have embraced. My study addresses resistance as it emanates from and acts upon the American experiences of racism, sexism, and poverty. But it examines a form of response that may seem paradoxical, since it can be seen as a retreat from the world into religious practices of purity and asceticism. My account stresses the specificity of discourses of resistance, their relation to family life and economic pressures, and it presents an ethnographic portrait of how these women represent their own choices. I argue that African American Islam is a political stance of engaging the world, not only a way of escaping it. I am critical of efforts to explain conversion as either "false consciousness" or

simple “empowerment,” and argue instead that there is a layered process of identity reformulation that involves dimensions of both ambivalence and empowerment.

SOURCES

Any book on Islam requires an explanation regarding the choice of sources and on the transliteration of language. Let me begin with my choice of Qur’an, which was revised and edited by the Presidency of Islamic Researchers. Both Muslim women on my dissertation committee asked me why I used this Qur’an. They noted problems they had with the translation, particularly the sections on women. They are not alone in challenging the accuracy of the translation; within the preface of the Qur’an, the publishers deny that it is even *the* Qur’an, given that any translation bankrupts some of the meaning and message of Allah. Because of the contentious debates in Islam regarding the validity of sources, I find it necessary to clarify that I am not an Islamic scholar, but merely an anthropologist studying a community of Muslims. Therefore, I use the Qur’an given to me by an imam at my primary field site. I used it because it is from that Qur’an that the community develops a significant portion of its exegesis.

My choice to use sources such as Maulana Muhammad Ali’s *The Religion of Islam* (1990), Amina Wadud-Muhsin’s *Qur’an and Woman* (1995), and Suzanne Haneef’s *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims* (1985), was determined by their popularity within the community. I believe these authors are popular because their exegesis resonates with the community. For similar reasons, I also derived my transliteration of Arabic to English primarily through Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s *Muslim Journal*. African American Muslims often feel that other Muslims in the United States see them as less knowledgeable about Islam, and I certainly do not want to participate in the reproduction of that consciousness by denigrating their choice of sources.

FIELDWORK

The primary locations for my fieldwork include two masjids where I initiated my contacts with many women and families. The names of the masjids, businesses, and streets have been changed. Also, the names of the people as well as some nonessential facts about their lives have been altered to maintain confidentiality. The frequency of my contact with the community varied from four times a week for more than a year to periods where my only contact was by phone to my closest informants. Ultimately, I collected more than one hundred formal and informal interviews. I also audiotaped or purchased the audio or videotape of more than twenty masjid lectures, attended more than one hundred *Jumabs*, or Friday prayers, and more than thirty women's gatherings.

From the spring of 1991 until the present, I have set out to discover how Islam has been adopted as a method for personal and social transformation in Southern California. Of my twenty-four key informants, five described exploring various religions before becoming Muslim, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Evangelical Christianity. Four had been politically active in the radical social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. All were dissatisfied with the social, economic, and political position of blacks; but seven were motivated primarily by a desire to change their community. One decided to convert when her son "turned his life around" for the better. Two were personally troubled with drugs and depression.³⁵ Three were introduced to the religion as children by their parents, and finally two out of three of my white female informants were introduced to Islam by their husbands who are Pakistani or Pakistani-American. Of course there is crossover, for example, one who was born into the faith went on to explore various religions before reentering the faith.

Each chapter in this book attempts to address African American Muslim liberation consciousness and resistance from the position of the actor looking out. Embodying ideology, in particular notions of purity, and grappling with ambivalence are fundamental aspects of resistance

that set the stage, so to speak, for collective action and protest.³⁶ Without these elements, I believe, everyday forms of resistance are random, lack social significance, and can ultimately be negatively transformative. My ethnographic interest had less to do with the physical maps of the city than the consciousness maps that inform the way the women think about the everyday. The maps these women draw help them to inscribe moral fields around people, places, identity, and family.³⁷ By drawing these consciousness maps they define borders of safety, productivity, community, friendship, and family. When African American social history, feminism, and Islam share consistent themes of justice, community, family, and equality, then transformation—in this case surrender to Islam—is possible.