Georgia State University
ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Women's Studies Theses

Institute for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

7-20-2009

Power and Surrender: African American Sunni Women and Embodied Agency

Lisa Renae Frazier

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/wsi_theses

Recommended Citation
Frazier, Lisa Renae, "Power and Surrender: African American Sunni Women and Embodied Agency" (2009). *Women's Studies Theses.* Paper 15.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

POWER AND SURRENDER:

AFRICAN AMERICAN SUNNI WOMEN AND EMBODIED AGENCY

by

LISA R. FRAZIER

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the lack of scholarly attention devoted to African American Sunni women by examining how they use collective memory to negotiate embodied agency. Through an analysis of African American Sunni women's narratives of testifying conversion, and vignettes from diaries and interviews, I show how African American Sunni women utilize racial, religious, and spiritual memory in the form of ritual practices and Islamic texts to multiply construct their bodies, and how this construction allows them to enact multimodal and nomadic forms of agency. A contextual analysis also illustrates how environment and interpretation (tafsir) further mobilizes forms of agency, articulating a need for flexibility in regard to the concept of embodied agency and challenging the dichotomy prevalent in Western and Eurocentric conceptions of liberatory agency.

INDEX WORDS: African American Sunni women, Agency, Empowerment, Islam, Spiritual memory, Religious memory, Conversion narrative, Testifying, Embodiment, Spiritual body, Polygamy

POWER AND SURRENDER:

AFRICAN AMERICAN SUNNI WOMEN AND EMBODIED AGENCY

by

LISA R. FRAZIER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

Copyright by
Lisa Renae Frazier
2009

POWER AND SURRENDER: AFRICAN AMERICAN SUNNI WOMEN AND EMBODIED AGENCY

by

LISA R. FRAZIER

Committee Chair: Amira Jarmakani

Committee: Layli Phillips
Margaret Mills Harper

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
August 2009

Bismillah,

To my son Esaiya Amir Sayyed, the embodiment of my Iman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank the members of the narrative project that results in this thesis. I am greatly indebted to my fellow Muslimahs who transferred into narrative their desire for their faith and themselves to be understood and collaborated on this project with me. It was a journey which took incredible courage. It is not easy to open one's life, one's physical, ethical, moral, and spiritual world up for others to see and judge. Without you, this project could not have happened.

In academia, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Amira Jarmakani, for having the wisdom, patience, and willingness that it took to work with me on this thesis. Without you, I am not sure I would have had the strength and belief to face my uncertainty and move forward. Also important, not only to this project but to my holistic self, was Dr. Layli Phillips. Her constant assurance and spiritual support was invaluable. To Dr. Margaret Mills Harper, I give my eternal gratitude for being a tremendous friend and helping me keep my mind intact at times of great strife and turmoil. To all of you, I give 'thanks' that will never be enough.

I would like to thank the people of the Women Studies Institute at Georgia State University for their general encouragement and for providing a nurturing environment in which to work. I would like to thank a few people who have been an encouragement and inspiration throughout the course of both my academic life and this thesis: Dr. Cliff Kuhn, who helped me break through the silences in my mind and find myself; to Maureen Hill, who never ceased to support and believe in me; and Dr. Malinda Snow for being, well, Dr. Malinda Snow, an inspiration to any woman in academia.

Finally I would like to thank my family: Luqman, Maiya, Karima, Ayesha, Amina, Esaiya, Jacquelyn, Catherine, Timothy, Jessie, and James. You all have been my strength, my inspiration, my motivation, my frustration, and my love. I could not have done this without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

CHAPTER

1. Introduction 1
2. Ritual Acts of Conversion 25
3. Becoming Muslimahs: Practical Constructions of Spiritual Engagements 50
4. Conclusion: Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Research 79

BIBLIOGRAPHY 82

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY 91

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

Purpose

Especially since the events of September 11, 2001, which invigorated contemporary debates about women's rights in Muslim societies, the topic of women in Islam has received considerable attention. Most scholarship has been compiled into anthologies focused specifically on Muslim women in the 'West.' Examples of these anthologies include Karin van Nieuwkerk's *Women Embracing Islam*; Barbara Aswad and Barbara Bilge's *Family and Gender among American Muslims*; Yvonne Haddad, Kathleen Moore, and Jane Smith's *Muslim Women in America*; and Debra Dirks and Stephanie Parlove's *Islam Our Choice: Portraits of Modern American Muslim Women* to cite a few. Essays represented in these anthologies are diverse, addressing the multitude of questions concerning Muslim women and their choices to (dis)embody Islamic norms in so called liberatory societies. Some of the essays focus on American-born converts and explore Muslim women living in America from different races, ethnicities, and classes. Essays represented in these anthologies are diverse, addressing the multitude of questions concerning Muslim women and their choices to (dis)embody Islamic norms in so called liberatory societies. Some of the essays focus on American-born converts and explore Muslim women living in America from different races, ethnicities, and classes.

However, it is safe to say that within this diversity, the main focus is on first and second generation immigrant, as well as transnationally located, women considered to be part of the 'Muslim Diaspora' in North America. For some time now, scholars have studied these women in order to illustrate how their decision to (dis)embody religious norms is often in tension between

a desire to belong in a new environment and a longing to maintain an allegiance to 'home' nations. For example, research on Middle Eastern Muslim women in the diaspora in the United States has shown how these women consider their political and social marginalization in America as factors that influence the way that they embody their religion (Abraham and Aswad 1983; Abu-Laban 1991; Aswad 1996; Haddad and Smith 2002). Research on South Asian Muslim women illustrates that decisions on whether or not women carry on Islamic rituals are contingent on levels of tolerance toward Islam in their current society and that women often revise rituals in accordance with this tolerance (Ahmed and Kaufman 1996; Haddad 2006; Qureshi 1991). Considerable attention has been given to Canadian, Iranian, and Afghan Muslim women in the diaspora, and how these women reject/reify Islamic norms or enact versions of embodiments that do neither (Abu-Laban 1991; Khan 2000, 2002; Moghissi 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006). For the last twenty years, scholars have repeatedly analyzed immigrant Muslim women to show how they manage the processes of acculturation, navigate the embodiment of their Muslim identity, and create agency in a new environment.

That there is a preponderance of research on immigrant women is somewhat understandable given the proclivity of the media to cast these women as ultimate 'Others,' women who wear and bear the signs of their oppression in forms like veiling and seclusion and thus have become the visible markers by which to measure 'Othered' hegemonic and patriarchal societies. The representation of immigrant Muslim women as victims has also served to fuel Western sociopolitical projects like the 'War on Terror.' In an effort to stifle stereotypical representations of Muslim women and to elucidate the differences between women who are Muslim, as well as to distinguish between diverse Islamic cultures within the United States, feminists have theorized how individual desire and collective religious memory are balanced and

embodied by Muslim women in various ways and how this challenges the Western conceptions of the orientalized Muslim woman. Feminists and scholars have claimed that these processes of embodiment and agency have been aided by elements of globalization, which allows access to dissident and alternative 'voices' that were not previously heard in 'home' cultures (Anway 2000; Esposito 2000; Haddad and Smith 2002; Moore 2000). Thus, contemporary analyses of immigrant Muslim women in America have served to disrupt monolithic conceptions of the Muslim woman.

Still, the persistent focus on immigrant Muslim women in America creates lacunae in the scholarship on women in Islam. Perhaps one of the most glaring lacunas is visible when the lens is turned toward African American Sunni women. African American Sunni women remain, as Karen Wyche has stated, part of "an invisible group," absent from various forms of representation in the United States. Their invisibility is surprising, considering that the majority of African American Muslim women in the United States are Sunnis, and that African American Sunni women comprise the second largest gendered Muslim group in America (Wood 2002). This invisibility, however, exemplifies the marginalization of African American Sunni women. They have been triply silenced and multiply marginalized in the United States —as African Americans, as women, and as Muslims. In addition, as a group, African American Muslim women are also silenced and marginalized *within* the Islamic *umma*, as *women* and as *African American* women because they are perceived by many other cultural Islamic groups within the religion as practicing a ghettoized version of Islam (Karim 1996; Mccloud 1995). Historically, they have been unrepresented in the media and when considering the politics of women in Islam in the United States, either because they have not provided the 'West' with a scopic determinism of 'Other' or because of the persistence of the mistaken assumption that the politics and

positionality of the most politically visible group of American Muslim women, those of the Nation of Islam (NOI), reflect those of all African American Sunni women.

This thesis addresses the lack of scholarly attention devoted to African American Sunni women by examining how they utilize racial, religious, and spiritual diasporic memory to negotiate embodied agency. Through narrative building and literary interrogation, the thesis explores and opens future discussions on the topics of African American Sunni women and, through an analysis of their agentive dynamics, responds to multiple questions such as: How do African American Sunni women use religious and spiritual memory to inform their embodied daily practices? Does an analysis of their religious and spiritual practices articulate a need for flexibility in regard to the concept of embodied agency? How does and an analysis of African American Sunni women's embodied agency challenge the dichotomy prevalent in Western and Eurocentric conceptions of liberatory agency?

Literature Review

As stated earlier, investigations concerning agency of Muslim women have increased, especially among feminist scholars. Ironically, however, feminist research and scholarship has inadvertently enabled the marginalization of African American Sunni women, as it has mostly focused on women within the NOI, highlighting the issues of culture, racism, and class that these women have had to negotiate intra and inter-culturally (Majeed, 2001, 2006; Mccloud 1995; Karim 1997, 2005, 2006; Simmons 1998, 2006). Beverly Thomas Mccloud's extensive research on NOI women has shed light on the ways that NOI women have embraced Islam as a way of creating personal empowerment and communal agency within the African American community (Mccloud 1995). Her research on immigrant transnational women in the United States gives a glimpse of how globalization has allowed increased contact with Muslim women of other

cultures living within the United States and how increased contact affects NOI women (Mccloud 2006). Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons' work on women in Islam has also primarily focused on NOI women and how they integrate nationalist concerns and issues related to race and class with a demand for Islamic communalism. Simmons stresses the appeal of Islam for these women, who have a need to embody a religious faith that can address issues of race, colonialism, and the exploitation of the African American community (2006). Jamillah Karim's research includes a historical emphasis on the women of Islam and the dynamic roles they have played, as well as how African American women can look to these women as examples of empowerment. She has also, like Mccloud, focused on how processes of globalization and transnationalism have affected second and third generation members of the NOI, who now inherit the ideology of their parents and those of immigrant communities (2005; 2006).This research on African American Muslim women has constantly touched on broad areas that overlap with both NIO women and African American Sunni women; however, in its emphasis on NOI women, it has largely failed to explain particular factors relating to African American Sunni women. In addition, the current research seems to have focused on African American Muslim women's racial and material concerns and realities within Islam to the exclusion of a consideration of how the embracing of Islam effects and affects their religious and spiritual reality.

Although research on African American Sunni women has received a dearth of attention, there have been notable endeavors by feminists and other scholars who have tried to narrow the 'gap'; their research has impacted the direction and intention of my own. Amina Beverly Mccloud's brief chapter on Sunni women, entitled "African-American Muslim Women," in *African American Islam* (1995) focuses on women who have converted to Sunni Islam, mentioning that hardly any scholarship has been dedicated to this topic. Mccloud goes on to

identify five ‘types’ of women who convert to Islam. All of their conversions fall into the category of self awakening, involving Islam as a path that offers an alternative view outside of Western norms through which to understand themselves. For the women in her study, Islam offers the ability to use cultural aspects like language, dress, and ritual, aspects which were believed to have been lost through the experience of slavery. According to Mccloud, these women adopt the customs and beliefs of Islam as a way of combating racist and sexist beliefs concerning African American women and their communities.

In Debra Mubasheer Majeed’s essay, “Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church,” (2006) Mubasheer Majeed sets forth a womanist methodology and framework for understanding women’s agency in the African American community, specifically the Sunni community. She asserts that because of “parallel structures of oppression,” which consist of internal and external colonialism, the enactment of agency of women in Islam can be examined and understood through the lens of womanism. For example, she states that a woman’s choice to embody the familial structure of polygamy in the Sunni community can be seen as embodiment enacting agency. Due to the historical specificities of the impact of slavery and colonialism in the African American community, that is, a lack of eligible and marriageable men, Mubasheer Majeed claims that the African American community needs alternative family structures to help combat what she sees as the demise of communal and familial structures. She explains that the lens of womanism allows for the understanding that race, class, and gender cannot be separated from the workings of religion in the African American community. Because of the legacy of slavery, individual and communal embodiment of Islam and agency in the African American community are inextricably intertwined.

Carolyn Moxley Rouse's *Engaged Surrender* (2004) is, to date, the only full length study dedicated to the negotiation of agency and empowerment of African American Sunni women. In this ethnographic study, Moxley Rouse posits that women in a Los Angeles community represent an 'indigenous Islam' in America. They perform religious exegesis (tafsir) in order to glean an understanding of the Quran, *sunnah*, and *hadith*, giving them personal empowerment. According to Rouse, Islam in this community is a resistance movement that allows women to embody norms contra to western feminist ideals and hegemony. Because of the historical, cultural, social, and economic ramifications of slavery, she argues that Islam allows African American women access to ideals and norms that may be contrary to some feminist discourse, like the social and religious hierarchy between men and women, thus allowing them to focus on the needs of the African American community. In this way, Islam can be understood through a womanist lens, in that the politics of racism, sexism, and classism become integral elements in communal religious embodiment.

All of these works have contributed to the expansion of research concerning African American Sunni women by highlighting that, for the African American Sunni community, religious embodiment at an individual level is connected in many ways to the communal level through the politics and dynamics of race, sex, and class. They have aided in dispelling the notion that African American Muslim women exist as women without agency, and instead explicate the truism that African American Muslim women in Islam think that issues of gender cannot easily be explained by current feminist conceptions. Thus, the explicit employment of a womanist framework by Debra Mubasheer Majeed and Carol Moxley Rouse is critical, in that it is a way to understand individual choice and empowerment by African American Sunni women that offers a useful analysis outside of traditional feminist frameworks. Therefore, the

employment of a womanist paradigm illustrates how multiple forms of oppression influence the way that religious performance can be conceived and realized. Understanding and utilizing the womanist paradigm greatly contributes to the realization that forms of agency in the African American Sunni community can be examined sociocontextually as resistance to Western domination.

However, I contend that the primacy given to the rhetoric employed in these works, that is, the rhetoric of embodied agency in Islam as oppositional and resistant to 'Western' culture is problematic in that its persistent use reproduces the 'invisibility' and marginalization of African American Sunni women in feminist scholarship. This occurs on multiple dialectical levels. First, it functions by collapsing the discursive and ideological spaces largely occupied by the NOI women with those occupied by African American Sunni women. It is inarguable that, historically, the discourse of the NOI locates its ideology as antithetical to that of the 'West.' The NOI also explicitly places the needs of the racial 'nation' in a primary position as the aim of religious manifestation. NOI ideology then becomes conflated with the beliefs and drives of African American Sunni women. Although it is not valid to say that the rhetorical spaces of NOI women and those of African American Sunni women are discrete, it is paramount that these ideological spaces not be collapsed as unified or monolithic. Unfortunately, scholarship dedicated to African American Sunni women continues to do so. For example, while Moxley Rouse states that she is examining an African American Sunni community, what she is really examining is a poverty stricken community in Los Angeles that is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. Most of the women interviewed were former members and still ascribe to an ideology that mimics that of the NOI. Therefore, the positionality of these women, which defines agency as resistance, is highly influenced by the Nation of Islam. In turn, the assumption that all African

American Muslim women are part of the Nation of Islam, apparent in both general and feminist scholarship, becomes solidified.

Secondly, this rhetoric places African American Sunni women in constant opposition to the 'West' at the same time that their conflation with NOI women situates them as hermetical to the politics of transnational Islam and the rhetorics of immigrant Muslim communities. For example, although Mubasheer Majeed and Moxley Rouse posit that embodiment of Islam in the African American Sunni community can be realized as resistance to the historical and societal circumstances of the community, they fail to articulate that the adoption of certain forms of dress and ritual are themselves interpretations of Islam. These adoptions are in constant flux due to the presence of immigrant communities and processes of transnationalism and globalization. Without taking into consideration the effects of cultural interpretation in these cultures, the only 'norms' by which African American Muslim women are measured are Western norms. This occludes conceptions of how African American Sunni women are also diasporically constructed through varied religious and cultural norms within Islam.

As I have argued, the perpetuation of a sole discourse of opposition and resistance severely limits the understanding African American Sunni women's agency, placing them outside of conversations involving how Muslim women acculturate to environments in the 'West' and excluding them from analyses of how transnational and diasporic groups negotiate their identity. Thus, the only explanation of embodiment of Islam offered is resistance, relegating these women to forms of religious embodiment and agency that can only be realized counter to domination. In this framework, African American Sunni women are reduced to perpetual victims within a system of Western hegemony, consciously subordinating themselves to ideals within a situated racial patriarchy in an effort to resist and subvert Western norms. Privileging

embodiment of Islam as a result of the collective racial memory of slavery, colonialism, and exploitation elides the variety of norms in which African American Sunni women construct their religious and spiritual embodiment of Islam and obfuscates how alternative and multiple forms of agency can be enacted by African American Muslim women. Most importantly, especially for understanding embodiment within Muslim cultures, it silences how forms of collective religious or spiritual memory mediate the performance of other types of collective cultural memory like racial memory.

In order to expand the conceptualizations of agency of African American Sunni women, scholars must look to alternative frameworks that more richly express African American Sunni women's embodied reality. The agentive faculty of resistance and subversion has been used by feminists, including Islamic feminists, to contextualize experiences of Muslim women and shed light on how Muslim women from cultures exterior to the United States and the 'West' have enacted forms of embodiment and agency through resistance and subversion (Abu-Lughod 1990; Hale 1996; Moghissi 2005, 2006). However, this perpetuates the peripheralization of other contexts of African American Sunni women's experience in the understanding of embodiment and agency. These women, through everyday experiences, embody more than diasporic racial memory facilitated by a specific and monolithic cultural interpretation of Islam; they embody Islamic religious and spiritual collective memory as rendered through the Quran, *hadith*, and *sunnah*, and they embody lived collective memory through religious and spiritual rituals. In fact, many Islamic feminists claim that without an explication of the way that these religious and spiritual memories are interpreted and embodied, analyses of the embodiment and agency of Muslim women are incomplete (Anwar 2006; Barlas 2002; Engineer 1992; Jawad 1998; Wadud 1995, 1999, 2006). These feminists emphasize that embodiment of Islam and agency for Muslim

women can only be understood at the intersections of religious and spiritual memory and cultural norms.

With this emphasis in mind, in recent years some academic and feminist scholars have studied the way that Muslim women's agency can be understood according to the Islamic memory,[1] how this memory is performed in cultural context, and how this performance creates frameworks of agency different than those utilized in the 'West.' One such work includes Ouseina Alidou's *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Niger* (2005). In this text, Alidou views Muslim women's agency beyond the concept of resistance by giving particular attention to the differing contexts in which Niger women utilize their faith to enact varying forms of agency. Alidou argues that, because the Niger Muslim women embody not only Islam but a form of ethnic/cultural brassage, which is a form of ethnic blending that positions them as members of different ethnicities, their agency changes according to their identification with different ethnicities and cultures. Furthermore, Alidou emphasizes this shifting of agency by focusing on semi-nomadic peoples whose physical movements bring about a change in positionality and agency. Within this framework, women can identify with multiple cultural locations simultaneously. Thus, individual embodiments of Islam can take on multiple agentive meanings depending on which intersections of cultural interpretation and Islam are invoked.

In addition, there are two foundational theorists of women in Islam that expand on existing agentive frameworks and also force a questioning of the liberal politics in which these frameworks are based. The first is Azam Torab's study entitled "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran" (1996) and her subsequent

[1] When stating Islamic memory, I am referring to both religious and spiritual collective memory in Islam in the form of hadith, Quran, Sunnah, and ritual.

text, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (2006). The texts illustrate how women perform the non-obligatory Shi'a ritual called *jalaseh,* used to foster piety according to the Qur'an and *sunnah*, and relay how Muslim women can embody Islamic memory in a way that seems to support patriarchal conceptions of gender but at the same time allows them to enact forms of moral agency. According to them, this moral agency is the foundation for all other forms of agency. In addition, Torab argues, these women multiply construct their gendered agency in context, as the same culture can hold multiple variations on the conception of gender. Since embodiment is performed and agency enacted at the intersections where Islamic memory and the cultural norms of gender merge, embodiment and agency can simultaneously be complicit in and resistant to ideological norms.

Similar to Torab, Saba Mahmood's work also seeks to illuminate how Western notions of agency fail to account for the dynamics in which Sunni women embody Islamic memory. In "Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent" and *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Mahmood illustrates that religious embodiment in a women's grassroots movement in Cairo, Egypt, involves more than a representation or symbolic response to patriarchal systems of power; instead, embodiment of Islam is a way to attain an understanding of the material self and a development of the moral and spiritual self. Even if this embodiment seems to reproduce social norms and women's subordination, Mahmood contends, these women have enacted agency by creating a desirable outcome. In Mahmood's analysis, Western notions of agency do not take into account women's desire to attain empowerment and meaning through norms other than those aspired to in Western notions of feminism. For the many Muslim women in Mahmood's research, spiritual and moral norms are critical in the making of the self.

All of these studies use a framework that analyzes embodiment and agency outside of the dichotomy of consolidation and resistance/subversion that is indicative of the Western conception of agency as it relates to power and structure. In this thesis, I build on and extend these arguments in several ways. First, in an effort to move away from the dyad of agency and the primacy of the autonomous subject, the aforementioned scholars have largely focused on how the desire to embody collective memory disrupts notions of the autonomous subject and creates notions of agency outside of material constraints, which are defined as the cultural and social norms of the society studied, norms relating intra-culturally. By analyzing African American Sunni women, I also look at how the embodiment of collective memory creates notions of agency outside of socio-cultural norms. However, by positioning African American Sunni women as belonging to a triple diaspora, I posit that African American Sunni women enact agency through the interplay of racial, religious, and spiritual[2] collective memory. These types of collective memory are diasporic in that they are "performative processes of linking back to a homeland" (whether physical, religious, or spiritual), are pulled from a "semiotic repertoire of discourses and practices activating and reproducing affinity in agents' subjectivities," require "repeated invocation and collective commemoration." and are "the privileged carrier of identity."[3]

Because of these multiple diasporic positionings, the diverse notions of identity may simultaneously be in play with varying multi-constituted modes of agency. In addition, I not only

[2] In speaking of spiritual memory, I pull from the mystical view in Islam that spiritual memory is memory of the heart, which must be remembered. According the Vincent Cornell, "human beings experienced intimate closeness to God in the beginning of time . . . while on earth. . . . they strive to renew the memory of this proximity." Accessing this memory is done through "training and domestication of the lower self" and through spiritual states of the body, (ie, performing piety is performing a type of spiritual memory). In addition, it can be textual. The Quran and Sunnah are both types of spiritual and religious memory in Islam. Thus spiritual memory is both a process and a remembrance. See Vincent Cornell, *Voices of Islam: Voices of Tradition*, pgs 250-254.

[3]

question the autonomy of the subject according to differing forms of agency, but also do so according to differing conceptions of the subject, such as individual or communal subjectivity.

Methodology

In this thesis, I engage in social, literary, and mystical epistemologies and methodologies. The use of these methodologies are not discrete, but are used interdependently in order to illustrate the diverse ways in which embodied agency must be analyzed. Utilizing these methodologies, I also approach the research and position myself from a feminist, particularly Islamic feminist, and womanist perspective and strategic location. Taking these perspectives and positioning myself as such implies a belief that there are power relations between genders and that disparages/differences between these power relations have social, political, and ethical implications. It also implies that my perspective is shaped by Islamic-feminist/ womanist methods of analysis and theory and are attuned to the experiences of women and that my methodology and methods are shaped by a desire for a shared political and ethical commitment between myself and the collaborators of my research as well as a shared accountability to the community of African American Sunni women.

I must also address that engaging in these methodologies does not mean that I posit an absolute ability to *know* -- that is, I do not claim to be able to produce a totally objective knowledge. Feminist researchers have taken different approaches in the explanation of how they can produce "knowledge of a real world in order to specify how gendered social life is organized, structured and made meaningful" (Ramanzanoglu 41). Most feminists disagree with the claim of the sciences that knowledge is "directly accessible" and is obtained in a "value-neutral, objective, dispassionate" way (Harding qtd in Ramazanoglu 45). Instead, feminists agree that all knowledge is socially situated, but vary in the way they perceive how social situations

affect knowers. For example, standpoint theorists take the position that where one is socially located can give them an epistemic claim to knowledge of that location. They elaborate that knowledge gleaned from being a member of a subjugated group, when one is objectively locating oneself as a part of that group, is a type of knowledge that is "generally true, or true for 'women" (Ramazanoglu 66). Other feminists caution us against the claim that the social position of the researcher yields epistemic privilege. This does not mean that knowledge claims are totally dependent on the perspective of the researcher and are thus relative from researcher to researcher. Relativism, as in the words of Haraway, "is the perfect twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity [because] both are "'god tricks,' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere" (584). Instead, it means that because both objectivity and subjectivity "deny the partial and located position of the knowing subject- and it is in this partial and located position… [that researchers] locate a new conception of objectivity," an understanding that all knowledge and positioning are situated should be taken (Ramanzanoglu 182).

In this thesis, I position myself as an African American Sunni woman that is part of the community I am researching. However, I am not asserting inherent claims to knowledge based on the fact that I am an African American Sunni Woman. Instead, I am aware that I cannot fully extricate this research from my already socially structured "ontology, epistemology, ideas, subjectivity, politics, ethics, and social location" (Ramanzanoglu 26). My location as an 'Other' to this community must also be acknowledged, and I understand that "more important than a sameness that might be assumed in my possible identity as an insider are the powerful differentials…and divisions between researched and researcher that are created by the very act of [my] observation" (Lal 108). Locating myself in the sociopolitical context in which I conduct my

research extends the understanding that as a researcher I am multiply positioned and that I really occupy no distinct insider or outsider status.

While researching cultural assimilation and reproduction among African American Sunni women, I was consciously attuned to my ‘politics of location’ concerning my partial situatedness in objective and subjective stances and continuously reflected on my location as a researcher. What was the relationship between myself and my collaborators? As a member of this community, as an African American, and as a woman, I situate myself as a partial insider to this community. In doing so, I acknowledge that my personal experiences overlap with the areas of research and this also positions me as a research participant of the community being researched. Acknowledging that I am a member of a subjugated community meant agreeing that my positioning could help me in the “critical and interpretive core of all knowledge” received concerning this position (Haraway 254); yet, I was also aware that integrating the aforementioned methodologies with personal experience and knowledge of the subject of my research allowed for the uncovering of a better analysis than if these methodologies were utilized discretely. Throughout the research, I held the understanding that knowledge should generate from a ‘politics of location’ and as a researcher, I should theorize and generate knowledge “from the location of multiple and hybrid identities” (Lal 115).

In my thesis research on embodied agency among African American Sunni women, memories of the experiences of embodiment of Islam were the bedrock of my data collection. I collected data in the form narrative from myself and other African American Sunni women. My collaborators were selected through snowball sampling originating from three distinct points in urban communities located within the southeast region of the United States. Although snowball sampling allowed for some randomness in selection, there were certain criteria that filtered the

selection of collaborators. I sought women who are either first time converts to Islam or second generation Sunni women. I also asked that the collaborators have a level of secondary or tertiary secular education and possess an immediate knowledge of Islam, Islamic thought, and ideology. Because data collection was primarily through digital means, I also asked that the collaborators have a working level of computer literacy.

I believe these limitations strengthened the aim and collaborative nature of the thesis. Since research on African American Sunni women has inadvertently perpetuated the belief that the ideology of African American Sunni women is congruent with that of NOI women, I believed that the selection of first time converts to Islam and second generation Sunni would decrease the probability that collaborators possessed 'built in' collapses in ideology and belief between Sunni Islam and the NOI. Also, due to the highly collaborative nature of this thesis, I also believed that limiting collaborators to women with certain secular educational levels and religious understanding reduces the shifting of power to a single collaborator.[4]

The accessioning of African American Sunni women's memories was gleaned through the process of 'memory work.' Memory work, initially characterized by the pioneering work of Frigga Haug in *Female Sexualization*, allows not only for the re-collection of embodied memories but also the linking of embodied memories to the contexts in which these experiences occurred. The intent of memory work is to glean the *process,* the way in which women conceptualize their subjectivity in relation to structures and to focus on the way that "past

[4] This balance of power played a critical role in data collection since some narrative building occurred on a collective nature. Also, since *self acknowledged* performance or embodiment of memory is one of the main foci of my study, it is critical that the collaborators in this thesis consider themselves as performing Islam. I would however like to note that there was conscription on the *way* these women perform. For example, veiling or not veiling, particular way of adhering to the five pillars of Islam, or opting for seclusion or sociality, can all be considered as performing Islam in this study if the collaborator believes that this performance is in accordance with their interpretation of Islamic memory.

experience may offer insight into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations" through the medium of their own bodies (Haug 18, 34). Its focus is on the labor or *work*, that women do through their bodies, to construct themselves into being. Utilizing memory work is a way to understand embodiment not only as a passive occurrence, where individuals are "simply a bundle of reactions to all powerful structures" but to analyze how women have "participated actively in the formation of their past experience" (Haug 35). Therefore the goal of memory work is to allow the collaborators to explicate through their own narratives their experiences of producing themselves into being, not just the experience of being objects where power and structure has been imprinted on the body.

In obtaining narratives through memory work, I am taking the stance that experience is a source of knowledge. The contention within feminist studies of taking experience as such has been well documented. Standpoint theorists have claimed that knowledge must be grounded in experience and posit "the notion that 'women speaking their truth' results in new knowledge of gendered social lives, grounded in womens' experience" (Ramazanoglu 64). In "Learning from the Outsiders Within," Patricia Hill Collins posits that as black women and societal outsiders within, "[b]lack women posses a unique standpoint on, or perspective of, their experiences" and their "experienced reality [can be] used as a valid source of knowledge" of "patterns that may be more difficult" for insiders to see (Collins 172).Thus the experience of being black and/or a woman becomes the basis for knowledge. Other feminists have agreed that experience may hold "epistemic privilege" only in certain situations. For example, Uma Narayan states that oppressed peoples "have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression" (Narayan qtd in Jagger 306). However, after the so called 'linguistic turn' in feminist critical theory, postmodern critics have, by and large, criticized taking experience as an

a priori source of knowledge. Some argue that experience cannot be relayed except through language, thus the “facts” of experience are “socially constituted” (Fuss qtd in Ramazanoglu 125). Others focus on the dangers of basing knowledge in experience, positing that “when experience becomes the bedrock on which evidence is built,. . . experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than exploring how difference is established, how it operates, and the way it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (Scott 82). Many postmodern feminists agree that experience is always “limited, partial and socially located” and generalizabilty of the phenomena cannot be applied (Ramanzanoglu 126).

I also hold that gender and the performed embodiment of it are not naturally occurring phenomena but are socially constructed. As social constructions, gender and embodiment “come into existence through the way that people perform it”; thus the gendered person “is constituted not once and for all, but again and again, and in this process, procedures of inclusion and exclusion operate” (Butler qtd in Ramanzanoglu 90). However, that gender and embodiment are social constructions does not negate important implications that the effects of these constructions have on the way that individuals understand and experience the material reality of embodied lives. Because knowledge is not only shaped by “theory, culture, ideas [and] language,” but is also “produced in particular social, political, and intellectual conditions and situations,” the embodied experience of gender represents a node of knowledge (Ramanzanoglu 14). This node of knowledge does not present itself as representative of one specific ‘truth’ that is impartial and distantly objective. Instead, since it is through embodiment that first hand knowledge of inhabiting a gendered body becomes tangible, it positions itself as a type of partial and “situated knowledge” that can relay a “better knowledge of social realities” affecting gender (Haraway:Ramanzanglu, 581: 47).

Acknowledging the construction of gender and its performed embodiment, I agree with many postmodern feminists that when feminists take experience "as transparent," experience "reproduces rather than contests ideological systems" (Scott 82). Experience should be evaluated in the context of the systems of meaning in which it was created, because if "representation [of experience] are assumed to be innocent, authentic, and natural . . . then it leads to the epistemological equivalent of identity politics" and creates the dangerous possibility of essentializing difference (Lal 113). However, I also agree with Alcoff in stating that although "any claim that women's experiences are related to underlying material realities can be contested," this does not negate the fact that women "live in real bodies, in real relationships, in the real world [and] these realities cannot be reduced to the language in which they are expressed, or discourses through which they are constituted" (qtd in Ramanzanoglu 134). Thus, when researching the 'experience' of embodiment, I will take a materialist postructuralist approach and look at not only the discursive and performative aspects but also the materiality of embodiment. Since women have primary experience in the ways their embodiment becomes realized, the knowledge gleaned from their experiences concerning the performativity of the gendered female body represents a better 'truth' of their reality and is thus one type of situated knowledge pursued in this thesis.

Experience gathering through memory work required that the collaborators in this research express these memories in the form of narrative or story. The writing of memories into narratives or stories allowed the women in the research to have more control over the telling of their own stories. The expression of memories in narrative also blurs the boundaries between what is considered literature, and therefore public, and what is considered individual memory, and therefore private. However, unlike the traditional memory work formulated within Haug's

study, where an individual's recollection of certain forms of experience are analyzed and transformed into narrative collectively, narrative building in this research occurred on two separate levels: individual and group/collaborator.

Individual memory work was done by the women through the use of a digital diary. The individual diaries allowed for women to record personal daily memories of embodiment in a secure environment. Once memories were recorded, women were able to revisit their memories and 'work' through particular instances of racial, religious, and spiritual embodiment individually. Then, the women had the opportunity to share their daily diaries in a group journal. The group journal functioned as a forum where personal memories were prompts for new questions about embodied experiences as well as an area of consciousness raising. This area also functioned as an area of consciousness raising and an area where women could engage in the collective process of re-membering. Often memories shared in the group journal would help evoke new memories related to previously relayed thoughts and narratives, giving women a deeper understanding of how they employed spiritual memory in their daily lives.

After narratives were produced from individual and group memory work, the collaborators continued to build their embodied narratives by responding to semi-structured prompts in interviews. I encouraged collaborators to respond in the form of story, allowing women to participate in the structuring and interpretation of their own personal narrative. As we built the journal entries into a story, "data and interpretation [were] fused, the story-line providing the interpretative framework through which the data [was] constructed," allowing the collaborators to "mark the boundaries of what they [were] prepared to tell" (Graham qtd in Reinhertz 301). These processes further embedded the collaborators in the research process and gave them a measure of control over the interpretation of the data given in research. The result of

the memory work done through diary writing, group conversation, and interviews are stories of conversion. In this thesis, conversion is not considered an event that occurs in one moment or period, but something that is a process that involves many stages of transformation occurring on many levels, including the spiritual, social, and cultural.

The Women and Narratives

Nine women participated in this study, although the narrative vignettes and diary excerpts illustrated in this thesis are from only five of these women. All of the women in this study primarily reside in the southeast region of the United States. Of the nine collaborators, all but one had been married before and had children and three were currently divorced. Only one sister was born into the religion, however all identified that they had moments of profound transformation and change from the moment they came to understand the faith.

A critical part of this project is positioning African American Sunni women as producers of knowledge in and for the Muslim community as well as for scholarship in general. For this reason, utilizing diaries, conversations from the group forum, and interviews, I have tried to portray the women in this study, including myself, though our own voices. At times our voices blend, especially when relaying experiences that we have identified as unifying and similar through group conversation. When individual experiences are given, I have aimed to maintain the expressions, vernacular, and tone of each woman's 'voice' as it was given to me, particularly since my collaborators were instrumental in the creation of their own narratives. In addition, stories and diary entries analyzed have been included at length, instead of as merely snapshots that underscore my current analysis, in order to illustrate the variable points where agency erupts and to portray the context of this eruption as the narrator understands it. Including the full

narratives as they were given also helps to make as transparent as possible differences between my analyses and what these women may think. I cannot ‘speak for’ these women.

However, I am aware that although I have done this, my own worldview and positioning, as well as the other collaborators’ positionings, especially those that participated in the forum, influences the creation of individual narratives. This is especially true of the conversion narratives since they are a result of blending personal diary entries and interviews. Although interview prompts were pulled from diary entries, I decided which diary entries may need further exploration or memory work. In addition, I engaged in the act of deep empathy and identification in my thesis research. As both a research method and also an act of reflexivity, deep identification was an act of self-disclosure and self-invitation in the form of sharing my own narratives with the research group. This allowed collaborators to identify with me as a fellow collaborator in the research itself. Through this act, I invited collaborators to take part in a shared sense of development and responsibility toward the research with enhanced understanding of the relationship between the “knowers” involved as well as development of trust.

Due to the sensitive nature of responses to research questions, participants may be concerned about familial or communal backlash over divulged information. In addition to the continuous process of consent, all names of people and places were changed. This alteration does not change the integrity and validity of data; only ensures that the dignity and the physical and mental well-being of participants are maintained. There is no fail-proof way to ensure that anonymity will stay intact and thus research participants were advised of the possible impact of this research before and during research. As a part of this community, I am aware that I am impacted by this research and, as a researcher, I am aware that I am impacting this research.

The narratives in this thesis are analyzed through textual and discourse analyses, separated into two chapters. In Chapter two, "Ritual Acts of Conversion," I examine collaborators' conversion narratives in order to illustrate how African American Sunni women use spiritual rituals derived from Islamic memory, particularly the Quran, *Sunnah,* and *hadith*, to structure themselves and create agency. Rearticulating conversion narratives as narratives of testifying conversion, which relay conversion as a process of accessing three social, religious, and spiritual embodied sites, I show how rituals enable African American Sunni women to effect diverse forms of agency. In doing so, these narratives dispel the myth of how African American Sunni women embody memory in monolithic terms in regards to racial diasporic memory. Emphasizing the spiritual also underscores that African American Sunni women live in a multiple diaspora that is racial, religious, and spiritual.

In Chapter Three, "Becoming Muslimahs," I analyze how women utilize *tafsir* (exegesis) to negotiate the becoming of their spiritual and gendered self. In this chapter I use narratives, personal diary entries, as well as conversations from the forum to argue that the construction of African American Sunni women's 'selves' or 'bodies' occur between a dialectic of spiritual goals with practical or pragmatic conditions. Through a textual and contextual reading of the embodiment of *hijab* and the performance of marriage, I examine how these women's embracement of Islamic and spiritual norms create and articulate moral and ethical virtues, while at the same time address and respond to physical and material concerns like social respectability, economic accessibility, familial and communal development, as well as personal desire. Environment and need further inform how embodiment is either reified or shifted and how this mimesis or movement of embodiment effects materiality and agency.

CHAPTER 2.

Ritual Acts of Conversion

> I saw girls wearing scarves around their heads and speaking this weird language. I was around 9-10 years old when I realized it was a religion. Islam at that time was a fashion, the "it" thing. I was eleven when my family member gave me and my brother a Muslim name, I don't think we took *shahadah* either. So for the record it was Jamirah..lol. I was excited and I went home and told my grandma. I told her I did not eat pork anymore, I think I had a few dollars to buy chips and juice but not real food. Well she had reminded me that as long as I stayed under her roof she cooks whatever she wants and if I wanted other than what was offered i needed to buy it! The funny thing was we were served pork'n beans and hotdogs that night. Hunger won that round, lol! I was actually sixteen when I took *shahadah*. Between 11-16 there were so many obstacles, people, and blessings that I received from Allah. I took *shahadah* because I wanted a change from the life I was living. In order to do that I had to ask Allah to help me, which meant I needed to believe in him first.
>
> -from Minah's Diary

> "Am I not Your Lord? They said "Verily we testify"
>
> Qur'an 7:172

The testimony of submission to Islam is called the *shahadah*, the first of five pillars of Islam. The profession of the belief that there is One God and that Muhammad is the messenger, *shahadah*, means in its verbal form to bear witness or testify and in its nominative form means testimony or that which is witnessed. Taking *shahadah* means that one will perform the other four pillars of Islam: *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (alms), *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and *sawm* (fasting). Because one is not considered Muslim until *shahadah* is professed, unless that person was born into the religion and had it professed for them, the *shahadah* has come to be the main component of conversion narratives. Certainly most, if not all, of the research devoted to or addressing the African American Muslim community and its embracement of Islam has employed the "conversion narrative" as a primary source of knowledge for understanding Sunni women's desire to embody their faith. For example, in Amina Beverly Mccloud's landmark work *African*

American Islam, women's acceptance of Islam is read through the lens of their experiences of conversion. Accounts from women like those found in Robert Dannin's ethnography *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* and Debra Mubasheer Majeed's article "Womanism Encounters Islam" are self-narratives of individual journeys into Islam. Carolyn Moxley Rouse devotes a chapter to conversion in her full length study in order to show how the act functioned as empowering in the lives of the Sunni women she studied.

From these conversion narratives, scholars have gleaned certain patterns that shape conversion as related to African American Muslim women converts.[5] Moxley Rouse's work serves as an example of this scholarship as her work aligns with most of the previous arguments concerning empowerment and conversion among African American women. Moxley Rouse states that the "important elements of conversion stories include new concepts of the body, purity, and health; redefinitions of gender and family; a positive acceptance of race, and an alternative or more 'true' faith than Christianity." She also states that although there might be slight variances, conversion narratives "almost always connect with current political discourses".[6] Through ethnographic portraits, Moxley Rouse describes how African American Sunni women embrace Islam as an act of resistance. She states that Islam allows African American Sunni women to grasp control over their own bodies in a society that commodifies them. Islam also addresses family and communal development while emphasizing the importance of women, something that these women claim is absent in mainstream society and was destroyed in the black community through the acts or slavery and racism and enables them

[5] See "Performing Gender" in Carolyn Moxley Rouse's *Enagaged Surrender*, "The Many Dimensions of a Muslim Woman" in Robert Dannin's *Black Pilgramage to Islam*, and "Women in Islam" in Amina Beverly Mccloud's *African American Islam*.
[6] Carolyn Moxley Rouse's *Enagaged Surrender*, pg 136

to employ a counterdiscourse to the ideals of white America and a counterculture of rituals that they feel link them to their racial past.

What is apparent when reading this literature is that the motives of women coming to provide *testimony*, that is an account of the moments that precede the utterance of *shahadah* and how its utterance brings material changes in their lives, have been focused on and delved, while the second part of *shahadah*, that which follows the testimony and imparts the process of embodying Islamic rituals in the creation of agency, has been limited to social forms of agency. In addition, these social forms have been articulated in regards to how they interact with racial constructs. As articulated above, the *shahadah*, *la ilaha ill-Allah, Muhammadan Rasool Allah*, represents the expression of the belief that "There is no diety but Allah and Muhammad (saws)[7] is a messenger." The first part of *shahadah* is that one understands and accepts *Tawheed*. The second part of *shahadah*, *Muhammadan Rasool Allah*, is an acknowledgement that living *Tawheed* through the Quran, hadith and *sunnah*[8] means following the embodied example of the prophet (saws), and "carefully observing the Prophet's (saws) ethical behavior and bodily comportment for signs of God's guidance".[9]

This chapter revisits conversion narratives of African American Sunni women in order to address the understanding of how these women adopt Islamic ritual acts in their process of conversion and how ritual acts effect agency and empowerment. Instead of using their narratives to focus on just the initial moment of testimony, I will examine the 'conversion narrative' as a story that portrays how one goes through the process of *testifying through the body*, or *testifying* conversion.As such, the conversion narrative vignettes highlighted in this chapter are analyzed to

[7] Sallallahu alayhi was sallam (saws): "This is an expression Muslims use whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad (saws) is mentioned or written. The meaning of it is "May the Blessings and the Peace of Allah be upon Him." Muslims are informed that if they proclaim such a statement once, Allah will reward them ten times.
[8] Sunnah means the way of the prophet, see *The New Dictionary of Islam*
[9] Kugle, *Sufi and Saints Bodies*, pg. 8.

show how Sunni women practice and perform *shahadah*, or testify conversion, and create agency through its performance.

Women's Narratives

Souljah: "By Any Means Necessary"

> I was introduced to Islam at a very young age. I was eight and an uncle of mine who was in and out of jail alot became Muslim while in jail, and each time he came home he would try to give us some understanding of Islam. It seemed to change his behavior and what he expected from others around him. For example he would scold anyone who cursed around him or us and he cared more about what went into his body. He also began to help elderly people in the neighborhood with their homes, get us up early every Saturday and have us sweep the whole block or paint for someone for free or take out their trash or go to the grocery store for someone who couldn't help themselves. He said that being a Muslim meant caring for your community and the people in it just as you would care for yourself, *alhumdulillah*.[10] He just really seemed to be more focused on what deeds he would carry into the next life. He carried on this way for many years until he eventually became known in the community as a security figure for the children and elderly right up until the day he died. He was shot by a store owner whose delivery guy was blocking a handicap ramp while his wheel chair bound friend was trying to cross the street. My uncle was shot and killed while pleading for the delivery driver to move his truck *mashallah*,[11] and the delivery driver shot him. Until this day he has remained the most influential person in my life when it comes to how to live as a Muslim daily *alhumdulillah*. At the same time that he was giving us information about Islam, the pastor in the Southern Baptist church that I attended faithfully was having an affair with his step daughter for many years until she became pregnant with twins. This pastor was revered and loved as part of the community. This upset me very much. It made me scared and angry that the person that I was thinking of as my connection to God could do this.
> I began to wonder if what information he had been giving me was the truth. I didn't go to anyone in my family to talk about my fear and anger because I didn't have a family that was really strong in the area of spirituality. There were a lot of bad things going on in the family, people fought, there was molestation and rape, and people partied through the week and then went to church on Sundays. They called themselves Christian and did this so I lost respect for anything related to Christianity. I remember my uncle because even though he was in an out of jail, he always seemed to be striving for something to make things better. He wasn't in jail for stealing or anything like that, he went to jail for what I came to understand as radical reasons like the one he died trying to defend, or standing up to the drug dealers in the neighborhood, or stopping one of my junky aunts and uncles from driving my grandmom crazy, stealing from her, fighting her, leaving their kids on her. He was the family advocate, by any means necessary, most of his charges was simple violation of his probation, and from the early 80's to late 90's it seemed that everyone was

[10] Alhumdulilllah means "praise belongs to Allah."
[11] Mashallah means "Allah has willed it."

on crack or some drug, so being the brother of 10 other siblings who were indulging heavily he had much work to keep him busy, *mashallah*.

Like I said, I didn't take to Islam at that young age though because I didn't have any support around. I was just kinda just out there and had absolutely no structure. My father was gone, my grandmother drank, and my mother was a prostitute on crack. I had no structure in life. Later in my teens was when I met my oldest child's father that I got a deeper understanding of Islam. He was Muslim and he tried to give me some knowledge, breaking down what it means to be a Muslim, why he changed his name, why I shouldn't eat pork, why I shouldn't wear booty shorts and tank tops, why I shouldn't curse, but while he was the most influential person to me at that time he misguided me a bit because he coerced me into smoking weed and drinking alcohol, which further confused me into believing that you could be a good Muslim and indulge in other things that Islam does not condone. This was in the late 80's and early nineties, around the period of time that Islam was a status symbol and people were wearing a kimar and sending the greeting of *assalaamu alaikum*[12] even before they took their shahadah or have the slightest understanding of Islam. I think most people joined because they found that with so many black people going to jail and needing the protection of the nation of Islam while there and often after leaving jail that lots of folks joined Islam for the wrong reasons. My uncle came home from jail around this period of time too. People walked around talking about Malcolm X and nobody wanted a Christian name. But fundamentally no body was doing what they had to do to be a Muslim. People in the community calling themselves Muslim were still drinking and smoking, selling drugs etc. The community was suffering from crack/heroin. There were people though in the community that other people labeled as the real Muslims. They covered completely. They were close knit. They were always clean. The kids seemed to be happy .They didn't seem like they were existing in the same struggle.

It was at that time that I truly became interested in Islam. I wanted my family to have that peace and security. I was drinking and smoking, young and not really caring, but I knew that I needed to change my life. I remembered the Muslims that were in the community and I knew that I needed some support (Christianity had already lost all hope for me ever since the minister and molestation). When it came to Islam, and I mean particularly from the Muslims that were covering, going to the mosque, and staying clean, the women always were so loving and peaceful. I wanted that peace instead of the rape, molestation, and chaos. I mean people were killing people in my family. Jehovah's Witnesses scared me. There were Jehovah's witnesses on my block and they seemed weird. I decided that I had to step outside of that chaos. I had turned 19 and lost my second child to s.i.d.s and it was then that I decided that I would take my *shahadah*. I knew I needed a greater power outside of myself if I wanted to see another day and survive to raise my first daughter. After I took my *shahadah*, I began to study and tried to cover and get into it but I was so tore up emotionally and mentally by the death of my daughter I couldn't really commit. At one point I was so depressed that I walked away from the apt were she died and left everything in it. I couldn't live there anymore. I was in and out of trying to practice Islam for years and around the year 2000, I found myself in trouble and went to jail. I had

[12] I have chosen to keep the spelling of certain phrases the same as the way they were presented to me by the authors of these narratives; even though there may be changes in spelling, this change in spelling does not indicate a change in meaning unless otherwise noted.

hit rock bottom. When they asked me what my religion was when I went to jail, I said that I was a Muslim. When you go to jail, you get stripped of everything, it is like being reborn. You are standing there butt naked and all you can see is yourself. You find that you are surrounded by hate and people still wrapped up in violence and longing for the world. In many ways it is worse inside than out, because at least outside you know the struggle. But certain things happen in jail when you say you are a Muslim. You are treated differently than the other prisoners. First you are allowed certain privileges that others are not. You can prepare your own food sometimes, request special places to wash and pray, etc. In jail you are also given some kind of support. They were offering fundamental Islamic classes taught by a beautiful sister by the name of Naheema. Naheema visited the jail weekly & taught the Islamic class, (may Allah reward her efforts ameen, *alhumdulilah*). Naeemah taught fundamental aspects of Islam, seven conditions of *lalilahailallah*, five pillars, *tawheed*, *hadith*, and *salat*. I seemed to be amazingly drawn into the religion in the beginning of the classes. I began to understand that what I had believed was Islam before was deeper than I thought. There was more to being a Muslim than just changing some of your behavior. I first had to understand, believe in and practice the faith. I still had many questions in my heart and I was allowed lots of material to research. I came across a huge very old Howard version of the bible. It was the first bible I had ever seen that included pictures. The people in the bible prostrated when they prayed. I was blown away. Then I explained to the sister the struggle that I was having within my soul. I explained that I was still very confused about why I should not believe in the trinity of Christ and our lord and how as a Muslim one came to understand Allah (swt) was the only one worthy of our worship. I wanted to know where the proof the way I was being requested to live my pertaining to Islamic way of life and she brought me a book called the Muslim Christian dialogue. She also told me I would need a bible and a Qur'an to complete my research properly, and I knew the Howard version would be perfect. The Christian Muslim dialogue was a conversation between two men with great knowledge one a Christian and one a Muslim, after reading the whole book and checking a few simple things I knew I was being led in the right direction. Once I fix my mind firm in Islam Allah (swt) sealed the love of Islam in my heart, I felt complete. I retook my *shahadah* in prison and started practicing Islam inside.

One of my most serious issues growing up a Baptist, was all the questions I asked were always diverted. As a child you don't question God, and I just hated being led around blindly, doing things that I never really agreed with or understood wholeheartedly. Once I found Islam or should I say Allah my heart was opened\softened and I began to get answers to all of the questions about life and the way the world works, and simply why things are the way they are, on a day to day basis, all around the world. I understood Islam. And it finally felt good to have something that would guide me in living this life. Daily. Islam made sense. With Islam, I felt like I was getting those questions answered. With the knowledge of those few essential elements I grabbed on to the rope of Allah (swt).

The classes also helped me in my understanding. In these classes you had a diverse group of Muslims- murderers, thieves, crackheads, rough to see but enlightening because even though they were doing these things they all were reaching out to say that my lord is Allah (swt). They had done these things and they were still this way. I felt like I had a chance of redemption. They told their stories of where they came from and I shared my

story. While I was in jail I prayed for many things and as scary as it may seem Allah has granted my every desire craved at that point in my life. These things included getting released, moving to Georgia, becoming employed, getting a car, getting a home, getting a drivers license, opening a bank account, fixing my credit, finding a new husband, and having more children Well in some peoples' world this may have seemed very normal but where I'm from that was all very, very challenging and almost impossible. Normal was not the norm in my world.

I firmly believe that I would not have been able to attain these things if it had not been for Islam. Islam served as a guidebook on how to live my life. For example, I got released early; something that I know was because of my good conduct while in jail. Islam provided me the structure and community to be able to get through my jail time. We prayed together, ate together, fasted together and learned the Qur'an together. Once I got out I stayed with the sister that gave the Islamic classes. She kept me on track, taught me how to dress the traditional way with my head, body, hands and feet covered. I learned discipline with Islam. This discipline I applied to every aspect of my life. I understood that the only way for me to attain what I wanted and needed, which was a better understanding of Allah and the means to get through this life, was that I had to work for it. And I don't mean just going to school, getting a job, and staying clean, which is what I did. I have done all these things only because I work hard to sustain my faith and relationship with Allah (swt) through prayer, fasting, and spiritual practice.

Now nine years later, after having been extremely blessed to have it all come true, my faith is the foundation which has captured & embraced my soul-alhumdulilah. Islam is my daily life, *alhumdulillah*. When I open my eyes, I think about being shrouded and going to the dirt. I am very more conscious of what goes into my body, how I am treating my body, every aspect is really thought out now. For example, if I am gaining weight, I don't think that I need to work out because I don't look so pretty, but it is because I will have difficulty making *salat*. I am aware and conscious that if I go and cook a meal that is halal for somebody, then I am doing something worthy. Being conscious makes you less likely to talk about people or hurt people, because you try to always maintain a state of purity in your mind. It makes you more aware of who you lay your body down with. I never thought about what it meant to lay down with somebody. How are you going to justify that in the next life –just sleeping with anybody? Now I don't think about sleeping with someone unless I'm married to them. I always think about how my choice impacts the afterlife. It is kinda hard to be a Muslim and not think about what you are doing on an everyday basis. It is not one day that goes by that I don't know that I made the right choice and sincerely want to die in the state of Islam, by any means necessary, *alhumdulillah*.

Naeemah: "Growing into My Faith"

I grew up Muslim. My family was practicing. I remember learning how to pray to Allah (swt) but I didn't know that it was *salat* or what it meant. I remember that we had to go into a room called the masjid and pray at different times of the day. This was when I was much younger, around six or seven. I just knew that we were something called Muslim

and that whatever this was, we were the only ones that lived our life a particular way. When I was in fourth grade I started covering. My mother told me to start covering my hair. I wrapped my hair in a bun. She wore her covering that way. I didn't question her because she said that is what you do. She told me that it was for modesty. I didn't know what this meant. I thought modesty meant that you weren't supposed to show your hair. She said that boys were not supposed to see it because it was part of the beauty that you shared with your husband.

Up through middle school, we had lived in a rural country area, except for the time that we moved to Honduras. Even still, when we moved to Honduras, my father had a lot of land and had opened a school for Muslims. So the only people that I was around were my family, which included my father, his brothers and sisters and their family, my half siblings and their mothers. Didn't interact with anybody else and I was schooled at this Muslim school. When we moved back to Georgia, we moved into another rural area and I was homeschooled until the third grade. My sisters and I were the only ones that were sent to public school. My brothers continued to be homeschooled. We were the only Muslims in this public school. Still I didn't have an understanding of what being Muslim really meant. I still had many friends that were not Muslim. I participated in extracurricular activities. I wasn't allowed to go over anybody's house. I just understood that being Muslim meant that there were things that you did or did not do, I really didn't understand why we did or did not do them. So I remember sometimes that I would sneak and do some things, but nothing too bad. I did those things because I wanted to and noone was really giving me a reason not to do them except to say that I was Muslim. Every once in a while, we would have an Islamic studies class at home, but they didn't last long or keep my attention.

I didn't start to have a real understanding of being Muslim until I was a teenager, when I was thirteen and I went to live with my sister in the city. First, I was immediately exposed to more Muslims. Coming to the city I was exposed to Muslims who looked different than I did. They weren't all black and they all didn't dress the same. I was taken to the mosque for prayer. At first I was pretty resistant to this. Because noone had been Muslim were I grew up but my family, and our *masjid* was our home, I felt like Islam was supposed to be something private. Something that you didn't share. Yet here these people were all making *salat* together and I felt like I was being forced to share something personal. Also, I started high school and there were other Muslims there. I didn't get close to them though. They looked different and they practiced different too. They would wear transparent *khimar*s and wear tight fitting clothes. Most of it though had to do with boys. They wanted to attract boys so they dressed like that. I knew that I didn't want to be Muslim like them.

But being around these Muslims helped me decide that I needed to understand some things about Islam and what being Muslim meant. Before I really never saw any variety but when I moved and saw different people it started to open things up for me. I started to incidentally pick things up about Islam from other Muslims that I encountered and I began to look things up and do research. It was around this time that I began to feel like being Muslim was something that I wanted to do. It wasn't that what I was reading was convincing me of something as much as it felt like it was revealing something that I didn't know about myself and I wanted to discover it. This was my period of growing into my faith. The more I learned the more I liked it. Learning more changed the way that

I began to understand the different ways that I had practiced Islam. For example, I remember saying to myself and to my friends that I would be Muslim when I grew up, but that I wouldn't cover. But as I began to learn why I covered, I knew that I would cover for the rest of my life. The more I learned, the more my faith increased. When I was around sixteen, I began to take Islam into my heart for the first time. I remember this so well because there was a big difference in the way that I began to approach prayer. *Salat* had always been the biggest thing for me to get down. Everything else was no problem.

But getting back to *salat*. *Salat* was one of the main reasons why I felt so exposed and bare when I came to the city and I began going to the mosque. I didn't really know my *salat*. I didn't know the meanings, the reasons for all of the positions that we took, what we were supposed to do and where. I felt comfortable with my family with this lack because that was my family. My family had made *salat* together when I was younger, but once I reached puberty, I was supposed to make my *salat* on my own, whether someone was around or not. And I didn't really like to make *salat*. Some of this was because it felt alien to me because I didn't know it and some of it was because it just took too much time. *Salat* was something that I was always made to do and I didn't want to do it. I knew that no one was going to be around to see me miss it. I remember one time my mother pulled us into a room and told us that Ramadan was coming up and we had to make sure that we made all our *salat*s. She knew that we didn't always make *salat* but we really needed to make *salat* because if we didn't, if you were fasting and you weren't making *salat*s, what is the point in fasting? We were fasting for no reason.

Around the age of sixteen, I was in my room praying for forgiveness for not making my *salat*s. Not in a way that I thought that I had sinned, but in the way that I had not remembered. What I mean by this is that I don't think *salat* is supposed to be the most natural thing. I mean you are a child and your parents are telling you that you are going to have to get up at the crack of dawn and before you do anything, you have to make *salat*. I barely want to get out of bed in the morning as a child. They are telling you that during the day, you are going to have to stop what you are doing and pray, you are going to have to pray. I think to myself that I'll do it, but when I grow up and be on my own, I am not going to be making all these *salat*s.

But in the early stages of *salat*, there is supposed to be a trust with your parents. It is like your parents tell you not to steal, or kill, or curse. You do what your parents tell you, not because you fear them (or you shouldn't) but because you love them and trust them. You have to remember that trust as a child, and if you have loving parents, do what you are told so that you can grow to become a better person. You trust your parents and through that trust is the act of remembering Allah(swt). *Salat* is this way. You are not supposed to know why you are making *salat*, or you don't have to especially as a child, but you do it anyway. You go through the motions of *salat* in order to let your body remember Allah (swt) for you until you consciously remember Allah (swt).

So at around the age of sixteen, I started to consciously understand *salat* as an act of remembrance. And it is only through remembering that we can be Muslim. But I didn't just make all my *salat*s from then on. Even now I still struggle but I realize that the struggle is part of the path to making you a better Muslim, to develop *Iman*. I realize again, the more that I learn and the more that I begin to understand, the more driven I am to not only make my *salat*s everyday, but also to make them on time. This is just within

> the last year or two. I used to make my *salat*s everyday, but sometimes didn't make them on time, because we can make them up. I just never made the effort to make *salat* while I was outside of the house. I'll make it later. You know, I was at school, at work, I couldn't make *salat*. Even when I made them up, I had problems completing them all. Especially Isha. After Magrib, I was like, I'll make it a little later let me watch a movie first. But in the last few months, I realized that this will not do. I am not making myself a better person this way. I said, I should just buy myself a prayer rug and make *salat* wherever I am. Now I make *salat* during the day. I think that used to think of Muslims in a bad way when the made *salat* in the public. You know, I would think, why are you being so conspicuous? Isn't that a private moment? Why does everyone have to see you making *salat* when you can make it up? But I know that it is the purpose to interrupt what you are doing and focus on Allah (swt). I tried to tell myself that if this was something that I enjoyed doing, like watching a TV show, would I say to myself, "oh well, I'll do it (watch it) eventually" or would I watch it when it was scheduled? I would watch it. I would anticipate it because I would want to know what happens, keep up with the progress of the show, see if who I like goes on. This is the same way I approach prayer now. The more I stay with it and do it when I should, the more I progress, the more that prayer affects my day and affects my state of mind. I have come to understand that prayer grows my faith. Now it is a priority before I do other things. I now know that I will not be able to really complete the other things adequately or as good as I could because my state of being is not right.

Analysis of the Narratives

How have these women utilized ritual practices of Islam to enact agency in their lives? In order for this question to be adequately answered, an examination of their narratives must be filtered through three Islamic concepts and what I am calling 'embodied sites' that were either explicitly or implicitly referenced by Souljah and Naeemah: islam[13], *Iman*, and *Ihsan*. Islam has come to be understood as a religion but it is comprised of three states of being and acts or worship, Islam, *Iman*, and *Ihsan*. These three states of being are derived from the *Hadith* of Jibril,[14] and comprise the three states of Islam. Narrated in the *hadiths* of Sahih Bukhari, the *hadith* of Jibril is as follows:

[13] For differentiation puposes, islam (as the first embodied state) will not be capitalized. Islam (as a religion and connoting the totality of practice) will be capitalized.
[14] Jibril means Gabriel in Arabic.

> While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of Allah, *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam*, there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with very black hair. No traces of journeying were visible on him, and none of us knew him.
> He sat down close by the Prophet, *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam*, rested his knee against his thighs, and said, O Muhammad! Inform me about Islam." Said the Messenger of Allah, *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam*, "Islam is that you should testify that there is no deity save Allah and that Muhammad is His Messenger, that you should perform *salah* (ritual prayer), pay the *zakah*, fast during Ramadan, and perform Hajj (pilgrimage) to the House (the Ka'bah at Makkah), if you can find a way to it (or find the means for making the journey to it)." Said he (the man), "You have spoken truly."
> We were astonished at his thus questioning him and telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, "Inform me about *iman* (faith)." He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, "It is that you believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in fate *(qadar)*, both in its good and in its evil aspects." He said, "You have spoken truly."
> Then he (the man) said, "Inform me about *Ihsan*." He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, " It is that you should serve Allah as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet He sees you." He said, "Inform me about the Hour." He (the Messenger of Allah) said, "About that the one questioned knows no more than the questioner." So he said, "Well, inform me about the signs thereof (i.e. of its coming)." Said he, "They are that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress, that you will see the barefooted ones, the naked, the destitute, the herdsmen of the sheep (competing with each other) in raising lofty buildings." Thereupon the man went off.
> I waited a while, and then he (the Messenger of Allah) said, "O 'Umar, do you know who that questioner was?" I replied, "Allah and His Messenger know better." He said, "That was Jibril. He came to teach you your religion.[15]

As can be seen above, Islam, as a religion is based in three different ways of worship called *islam*, *ihsan*, and *iman*. These three states form graduated degrees of worship. The first degree, *islam*,[16] means surrender and is the first essential act in *becoming* Muslim. Islam is the embodiment and performance of *shahadah*, an:

> "an act that constitutes the observance of the five pillars…"the 'simple' verbal declaration that is accomplished by the Shahadatain [*shahadah*]…and outer shell of being that may be done for convenience or material gain…it is limited to the interactions of the material world and people therein… [and] is likened to skin.[17]

This description of the faith yields the explanation that performing islam, or submission, is equivalent to providing the testimony of *shahadah* and the performance of the five pillars. A

[15] Sahih Bukhari , Iman, No. 50.
[16] Here, islam, is different from Islam; islam denoting the first degree or state within Islam.
[17] Ibn Taymiyyah quoted in Toshiko *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Ideology*. pg 88.

verbal and body submission, the state of islam requires no faith in the heart, as clarified by the Qur'an where it relays the definition of this state. In the Qur'an it says that when "The wandering bedoins say 'we have faith': say (unto them) Muhammad, 'you do not have faith, rather say, 'We have submitted,' for faith has not entered the heart."[18] Allah's clarification of islam from *iman* shows that submission does not mean faith. Submission of the body, however, is the first step in linking one to the faith of islam. Thus the performance of Islam is inextricably connected to the material world, which would include parents, siblings, and community. Because this state of Islam is connected to the material, its performance is solely through the physical body.

Iman is different from islam in that it is "the deeper level of submission, a more internal act of assent close to the word faith," which involves testimony through the tongue, testifying through the body, and testifying through the heart." It comprises of "assent (*tasdiq*), acknowledging *(iqrar*) and knowledge (*ma'rifa*), thereby being an act of the heart" and encompasses the state of islam as well.[19] One develops the ability to perform faith through the continuous performance of islam. Performing or embodying islam connects the body to the material world, while performing *iman* is creating a connection from material to the body to the spirit. Because it is a development of the spirit, it also connects to others on a spiritual plane. It is through performance of *iman*, that one attains the manifestation of its attribute and becomes a *mu'min*, a believer.

A degree above *iman* is *ihsan*, meaning perfection in deeds and thoughts. It is the utilization of *iman* as the tool in creating and being a better external self. Like all other sites, *Ihsan* is indelibly intertwined with *niyah*, or intention, and yields the living of Islam through

[18] Quran 49:14.
[19] Ibn Taymiyyah quoted in Toshiko, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Ideology*, pg 88.

daily actions. Thus, while any individual or Muslim can perform good deeds, the deeds are only considered a result of *Ihsan* if the person has *Iman* and the *niyah* of perfection in the heart. Once this is done, a person is considered to have excellent *ibadah*, or worship, and is considered a *Muh'sin*.

It is important to note that these 'sites' mentioned above are performed and are thus constructed and can be made and unmade, done and undone. In addition, the word 'site' is not meant to imply that these constructions are in static positions; they actually occur along intersecting circular continuums. Even in the state of islam, there is no given 'body' which precedes the social and no 'spiritual self' which precedes the body. It must be created through techniques, positions, postures, acts, and so forth. Thus the very purpose of the state of islam is to enact performance which creates submission, to create something which is part of and functions within the *umma.* The purpose of *Iman* is to create something that is part of and functions within the spiritual and within the *umma*. *Ihsan* is then the embodiment of islam and *iman* in daily actions and deeds, functioning in the spiritual and *umma*, but with the added depth of perfection.

It is also important to understand that for a Muslim, the primary goal of striving towards these three sites lies in acquiring both the *ability* to perform them and the *performance* of them. Their continual performance is primarily for that goal. Auxiliary effects from performing these 'sites' lie in the manifestation of their attributes in one's conduct. For example, what Muslims strive for in performing *taqwa*[20] over and over is only to maintain the conditioning of the body for the performance itself. That one manifests *taqwa* outwardly is additional. In other words, to show one's taqwa is not the goal, but to acquire and maintain the ability to perform taqwa is the

[20] taqwa means "fear of Allah" and also "piety."

goal. In addition, the attributes of each site are so varied that it is virtually impossible for one to attain complete *iman* or *ihsan*. Again complete attainment is not necessarily the *goal*, as the benefit lies in the performance and its intention.

However, my clarification that one may never reach full iman or ihsan does not mean that one cannot attain perfection in certain virtues. For example, one can attain *Ihsan* in islam, meaning perfection in the performance of the five basic rituals. Ibn Arabi articulates this in his analysis of salihat,[21] the combined concept of good works done by a believer: "When salihat (good works) is used it should be understood as one having Islam and *iman* in that particular work mentioned. It is conditional, not absolute." [22] Salihat, then, is a form of *ihsan*. For this reason, these embodied sites must be seen as permeable, partially accessible, and multiply constructed. Finally, although the effect of performing the virtues of each site is the constant 'wearing,' so to speak, of that virtues' 'skin,' this does not mean that other material and tangible means of agency are not attained.

Understanding these three embodied sites is critical to grasping the meaning of Souljah and Naeemah's narratives of testifying. These women's narratives relate that at some point they were able to access the ability to perform these sites. In Souljah's narrative, her initial motive for embracing Islam comes through a desire to have a better way of life and access to opportunities. For her, Islam provided a model for an alternative way of life even before she took her *shahadah*. Common to accounts of Islamic conversion is that "Islam appeals because it gives the convert the greatest possible contrast with the culture he or she comes from," a culture in "which

---

[21] salihat means "pious deeds" One must have islam and iman in order to perform it. Ibn Arabi explains that the The *Qur'an* praises those who perform salihat, pious deeds, and that the continual performance establishes. 'wholesomeness' or piousness. However this is only a *part* of ihsan, Arabi quoted in William Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, 122.

[22] Ibn Taymiyyah quoted in Toshihiko Izutzu *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology,* pg 89-90.

the convert is dissatisfied with."[23] In embracing Islam, Souljah is able to critique systems that oppressed her or placed her at a disadvantage. In addition, Souljah's narrative illustrates that it is not only that Islam was a contrasting faith but also that its contrast offered a better way to live when she states that "when it came to the Muslims in my community, and I mean particularly from the Muslims that were covering, going to the mosque, and staying clean, the women always were so loving and peaceful. I wanted that peace instead of the rape, molestation, and chaos….they didn't seem to be living in the same struggle…..I wanted that peace and security."

Once she went to prison, she was faced with a whole new struggle. Because the prison system "asserts a unique institutional order… a regime that codifies various methods used to alter and perhaps destroy the inmate's physical and psychological integrity…by circumscribing every aspect of the inmates existence," an individual may have to "struggle to maintain notions of autonomy within its walls"[24] By claiming Islam in prison, and submitting to its first embodied site of islam, Souljah was able to instantly carve out zones of empowerment and access through her declaration of being a Muslim, access that would have been unavailable if she were not Muslim. This can be seen when she states:

> When they asked me what my religion was when I went to prison, I said that I was a Muslim. When you go to prison, you get stripped of everything, it is like being reborn. You are standing there butt naked and all you can see is yourself. In many ways it is worse inside than out, because at least outside you know the struggle. But certain things happen in jail when you say you are a Muslim. You are treated differently than the other prisoners. First you are allowed certain privileges that others are not. You can prepare your own food sometimes, request special places to wash and pray, etc. In jail you are also given some kind of support.

---

[23] Van Nieuwkerk, *Women Embracing Islam*, pg. 87.
[24] Dannin, *Pilgrimage to Islam*, 175.

In her declaration, Souljah is able to gain an immediate sense of community, support, security that she had been longing for, as well as an alternative structure outside of dominant prison system in which to uphold, an alternative that she chose.

Souljah's narrative also relays that she was able to attain a greater level of control over her body. The rigor involved in learning what to eat and how, when to fast, as well as when and how to pray, all played a part in her developing control. Souljah was then able to extend this control to other parts of her life:

> Allah has granted my every desire craved at that point in my life. These things included getting released, moving to Georgia, becoming employed, getting a car, getting a home, getting a drivers license, opening a bank account, fixing my credit, finding a new husband, and having more children. Well in some peoples' world this may have seemed very normal but…normal was not the norm in my world…I firmly believe that I would not have been able to attain these things if it had not been for Islam. Islam served as a guidebook on how to live my life.

Souljah was able to achieve agency by gaining more self-discipline over her body and physical surroundings by embodying certain rituals in which this discipline was key.

However, Souljah's narrative not only relates that she acquired more control or "discipline" *over* the material things in her life and her body; it also reveals that she developed a new understanding of the meaning of material reality and role *of* her body in enacting discipline and performing islam. While in prison, Souljah's body becomes more than something "she is more conscious of" on a material realm; it becomes the very means to construct a new form of authority in her life. This new authority is not only that of the community of Muslims in the prison system, but also that community in the form of *shahadah*. Through prayer, fasting, and Quranic learning, Souljah comes to understand and embrace Islam and, through it, construct new forms of agency and authority in her life.

After she is released, she then takes her new understanding of how to discipline her body and uses it in the acquisition of other forms of agency, both spiritual and material. At this point, she has accessed ability inherent in the state of *iman*:

> I learned discipline with Islam. This discipline I applied to every aspect of my life. I understood that the only way for me to attain what I wanted and needed, which was a better understanding of Allah and the means to get through this life, was that I had to work for it. And I don't mean just going to school, getting a job, and staying clean, which is what I did. I have done all these things only because I work hard to sustain my faith and relationship with Allah (swt) through prayer, fasting, and spiritual practice.

Here Souljah explains a specific way of attaining embodied agency through the application of disciplinary practice or work through prayer and fasting. The type of discipline to which Souljah refers is an embodied process of internalizing beliefs and values through practices like prayer, ritual, physical comportment, and daily practices. In her example, the labor that the body must perform (the sustaining of faith through prayer and fasting) are done in the state of islam and *iman*, which results in both spiritual and material agency, creating a better understanding of Allah (swt) and the tangible means to navigate this life. As she continues practicing islam and *iman*, Souljah identifies various moments when she clearly sees her body as instrumental in the continual 'building' of these sites, as well as a way to access *ihsan*, the performance of good deeds:

> I am very more conscious of what goes into my body, how I am treating my body, every aspect is really thought out now. For example, if I am gaining weight, I don't think that I need to work out because I don't look so pretty, but it is because I will have difficulty making *salat*. I am aware and conscious that if I go and cook a meal that is halal for somebody, then I am doing something worthy. Being conscious makes you less likely to talk about people or hurt people, because you try to always maintain a state of purity in your mind.

An analysis of Souljah's narrative shows that as she attains varying forms of agency as she inhabits different embodied sites. Through the performance of islam, Souljah gains a shared sense of community, the acquisition of material needs and desires, and the mental and physical

support needed to progress in her life. Through the continual performance of islam and applied study, she is able to access *iman*, increasing her faith. However, although her narrative positions the initial process of conversion as something that may be motivated by sociocontextual factors like race, poverty, inequality and personal hardship, it also shows that these factors are transformed through embodied ritual performance to spiritual as well as social modes of agency

Naeemah's narrative is similar to Souljah's in that it highlights conversion as a process of testifying through the body, a process that enacts embodied abilities yielding different modalities of agency. Like Souljah, Naeemah's first act of submission is influenced by the 'material' or physical, that is, her *umma*. Born into Islam, her actions as a Muslim in her early years are largely guided and determined by her family and her community. She confesses that she really didn't have a solid conceptualization of Islam:

> I remember learning how to pray to Allah (swt) but I didn't know that it was *salat* or what it meant. I remember that we had to go into a room called the masjid and pray at different times of the day… I just knew that we were something called Muslim and that whatever this was, we were the only ones that lived our life a particular way.

Even without a solid understanding of Islam, Naeemah's acceptance and performance in her early years further elucidates an important aspect of being in the initial state of islam, that is, surrender. As Souljah's explication shows, surrendering to the five pillars and performing ritual acts is done to tie an individual to the community. As such, the agency derived from this performance may be social in effect. But it is not solely social. Spiritual agency is derived from the very act of surrendering. This means that agency is not effected as a result of independence, but is done so through the act of *dependence*.

Enacting agency through dependence is something every Muslim accomplishes upon surrender and can be understood by examining the concept of *tawheed*. Ground in the principle of *tawheed* is the oneness of Allah (swt) and that Allah (swt) is everything, complete, the

macrocosm; but also a part of the *tawheedic* paradigm[25] is that the human being is the appointed khalifah, trustee, or vicegerent of Allah (swt), the microcosm. As khalifah, the human being, or the self, already has an inborn moral agency, but it is also born in a state of forgetfulness. Allah's revelations through prophets come as a reminder "about what is already ingrained in our deepest level"; thus "mediating between faith and heedlessness is our human capacity for *fitrah,* or discernment for freedom of choice and moral agency."[26] This means that as a Muslim, ethical potentialities are already in effect through the concept of *tawheed* and the self's position as khalifah. In order for the self to actualize its ethical potentiality, it must *depend* on the embodied manifestation of Allah's (swt) words and the Prophet's (saws) actions: the Islamic *umma*. Thus the first moment of moral agency in the state of Islam is acquired through submission to the ethics of the *umma*.

Both Etin Anwar and Donald Wehrs elaborate on the self's ethical or moral connection to the community in Islam. In *Gender and the Self in Islam*, Anwar notes that although the self will be accountable for its own actions in the hereafter, "for the Qur'an posits each individual self, whether it be male of female, as equals before God's judgment," the moral role as a self also depends on the community. This is because the self: "operates in an individualistic and communal sense," its role in building communal righteousness "immediately bestowed following the birth of a new individual [;] [and] since doing what's good is the foundation of the community as expressed in the Quran, [t]hen "enacting 'righteousness' of the self…is the

[25] I pull here from Amina Wadud's conception of the tawhidic paradigm, which she extended as an explanation of spiritual equality between men and women . It is spelled differently here to maintain consistency. See Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, pg 24.
[26] Daniel C. Maguire, *Sacred Rights, pg. 107.*

condition for mutual and participatory process in the community. Each "self should look after its peers…, [using] self/ community practices a form of reciprocal dependence [27]

Wehrs' work on analyzing piety and politics in the narratives of the Sufi West African Mande people yields a similar understanding of self/communal reciprocal development, especially as it pertains to agency. In "Gendering the Subject, Engendering the Self" Wehrs posits that the Mande's conceptualization of *bandenya,* mother-childness and *fadenya*, father-childness factors into how this culture perceives how these characteristics shape individual agency. He states that according to the Mande, the quality of bandenya and fadenya exists in each self yet

> *Bandenya*…ties us through affections, memory, and gratitude to our own families and communities[while] *fadenya* leads us to distinguish ourselves from our peer. . . .While fadenya suggests that constitutive distance, differentiation, and pluralism are good things for individuals and societies, bandenya insists that a determinate materiality impresses upon us ethical obligation . . . that the origins of an individual's [moral] agency . . . lies in *dependence* [italics his] upon another's ethical subjectivity. [28]

Wehrs' analysis shows that acting upon bandenya, or mother-childness, is a necessary pre-condition in the enacting of both internalized ethical and moral agency, as well as external ethical agency. The external in Wehrs analysis, is the bandenya, mother, or umm, of which *umma*, community is an extension. This underscores that initial enactments of agency on an individual level is dependent on one's ethical responsibility towards the *umma* in Islam.

Naeemah comes to realize this necessary dependence. She emphasizes this when she relates her experience in hindsight:

> But in the early stages of *salat*, there is supposed to be a trust with your parents. It is like you parents tell you not to steal, or kill, or curse. You do what your parents tell you, not because you fear them (or you shouldn't) but because you love them and trust them. You have to remember that trust as a child, and if you have Allah (swt) fearing parents, do

[27] Etin Anwar, *Gender and Self in Islam*, pg 103.
[28] Donald Wehrs*, Islam, Ethics, and Revolt*, pg 27

> what you are told so that you can grow to become a better person. You trust your parents and through that trust is the act of remembering Allah (swt).

Here, Naeemah relays that it is a "trust" in ones parents, the closest embodiment of the Islamic *umma* that relays an "act of remembering." Thus Naeemeah's narrative exemplifies a shift in the way that agency is usually conceived, especially as it pertains to the notion of individual 'will' and resistance/ submission of the body. Instead of agency being derived or created through the body's independent action or an act of resistance to move itself away from something that may make it submissive, it is enacted through the body/self's acquiescence and submission to its own ethical communal subjectivity. This submission is specifically rendered through the body's performance of spiritual disciplines, "in the acts, gestures, and expressions that characterize one's relationship to a moral code" and the relationship between "the self structures of social authority."[29] In this way, Naeemah's very bodily obedience to her parents and then her *umma* as material manifestations of Allah (swt) enacts ethical agency at the individual and communal level simultaneously. This act of 'reciprocal dependency' or mutual reciprocity between the self and community yields a form of shared agency, as the effecting of one body's moral and ethical subjectivity cannot occur or strengthen without the other.

Through this initial act of submission in the state of islam, Naeemah's body instantly becomes the instrument necessary in the enacting agency. As she begins the process of "growing into" her faith, she consciously sees it as the means to further develop spiritual or moral agency and begins to 'practice' the second embodied site, *iman*:

> The more I learned, the more my faith increased. When I was around sixteen, I began to take Islam into my heart for the first time. I remember this so well because there was a big difference in the way that I began to approach prayer. *Salat* had always been the biggest thing for me to get down… And I didn't really like to make *salat*… Around the age of sixteen, I was in my room praying for forgiveness for not making my *salat*s. Not

[29] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, pg. 120.

> in a way that I thought that I had sinned, but in the way that I had not remembered. What I mean by this is that I don't think *salat* is supposed to be the most natural thing… [But] You go through the motions of *salat* in order to let your body remember Allah (swt) for you until you consciously remember Allah (swt). So at around the age of sixteen, I started to consciously understand *salat* as an act of remembrance. And it is only through remembering that we can be Muslim. But I didn't just make all my *salat*s from then on. Even now I still struggle but I realize that the struggle is part of the path to making you a better Muslim, to develop *Iman*. I realize again, the more that I learn and the more that I begin to understand, the more driven I am to not only make my *salat*s everyday, but also to make them on time.

Her understanding of *salat* as a means to 'develop' *iman,* the second embodied site of Islam, positions the body as necessary in the building of her faith. Here we see that for her, faith is not an internal motivator which propels the body to act, but is the effect enacted through the performance of the body. Thus it is what the body does, its external movements, motions, and actions that creates the internal, emotions, feelings, and spiritual states.

This understanding also underpins Naeemah's discussion about her lack of desire and the fact that she "didn't really like to make *salat*." As she begins to make her *salat*s, the more she makes them, the more she wants to make them:

> The more I stay with it [prayer] and do it when I should, the more I progress spiritually, the more that prayer affects my day and affects my state of mind, the more I want to do it. I am a better person when I am praying. I have come to understand that prayer grows my faith. Now it is a priority before I do other things. I now know that I will not be able to really complete the 'other' things adequately or as good as I could because my state of being is not right.

Naeemah's admission, "the more I do it when I should…the more I want to do it," underscores a particular conceptualization of the development and application of personal and individual desire. Instead of viewing desire as a feeling or emotion that comes from the inside, driven by individual will and molding or affecting the performance of the body, again, the body divines the internal, manifesting desire through ritual performance. Like the participants in Mahmood's study where their desire is not something that exists a priori, Naeemah's desire to pray is created,

the body instituting the necessary movements, practices, and techniques through which pious desires are cultivated.[30]

In addition, her narrative indicates that not only is the successful performance (doing it when she 'should') of the ritual necessary in the building of faith, but also its failure, in the form of struggle. Jihad, literally meaning struggle, is considered by most Muslims the most vital ingredient in attaining the potentiality of any state and is thus said to permeate any and every act of the believing Muslim. In the act of perfecting faith, the inner or 'greater' jihad is necessarily fought as the individual "struggles against the limitations and ignorance of one's soul."[31] Naeemah relays this understanding when she says, "Even now I still struggle but I realize that the struggle is part of the path to making you a better Muslim, to develop *Iman*." Thus both success and failure are integral and essential acts in the creation of agency. In this regard, the performance of *iman* and the creation of spiritual agency depart from dominantly used formulations of performative agency, where agency either lies in performative subversion (failure) or reification (successful repetition) of hegemonic norms. Here, agency, in the form of faith creation, or iman, and its acquisition, is dependent on *both* the success and failure of the performance because both are constitutive elements of the norm.

Souljah and Naeemah's narratives of testifying conversion illustrate that embracing Islam is a continuously performed process that goes through three embodied sites: islam ,*iman*, and *ihsan*. As Souljah and Naeemah begin to testify their conversion by performing *shahadah*, they gain the ability to perform other sites. Each performance enables them to build new 'bodies, ' bodies existing in both multiple spaces, as in the individual and communal bodies, and on multiple 'planes' as in the ethical, spiritual, and moral. Through ritual acts, Souljah and

---

[30] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, pg.157-158
[31] Al Ghazali quoted in William Chittick, *Faith and the Practice of Islam*, pg. 171-172.

Naeemah are able to construct and reconstruct these bodies, their physical body becoming "a resource for generating and creating a spiritual and moral 'self' as well as an instrument in attaining religious meaning, communal solidarity, and the experience of the sacred."[32] Their narratives demand that any analysis of Sunni women, and their agency creation, must consider the totality of Islamic embodiment; which consists of various bodies and multimodal forms of agency, instead of seeking how the 'body' just reifies or subverts norms through ritual performance.

The employment of the above consideration has special significance for African American Sunni women, whose agentives have been largely isolated to the social and as acts of resistance. Understanding Islamic agency as multiply constructed creates a shift in the way that we understand these women's agency. For example, while Souljah is performing in the first embodied site of the Islam, she effects agency at the social level. It is quite possible that her embrace of Islam in prison is an act of resistant to social structures such as the prison system and hegemonic systems of oppression. However, as Naeemah's narrative highlights, the very act of surrender effects both individual and communal ethical agency simultaneously. In essence, in Souljah's intial stage of testifying, three forms of agency are effected and as she acquires new bodies, other forms of agency are enacted *at the same time* as the former agentives, making any effort to minimize this act as resistance impossible.

In this chapter, I have shown that African American Sunni women testify conversion by utilizing the ritual acts of Islam to transport themselves through three embodied sites of being, sites that enable them to effect agency through multiply constructed bodies. My goal was to illustrate that in order to understand the embracing of Islam as agentive, in other ways besides

[32] Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saints Bodies*, pg.8.

resistance, in the lives African American Sunni women, first a deeper analysis of the conceptual frameworks in which these women live their lives needs to be done. Since the primary aim of every Muslim is to able to acquire ethical, spiritual, and moral bodies, acquiring these bodies through ritual performances are the ultimate acts of agency. However, since every site is mediated through the material and social body, ritual acts enable Muslim women to accomplish other rich and varied forms of agency that are also fluid and mobile. This mediation is what African American Sunni women must negotiate as they strive to become Muslimahs.

CHAPTER 3.

Becoming Muslimahs: Practical Constructions of Spiritual Engagements

When one becomes a Muslimah, she is doing more than accepting a new faith. Muslimahs are not only reconstructing themselves, creating a Muslim identity by embodying Islamic ideals and norms through performance, but also constructing herself according to particular sexed/gendered roles. Although anyone who embodies or testifies *shahadah*, as expressed in the previous chapter, becomes Muslim,[33] to call oneself Muslimah denotes a specific characterization of the term, a characterization of the embodied feminine. Since every human being has been entrusted as *khalifahs* of Allah (swt) and thus manifestations of his characterizations, characterizations that are expressed in dualities of feminine and masculine qualities, human beings embody both masculine and feminine attributes of Allah (swt); they are the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm of Allah (swt).

The duality of the human being also extends to all, male or female, as expressed in the Qur'an when it describes the creation of pairs from one soul. The Qur'an states "fear your lord, who created you from a single soul (nafs wahidah); and from this single soul (nafs wahidah) a mate and sent forth from the two of you many men and women."[34] The pair of souls created from this nafs wahidah is from "a single point of origin," both created in the likeness of the one. These likenesses (of the nafs wahidah) are neither male nor female; however, ultimately, the soul (nafs) is characterized as feminine because its greatest potentiality, and thus its primary purpose, lies in

---

[33] Although the word Muslim is characterized as masculine, I am stating that at that moment that one embodies the *shahadah*, then they acquire that characterization. My understanding is largely taken from Amina Wadud's assertion that although each word 'is designated as masculine or feminine, it does not follow that the use of the word is restricted to the mentioned gender. In addition, as khalifah, every 'self' embodies both masculine and feminine characterization.

[34] Qur'an 4:1.

its characteristic of surrender, lack of will, or in other words, its ability to submit.[35] The acquirement of the soul's potentiality and characterization becomes the goal for both male and female in Islam However, the soul cannot attain this potentiality without the intellect (aql), after all, the soul must become aware of itself. So to achieve its potential, every soul must construct into being its feminine and masculine aspects; every human being, as men and women, created as pairs, must also do the same.

For the African American Muslimahs highlighted in this chapter , who adhere to and create their selves according to divine conceptualizations of feminine outlined above, as well as their ultimate embodiments in the form of woman, the Qur'an provides a guide for obtaining spiritual goals and needs in the context of the body. The body becomes both the instrument for the creation of the spiritual and its characterization and also the means through which the social or gendered body becomes constructed. The way in which a spiritual characterization is constructed is mediated through the physical and social needs of the individual body. Accordingly, Muslimahs in this chapter choose to construct the feminine divine in a gendered body and at the same time assist in the construction of the masculine divine, and its gendered embodiment, in their mates, in a way that fulfills both a spiritual and a physical need or desire. In their construction of gender and their performance of discursive norms, the women in this study use Quran, *hadith*, and other Islamic texts to create their spiritual selves, yet they empower themselves according to their needs in a given context.

---

[35] In *The Soul*, Ibn Sina states that the soul is characterized as female because its charge is to fulfill its state of submission. In addition the soul is mentioned three time in the Quran: as being prone to be incited by things of this world (12:53), as the accusing soul (75:2) and the soul at peace (89:27-28). When the divine soul is referred to, this reference is to "the soul at peace." Also Schimmel states that the soul at peace is the state that one strives towards continuously (its greatest potentiality) because to accomplish this means that one has come into haqqiqa (truth, oneness of Allah, swt) and Tawheed . This can only be done through the total killing of the self. The self, or lower nafs, is the worldly soul that we try to get rid of through jihad, Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, pg 18.

Through an analysis of Muslimah's narratives of embodying and performing Islamic norms and ideals through *hijab* and marriage, I posit that African American Sunni represented in this chapter construct gendered selves in order to attain and effect agency on both the spiritual and practical level. Specifically I argue that through exegetic application of tafsir, as well as narrative analyses of *hadith* and Islamic texts, African American Sunni women construct their selves at dialectic junctures between spiritual virtues and varying contextual factors like individual and communal needs, personal desire, and social opportunity. In doing this, Muslimahs find a way to connect their spirituality to their experiences in their material lives, building their faith while also fulfilling and addressing needs and desires that lie in the contextual realities of their world.

Embodying *Hijab*

Minah

> When I first accepted Islam, the clothes were not important. As I became more knowledgable about the religion, I began to feel like I had to change my appearance. First, I would see sisters in full *hijab* and feel intimidated. This had more to do with my understanding of *hijab* than with these sisters. It is the feeling of intimidation that someone may get when they feel like someone else is outdoing them. I started to wear *hijab* then, feeling like I wasn't being the best that I could be. When I turned 19, I began to wear my *hijab* permanently. I began to dress in full *hijab*, mainly dark blue or black. At first the criticism was hard from family and friends. As the years passed, less was spoken on my clothing because they seen I was serious. I felt good at first for like the first two years, then I began to question the reason of dressing so dark. I figured that no one will pay attention to me, and if they did, the attention would be negative. This is because there is a stigma attached to Muslims in the presence of non Muslims. This period was confusing and a battle. I think that we all go through some kind of ship wreck and it is a crazy ride to take. I continued to pray to Allah (swt) about it and seek his guidance through his words. I came to understand that it wasn't the outer I had an issue with, it was something emotional. I was still seeking to be seen a certain way by people, when I should have been focused on being 'seen' a certain way by Allah (swt). My goal now is modesty because I realized that I dress for Allah (swt). Now I am 25 and feel good about everything I wear.
> For me *hijab* is *taqwa*. I grew as a woman, mother, and sister in Islam. I guess praying to Allah gave me confidence in my appearance because I can not pin point a specific person with encouraging words. I remember I went some place where there was a bunch of non

Muslims and I was walking proudly as usual and there stood a little boy staring at me. It was obvious he was amazed or scared of my appearance. Loud as ever he said, "mommy why she look like that." Instead of the mother explaining to him why i dressed the way I did, she just told him, "shh, come on and mind your business!" Things like that don't bother me anymore.

During my marriage, I also began to change the way of *hijab*. *Hijab* is not only clothing, but is what you do and how you live your life. For example, Islam has changed my goals in life. Before I converted to Islam, I said to myself that I would work a 9-5 job, maybe even become a lawyer. The sky was the limit I thought. Now that I am a woman, mother, and wife in Islam those goals are gone. This is not a bad thing. I see that I am needed in other places besides a court room or office. Today's goals are to be a knowledgeable sister and a child care provider. Yes Islam had an influence on the changing of my goals. *Hijab* helped me think about what kind of 'job' do I want. I think my job now is a typical Muslimah job, taking care of Muslim children in my home. And I do not take typical lightly. Being able to deal with children means you need patience, passion, and love. As we all can agree on, patience does not come easy, especially with children. So to have these qualities are a blessing from Allah. The objective in Islam is to expand the *umma* and that is what I am doing everyday.

Being in child care also gives me many advantages. Child care will always be a booming career. Being a caregiver in the home helps me be able to uphold my state of *taqwa* with ease. This is because, I mostly seclude myself. I shop and go to Muslim events but that is all. Allah says in the Qur'an "stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display of yourself like those in the time of ignorance and establish regular prayer, and give zakat and obey Allah and His Messenger. And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye Members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless" (33:33). This to me means that the more you veil yourself, not just your body, but your household and family, the more easier it is to maintain your *taqwa*. So it allowed me to be ale to create a safe and pure space that is undistracted by some things of this world. I barely keep the company of men at all. I think the only reason women should talk to men other than their family is if he is someone who can teach you your religion. Seeking knowledge is for every Muslim, and all since the major scholars are men, we have to have some type of communication with them one way or another. As long as I do not kick my feet up and start gossiping with men, I believe the short exchange of words are no harm to me.

People have a misconception about Muslim women. They think we know nothing other than cleaning and making babies. The belief that we are mistreated by our men, that we belittle our worth by having polygamy in our life is wrong. The women in Islam role is to be able. Able is everything, there is no limit. We are the strongest, the smartest, and the most compassionate creation Allah made.

Latifah

This is a sensitive topic for me. My *umma*h, my community, and my sisters struggle with it constantly, and by that simple fact so do I. When I converted to Islam, I decided that I would cover. This is mainly because the sisters around me covered, and even in certain sects of Christianity, covering the head, particularly for prayer had always been a part of scripture or some type of discourse. My husband never put a great deal of pressure on me

concerning my dress. He understood that women were to cover the head (bosom) and he was fine with that. He was personally inclined to want me to wear clothing that only revealed my face, hands, and sometimes my feet but again, that was his inclination. I, then, received the greatest amount of pressure from my Muslim community and other Muslim sisters that I would come into contact with. Why am I not wearing a niqab? A jilbab, an abaya, a something? What is my reasoning for being able to show my lower arms? How can I wear sandals without socks? Why is my *khimar* in the form of a bun. But finally my decision concerning *hijab* was resolved. I started studying and really looking at the circumstances around covering. My greatest understanding came from the Qur'an itself. In surah 24 verse 31, the purpose of the *hijab* is revealed. There are also references to *hijab* and covering in the *hadith*. When I first came across these passages, I thought, well maybe I should make sure that I always wear my *Khimar* and shawl wrapped around my shoulders and never wear sandals showing my feet etc. But as I kept studying, I began to understand that this modesty and purity is for both men and women to dress in a way so that they may be able to worship right. All women were wearing headdresses, but their bosoms were bare, so that is why it was decreed that they cover their bosoms with their headdress. This is not the case today, were we have so many options in the way that we cover ourselves.

Veiling to me, through Quran, *sunnah* and *hadith* reveals itself as a means to modesty and as way to be identified as a Muslim. So when I cover, I think about these things. I know that I choose to cover my head (with a scarf) and wear clothes that cover me from my neck to my ankles (I will reveal my face, feet, hands, and lower arms) because it makes me feel protected and in control. I control who and how I allow others access to the viewing of my body. I know that when people (not just men) see me, they think that I am dressing a certain way purposefully. It makes me feel different, and I like that. I have been approached with respect by men and women.

Although it can stigmatize and make people less accepting of me, that doesn't really bother me, unless it is other Muslims. It is in the Qur'an for women to dress a certain way so that they can be identified as Muslims and not bothered. I want to feel Muslim and connected in some way to my other Muslim sisters and brothers. Not just this, but I feel like dressing in a way that identifies yourself as Muslim also is a form of *dawa*. And I think helps me maintain my spiritual integrity. I can't see myself doing something haram while wrapped. It helps me make myself a better Muslim, maintain a state of *taqwa* and proper *adab.*

I will change the way that I *hijab* depending on the situation. Sometimes I won't cover. I went to a family members wedding and decided not to cover. This was about making my family and others feel more comfortable. Plus they all know that I am Muslim. I have also found that that *hijab* can be helpful, depending on how you wear it. I have felt very put out in certain masjids because I don't cover a certain way. So depending on the community that my husband and I are visiting, I will change the way that I *hijab*. Sometimes if I am going to a masjid in-town that is largely African American, I will just wear a bun. If I am going to a masjid north of the city that is a little more conservative, then I may wear an abaya. I do this because I want to be comfortable and I want the women around me to be comfortable. Mainly I am just coming to worship Allah (swt) who doesn't care how I *hijab* as long as I do. But in social situations sometimes you must accommodate in order to keep *fitna* away. I have come to masjids where the women are

> in separate buildings and have to watch the *khutbah* through video. If I come to masjid like this with just my business wear and a bun on then I know that the women will be more focused on the fact that I don't look like them than their prayer. Plus while they are most likely judging me, I have wondered is it because they may think that I judge them. Our way of wearing *hijab* marks us as different. Most of these women have their children with them too, so many things could be on their mind. I know some sisters that just come anyway and sit there proudly different. But I don't think that the masjid is the space for this. There are many more occasions where the fact that people express *hijab* differently cannot be hidden. Prayer at Ramadan is one of them. So I come to these masjids to blend in and have the opportunity to have conversations with these different women. Many times I have been able to build true and lasting friendships with women from different cultures in this way. So, again, I think *hijab* as something which identifies is not only identifies as a Muslim, but as someone who can or is willing to understand you. *Hijab* will help everyone keep their mind on what they came there to do and that is to submit to Allah (swt). I am coming to their community to pray, so I accommodate their idea of *hijab*. The key is to be modest, maintain a pure mind and spirit, not allow lust to rule your heart.

Analyses of the Narratives

Hijab, although popularly thought of as solely a form of dress, is actually an Arabic word for cover, curtain, or shelter.[36] In a spiritual sense, *hijab* is revealed in the Qur'an as a curtain or shield and is interpreted as a means to create and maintain modesty, privacy, and morality. In Sufism, the word *hijab* is often used to denote the sacred divide between the consciousness of man and the divine and represents the separation of two spaces and levels of purity.[37] The narratives of the African American Sunni women in this study reveal various reasons for embracing forms of *hijab*; however, these reasons are largely tied to the way that these women conceptualize *hijab* itself, both individually and collectively. For them, *hijab* can be expressed through three main ways: as an act of dress, as a performance of spatial seclusion, and as the

---

[36] In the *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam,* John Esposito states that hijab is a form of dress for Muslim women, which denotes its popular definition. However, as scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Lila Abu Lughod have stipulated, hijab as referenced in the Qur'an in Sura 33:53 as the phrase "min wara'al-hijab" actually means 'separation' specifically in the form of a curtain or partition, Mernissi, 1991:184-185, and Abu Lughod, 1986:159. Thus the generic meaning of hijab is the practice of some form of separation.

[37] Here, as in other places, I clarify that Sufi Ideology defines a word or concept a specific way. This does not mean that I position Sufism as separate from Sunni Ideology. I take the position of many Islamic Scholars like Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Vincent Cornell, and Scott Kugle that Sufism is already embedded in Sunni Ideology. My clarification is only to specify that Sufism denotes the mystical element of Islam.

practice of specific conduct, especially in regards to gender separation. Their understanding that all three performances function as *hijab* is pulled from various places, including *hadith*, islamic history and narrative, and the examples of the prophet's wives, but the most authoritative source for them is from the Qur'an.

In understanding dress as functioning as *hijab*, the women refer to two key verses from the Qur'an. The first states:

> say to the believing men and the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for Greater purity for them: And God is Well-acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their khumar [head covering]over their juyub [breasts or neck] and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or the children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! So that you may be successful."[38]

In this verse, Muslims are asked to guard their conduct, in the form of "casting down their looks and guarding their private parts." Women are also told to wear a *khimar* as an act that will help them maintain their modesty or *taqwa*.

The second verse that relays *hijab* as an act of dress states, "Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their *khimar* close round them and lengthen their garments (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful."[39] This verse further extends the function of *khimar*. Already identified as a form of dress that helps one guard their modesty, the *khimar* here also functions as an identifying mark of a Muslimah and as a means of protection.

---

[38] Qur'an 24:31.
[39] Qur'an 33:59.

The concept of seclusion and gender separation as a form of *hijab* primarily comes from both a verse in the Qur'an and a contextual reading of it:

> O Wives of the Prophet, ye are not like any of the (other) women. If ye do fear (Allah), be not too complaisant of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speak that is just. Abide still in your homes and make not a dazzling display like that of the former times of ignorance: and establish regular prayer, and give regular charity; and obey Allah and His Messenger. And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye Members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.[40]

This verse 'came down'[41] during a time of tremendous growth in the faith of Islam, and converts were flocking to the mosques surrounding the living quarters of both the prophet and his wives (saws). It is related through *hadith* that this verse was meant to reveal the status of the prophets wives by granting them special protection, privacy, and a mark of their purity through the 'veil.' Even though most Muslims agree that this verse explicitly and specifically pertaining to the prophets wives, for Muslimahs who live their lives utilizing the conduct of the prophets (saws) as the ultimate example, it is proof of the need for seclusion.

All of the women in this study understood and agreed that *hijab* was necessary in the development of and maintenance of *taqwa*, but they sometimes varied in the way that they thought *hijab* could be performed and expressed. These variances usually spoke to or addressed some personal or social need or desire by the individual. Minah, who dresses in what she calls "the traditional way," claims that dressing this way helped her grow as "a woman, mother, and

---

[40] Qur'an 33:32.

[41]The phrase 'came down' is used frequently by Muslims when referring to Quranic revelation. This is mainly because it is mentioned several times in the Qur'an that its message 'came down' from the heavens and was recited by the prophet (saws): see Qur'an 81:26; 12:2; 52:33-34 for examples. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal revelation from Allah (swt) and so its message is of divine authorship. In addition, in many ways , the Qur'an is historically contextual, revealed over a period of 23 years during the course of the prophets (saws) life, (Qur'an 17:106, 25:32).During this time, some revelations 'came down' instantaneously and in regards to the historical moment.

sister in Islam." Admitting that she always had a desire to be 'seen' a certain way by people in general, she claims that *hijab* helped her create a deeper sense of modesty:

> I figured that no one will pay attention to me, and if they did, the attention would be negative. This is because there is a stigma attached to Muslims in the presence of non Muslims. This period was confusing and a battle. I think that we all go through some kind of ship wreck and it is a crazy ride to take. I continued to pray to Allah (swt) about it and seek his guidance through his words. I came to understand that it wasn't the outer I had an issue with, it was something emotional. I was still seeking to be seen a certain way by people, when I should have been focused on being 'seen' a certain way by Allah (swt). My goal now is modesty because I realized that I dress for Allah (swt). Now I am 25 and feel good about everything I wear.

As she grows as "a woman, a mother, and a sister in Islam," her view of *hijab* changes, as she expands her conceptualization of *hijab* and the way it can be expressed. She still understands *hijab* as something that should be created and expressed through dress, but she extends this understanding both inward and outward to her spiritual and social body. Thus she states that "*hijab* is *taqwa*," something that manifests an inner spiritual state as well as outer, but is also "not only clothing, but what you do and how you live your life." *Hijab*, according to Minah, as modesty, piety, and privacy, encompasses both dress and the actions that you take. Since any deed that is done with *niyah* and faith is *ihsan*, then including *hijab* as part of you actions becomes an act if *ihsan*, of good deeds and excellence.

Once *hijab* is understood as something that carries beyond the physical body, Minah incorporates the belief that how she controls her surroundings and actions is also an extension of her performance of *hijab*. She demonstrates this as she starts to perform *hijab* through the act of seclusion and takes on a job that enables her to maintain it. By choosing to seclude herself, Minah is able to have what she calls a "typical Muslimah job," providing care for Muslim children:

> today's goals are to be a knowledgeable sister and a child care provider. Being in child care also gives me many advantages. Child care will always be a booming career. Being

> at home allows me to study my *deen* when I want and even study when I teach. Being a caregiver in the home helps me be able to uphold my state of *taqwa* with ease. This is because, I mostly seclude myself… This to me means that the more you veil yourself, not just your body, but your household and family, the more easier it is to maintain your *taqwa*.

Minah's narrative shows that she considers seclusion as far from debilitating, as giving her the ability to have and maintain *taqwa*, create a space of both learning and work that enriches her on an individual level, and provide a valuable service by helping to "expand the *umma*" by teaching young children Islam.

Given the negative perception of *hijabi* Muslimahs in Western society, Minah has embraced a form of *hijab* that removes her from the stigma associated with her form of dress, grants her control over the viewing of her body, and positions her in a favorable position to be 'employed' or used in the Islamic community. Her understanding of *hijab* and her expression of it challenges the dichotomous view of women's access to liberatory agency, where either she is in a 'public' emancipatory sphere and liberated, or in private dominated sphere and oppressed. Minah's act of separation functions both 'publicly' and privately as an area where her community or *umma* can access an avenue of growth and as an area where she can have protection and growth as well. In addition, instead of seeing 'veiling' of the body, both in terms of dress and seclusion, as limiting to women, Minah understands this act as liberatory because it makes her "able," able to maintain her and her family's *taqwa*, expand the *umma*, and perform in a 'job' that renders its value in economic, moral, and spiritual wealth.

Although Latifah does not extend *hijab* to the act of seclusion, she identifies *hijab* as something that can be performed through dress and conduct, even though she expresses is differently than Minah. Latifah has always associated covering with the act of worship, even when she was Christian, and extended this understanding of covering as essential to worship and

modesty stating "as I kept studying [Islam], I began to understand that this modesty and purity is for both men and women to dress in a way so that they may be able to worship right." Here, we see that Latifah's main reason for performing *hijab* is to maintain modesty for herself, but in doing so, she believes that she is also helping men maintain modesty as well.

Latifah utilizes *hijab* not only as a way to maintain modesty but also as a way to create communal bonds and transgress boundaries, both spiritual and ethnic. Latifah chooses to perform *hijab*, but she changes the way that she embodies *hijab* according to the environment that she enters. She does this so that she can be identified as Muslim and to be able to connect with different Muslim women in other ethnic spaces. She states, "it is in the Qur'an for women to dress a certain way so that they can be identified as Muslims and not be bothered. I want to feel Muslim and connected in some way to my other Muslim sisters and brothers." Latifah notes that when she enters into particular ethnic spaces, she can be excluded because she does not "cover a certain way," but has found that wearing *hijab* in a way that blends with these spaces can function as a tool to create a sense of solidarity. She states:

> I have also found that that *hijab* can be helpful, depending on how you wear it. I have felt very put out in certain masjids because I don't cover a certain way. So depending on the community that my husband and I are visiting, I will change the way that I *hijab*… Mainly I am just coming to worship Allah (swt) who doesn't care how I *hijab* as long as I do. But in social situations sometimes you must accommodate in order to keep *fitna* away.

Although Latifah's behavior could be seen as accommodating situations that takes her individuality away (and in fact she uses the word *accommodat*e often), her intention is to create an atmosphere that is more conducive to worship, not just for herself, but also for the women in the masjids that she visits:

> *Hijab* will help everyone keep their mind on what they came there to do and that is to submit to Allah (swt). I am coming to their community to pray, so I accommodate their

> idea of *hijab*. The key is to be modest, maintain a pure mind and spirit, not allow lust to rule your heart.

Here we see that Latifah understands her ability to worship properly as necessarily dependent on the state of her environment and community in general.

Latifah's understanding of the communal power of hijab as dress is further demonstrated through the way that she connects the concept of *fitna* to *hijab*. *Fitna* means source of chaos and temptation, and feminist scholars have noted that common patriarchal interpretations position women as naturally sly sexual temptations and producers of social chaos through their sexuality; in other words, they are an *innate* source of *fitna*.[42] According to these interpretations, *hijab*, then, is meant to conceal *fitna*, providing a barrier between the woman as a source of *fitna* and Islamic society. However, Latifah's use of *fitna* is more in line with the communal meaning of *fitna* which correlates with some feminist and mystical interpretations.[43]These interpretations focus on its spiritual and communal meaning, relating that *fitna* means any source of chaos or division within the umma and the self. Latifah understands *hijab* as dress and as something that helps create an environment where *everyone* can maintain their state of worship. This state of worship is both internal, as in helping the women "be more focused" on their prayer, and external, as in having a sense of community.

By claiming *hijab*, in the form of dress, as instrumental in the cohesion of community within the Muslimah community as well as something that "keeps fitna away,"Latifah manages to co-pt and redeploy the conceptual purpose and politics of *hijab*. *Fitna* becomes any formation opposing worship and the performance of one's deen. That she claims this power in a gender segregated space underscores the fact that *fitna* is not seen as something that comes from

---

[42] Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, pg. 52-56.
[43] Ibid .

something innately within the woman. Instead, Latifah positions women as powerful agents with the ability to create and effect space conducive to worship in the Islamic community.

For these African American Sunni women, *hijab* is a way to construct the spiritual norm or ideal feminine in Islam as well as articulate religious, political, social, and cultural ideas, desires, and needs on an individual, shared, and communal level. On the one hand , *hijab* is a way for these women to articulate the islamic morals (aklaq) like *taqwa*. On the other, it is a way to understand the body according to its social, cultural, or political aspect.

Performing Marriage

Minah

> Allah (swt) seeks to make things easy for us. This is why they say marriage for men is half of your *deen*.[44]This works for women too. In Islam, women are not supposed to have "male friends." When I convert to Islam, the last thing that is on your mind is eliminating friends. I accepted Islam and did not think the one who gave me shahada was not a friend. Matter of fact, I barely knew him, but the way he explained Islam was so calming and inviting, I kinda considered him a friend. All the while he could have asked to marry me and I would have thought nothing of it. Islam protects women and their dignity. Allah created barriers for women to safe guard their chasity. Me getting married had a ton to do with the decision to dress more modest. Marriage is one of those safeguards. I can see that in the way that it helped me strengthen my conduct and modesty. Allah says in the Quran,"We have created for you a mate, so that happily you may remember." This to me means that through your zawj, you may get ease in remembrance. This happened to me. I felt like getting married helped me focus on my *deen* as I wasn't worried about so many things that have to do with men. The need for sex, the urge to look a certain way for men. My thinking really changed and strengthened. We, as Muslims are supposed to marry the person with the best piety. Allah (swt) states in the Qur'an that we are clothing for each other.[45] I felt like, as his mate, part of my responsibility was to be his 'clothing' as Allah (swt) says. So I had to be more pious, just like he had to be more pious for me.

Jamillah

> When I met my husband, he was already married. I had known of him for a while, but we really did not know each other well. He seemed particularly solid, and I knew that he was the sole supporter of his family. He approached me for marriage when I had already

[44] deen means a system of life and worship.

[45] Minah here is referring to the Qur'an 2:187 where it states that "women are a raiment (clothing) for you and you are a clothing for them. Since the Qur'an also states that piety ot taqwa is the best of all raiments, then Muslims are urged to marry the person with the strongest embodiment of taqwa.

begun studying about Islam. He was a main facilitator in me coming to know the path. He bought me my first quran, taught me *fatihah*, and explained aspects of Islam to me. One day I saw him at a function. A *sheikh* was in town and many people were there. After talking to the sheikh, I met up with him outside and he stated that he wanted to talk to me. We talked briefly, but he brought up the fact that he wanted to marry me. I was astonished and my first response was no. This brother had a wife and children. Even though I knew that polygamy was a part of the faith as outlined in the Quran, I didn't think that African American Muslims were still practicing it. I say still because I had known of some Muslims practicing it in my neighborhood when I was growing up. But I thought that was tossed out with the days of the black revolution. I asked him why would he want or need another wife besides the obvious. He said that he thought that I was a good sister that his wife is a sister that would approve of the joining. I told him that I would have to meet the sister and pray, pray, pray and see which direction Allah (swt) intended for me to travel.

Shortly after he asked, I took my *shahadah* and his wife was there. She brought me a set of dhikr beads, a rug, gave me a hug, and asked could she meet with me the next day. The next day I met with his wife and we took to each other.We ended up spending a lot of time together and the brother was really out of the picture. I mean that sometimes he would come home and I would be there. But we barely spoke and I was fine with it. I thought that the idea of polygamy was out of his head.

The sister and I steadily became good friends. She had always been a stay at home mom since she had been married and she said that she wanted to 'get out there' and do other things. She loved being a mother but with three kids she couldn't find the time to do anything else. She wanted to go to school and get a degree in nursing. I encouraged her. Sometimes she would ask me if I wanted to get married. I said yes, but that I wanted it to be a good man, someone who was striving in the *deen*. We were very tight for about two months, she saying that I was the sister she never had. After about two months, she called and asked me would I marry her husband. She asked could I come over that night. I came and we prayed together and asked her why. She said that she thought that I would like married life, that being married as a Muslim woman was a real help in dealing with this world, and that I had become her best friend. I was really conflicted, but I decided that Allah was giving me a test. Was I up to the challenge? I was educated had a good job. I was cruising in life, but I was also alone. I didn't have any family. I knew that this brother was a family man and practiced. I felt that I could be used and submit myself, not to this life, but to the *deen*. But there was still the brother to deal with. All this time that I had been spending with the wife, I had not really gotten to know him. I said that was o.k. because this marriage was not for self but for the love of Allah (swt). Because there is no traditional western concept of dating in Islam the marriage was fast-tracked and we planned to get married the next week.

Every day of that week, the sister was encouraging me to get married. I would lose my nerve sometimes and tell her that I couldn't do it and she would become very sad. She said that with me she thought that she had found the sense of sisterhood that she had always wanted. Her husband was always off praying somewhere or working. After that week, I got married to the brother. I had never been so nervous. After the wedding night, I went to see my co-wife. She was an emotional wreck. But instead of turning away, she came to me and cried. She said that she was willing to make the sacrifice of having a co-

wife but that it would be the hardest thing in her life. I stayed with her a whole week while our husband stayed at my place. After that we broke into a traditional routine of him at my place half the time and him with my co-wife. For months it was really hard, a special kind of suffering that I don't think many people go through. First you have to kill yourself. And I mean kill that part of you lower nafs that is screaming at you to be selfish. I don't think I would have made it through this stage if it wasn't for my co-wife. When I would feel bad, and that seemed to happen a lot, I reminded myself that she had to feel worse. Why did we do this? We placed ourselves in this position, but came out the stronger for it. In terms of our personal jihad, it was a battle that we asked for, struggled through and came out whole on the other side. But we shared that struggle together. Now we are stronger individually because of that. She keeps some of my strength and I keep some of hers. Now we are still really close. I have two children and she has three. We have been married for 14 years. We eat together, cook together, and pray together. It is still hard, but because we mostly spend time together and not with our spouse, I think that it works. There are plenty of African American Muslim men out there, but most are already married. This is because marriage is half of their *deen*. Marriage gives them and us an outlet for sexual desires that is halal. This helps us focus on our *deen*.

I think polygamy can work as long as you are addressing a need. If it is just desire, desire wears away and what you are stuck with is a mess. This is because I think that polygamy was intended and should be for the women. The Qur'an states that a man must be able to provide for all his wives equally and if not don't get more than one. Emphasis should be given to women who cannot take care of themselves or find themselves in need.[46] The Qur'an makes this clear. While it may seem like it is for the man, what he is supposed to gain is more responsibility not sex because when this came down it was not something extra but a limitation, but with more responsibility.[47] I think that, especially in the African American community, where marriageable black men are basically gone, polygamy could be a needed option. What we all gain is an extra person to share this life and *deen* with. If done right, the women will struggle, maybe even go through hell, but we come out stronger with bonds of sisterhood that do not break and more patience and humility than anyone can ask for. I look to the wives of the prophet as the ultimate examples. They made it work .We make is work. The sister is in school and I have time away from the kids and a husband. I travel and work. We have children that understand Islam and value women because they see the incredible strength that we have. *Alhumdulillah*.

Naeemah

I got married at age seventeen. I wanted to get married, not because I wanted to have sex, but rather because I thought it would make me a stronger Muslim and I really wanted my own household and independence because at the time I was living with my sister. The man I married is a close friend of my brother-in-law and thirteen years older than me.

---

[46] Reference is to Qur'an 4:3 where it states that " if you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans (women without husbands) marry of them two, three, or four" [translation].

[47] The reference here is to the fact that in pre-Islamic times, there was no limitation on the number of wives or concubines a man could take. The Qur'an limited this numbers to four women, and only if the man could treat the wives equally.

That's not to say that he was some pervy old man or anything; I'm simply stating a fact. I didn't know him very well when I agreed to the marriage. I had seen him at functions and he'd come over to the house a few times, but we'd never really talked. I said yes right away because I didn't want to make anything weird for my brother-in-law.

My husband-to-be was already married. He had a wife and three kids, including one step-daughter. I wasn't afraid of polygamy. I grew up around it. My father had many wives and children in his lifetime. I believe the overall total of women was twelve, but I'm not sure. Anyway, when he died, he was married to two, my mother and Sister Sabriya. I was four when my father died. My mother remarried not long after my father's death and Sister Sabriya did the same. Both of them remarried into polygamy. Growing up, I saw them be very close; they were (and are) very good friends. They both also seemed to get along with their co-wives. I never saw any arguments or fights, but I was child, so maybe I was just unaware. Whatever the case, polygamy seemed like a normal marriage option that women chose again and again.

When it was time for me to get married, I did not seek out polygamy, but I was certainly not going to shy away from it. It was nothing foreign or dramatic to me, though it did end up being a little more emotionally taxing than I expected. A little while after getting engaged, I found out through a third party that his wife was pregnant. I didn't want to getting married while she was pregnant; it didn't seem right. I voiced my concern to him and he said that I thought I would feel that way when I found out and that he would talk to his sheikh about it. When he got back to me, he said that his *sheikh* thought it would be okay to go ahead with the marriage. I still didn't want to, but my eagerness to please and not cause trouble (something I still struggle with) kept me silent. My mother actually had some misgivings about the marriage. She was concerned that we were going to be living with my sister; she was worried that the plan was "for him not to take care of me." She cautioned me to make sure that my husband provided for me.

We married. We were married for four and half years. For that entire time, we lived with my sister and brother-in-law. I continue to live there now. We never had a place of our own; my daughter and I weren't provided for equally. There was nothing malicious on his part about this. He simply couldn't afford two families; I, of course, was not informed of this before we got married. My mother continually asked me about the marriage. Why are we still living with my sister and brother in law? I tried my best to convince her (and myself) that the situation would only be temporary, that things would soon change. My mother's not the kind of person to fight and fuss, so we didn't argue about it. I hadn't been living with her for four years, so I suppose there wasn't much she could have done from such a distance anyway. Islam makes it incumbent on the man to support his family and, in the case of co-wives, to treat them equally. Though this is probably not the way it should be, it often falls on the woman to remind him of that. I thought that because my husband was older than I was and had a family that he would be able to handle polygamy. This turned out not to be the case because he just didn’t have the finances to do it. As a person, my husband is great. He's a good friend. He never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do. He was very understanding and caring. I don't hate him. I've never hated him. I wish him and his family well.

My experience has by no means soured me on marriage. I very much want to get married again. I believe it will make me a stronger Muslim and a happier person. Marriage helped

> me understand and appreciate being more pious. It makes life easier in that manner because you don't have to worry about other men approaching you and you don't worry about other men. I can say that while I was married, I was frustrated, but I also grew tremendously spiritually. I learned simple Arabic, started studying more, and grew closer to Allah (swt). This spiritual growth was a confusing point for me when I was contemplating my divorce. My ex-husband is *hafiz*[48] and teaches Qur'an to children. *Mashallah*, he has dedicated his life to important, invaluable work that, *inshallah*, will bear rewards for him and his family in this life and the next. He was not providing my daughter and I with the things we needed in this world, but he was spiritually rich. He even brought that up as a point in one of our discussions about the divorce. It gave me serious pause, but then I reminded myself that my daughter and I live in *dunya* right now and it is not acceptable for us to be unnecessarily treated unequally in this world. There must be a balance. Strive for what will be important in the afterlife, but know that if you do not take care of yourself in this world, you may not be able to adequately prepare yourself for the next one. This is also a part of spirituality. If your daily life prevents you from doing what you need to do for your afterlife then you have to find a way to be able to take care of yourself in this *dunya*. Allah (swt) knows this and although divorce is frowned upon it is an option that you can take and still be on the straight path. Looking towards the future, I don't want my second marriage to be polygamous, at least not at first. I need some adjustment time. I need to reflect on marriage and what I want from it. I learned a lot from it. I tried to be patient and wait and pray and encourage, etc. I wanted my marriage to work. I know how serious divorce is in Islam and I most certainly did not see it as an easy out.

Analyses of the Narratives

In its simplest sense, marriage in Islam is a contractual agreement that has moral, spiritual, ethical, legal, and social implications and obligations. Discussed thoroughly in the Quran, marriage has specific guidelines for its institution, its practice, and its dissolution. The Qur'an stipulates that human beings experience sexual desire and that the best means to express this desire is through a relationship that guards physical, social, and spiritual well being. Thus marriage is advocated for in Islam as a contract between individuals who seek, through its performance the benefits that it grants.

The Muslimahs with whom I collaborated had many reasons for seeking out marriage. Most in some way stated that they wanted to find ease in practicing their *deen*. For them, this

[48]Hafiz is a title given to someone who has memorized the entire Qur'an.

was the primary function of marriage. Minah's narrative relays that she found that marriage made the performance and maintenance of modesty and piety easier for her:

> Allah (swt) seeks to make things easy for us. This is why they say marriage for men is half of your *deen*. This works for women too… Islam protects women and their dignity. Allah created barriers for women to safe guard their chastity. Me getting married had a ton to do with the decision to dress more modest. Marriage is one of those safeguards. I can see that in the way that it helped me strengthen my conduct and modesty. Allah says in the Quran,"We have created for you a mate, so that happily you may remember." This to me means that through your zawj, you may get ease in remembrance. This happened to me. I felt like getting married helped me focus on my *deen* as I wasn't worried about so many things that have to do with men. The need for sex, the urge to look a certain way for men. My thinking really changed and strengthened.

In regarding marriage as a way to safeguard chastity and modesty, Minah, then, also looks at marriage as a form of *hijab* and protection. This protection is not necessarily against something exterior to the self, but rather is a protection for the self as marriage acts as a refuge, a means to access something that safeguards a thing of value from loss.

Viewing marriage as *hijab* also allows Minah to extend her concept of marriage as protection for her own personal *taqwa* outward to include her husband. She states, "we, as Muslims are supposed to marry the person with the best piety. I felt like, as his mate, part of my responsibility was to be his 'clothing' as Allah (swt) says. So I had to be more pious, just like he had to be more pious for me." The reciprocal responsibility towards each other's *taqwa* reflects the Islamic view that marriage is the ultimate way to complete the ascension of the soul. In Sufism, any stronger component that is produced through the merging of two is considered a marriage. This is evidenced in the word '*taqwa*,' considered the strongest virtue in Islam, and is created when the "masculine and the feminine elements collaborate and work together to ascend to a higher stage…the masculine element 'fear' combining with the feminine element 'hope'

leading to the birth of true faith."[49] Furthermore, since the explanation of reciprocal responsibility towards another's ethical subjectivity is similar to the ethical dependency relayed through the concept of *tawheed*, we can glean that marriage is a relationship where dependency on another results in the creation and maintenance of ethical and moral agency

Minah's narrative indicates that it is important to understand embodied agency in the context in which and for which it is enacted. An understanding of context in situating agency is especially helpful in understanding Jamillah and Naeemah's narratives. By choosing to perform polygamy, Jamillah and Naeemah participate in a type of marital formation that is regarded by most as oppressive to women. Why would they then choose to participate in it? Jamillah indicates her initial reason:

> I decided that Allah was giving me a test. Was I up to the challenge? I was educated had a good job. I was cruising in life, but I was also alone. I didn't have any family. I knew that this brother was a family man and practiced. I felt that I could be used and submit myself, not to this life, but to the *deen*…. I said that was o.k. because this marriage was not for self but for the love of Allah (swt).

Jamillah's statement indicates that she felt polygamy would be an expression of faith in addition to something that would increase her *iman* and her *ibadah*. Eventually she states that the practice of polygamy did this, but not before she went through an emotional struggle:

> "for months it was really hard, a special kind of suffering that I don't think many people go through. First you have to kill yourself. And I mean kill that part of your lower nafs that is screaming at you to be selfish.

This emotional struggle is also a spiritual struggle, one in which the "lower nafs" or self has to be killed. This description of killing the self is regarded as the inner jihad, a necessary step in coming to embrace *iman* and the oneness of allah (swt).

---

[49] Sufi at Tustari quoted in Anne Marie Schimmel*, My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, pg. 22.

Jamillah also acknowledges that she would not have been able to make it through a struggle without the "sacrifice" of her co-wife:

> I don't think I would have made it through this stage if it wasn't for my co-wife. When I would feel bad, and that seemed to happen a lot, I reminded myself that she had to feel worse. Why did we do this? We placed ourselves in this position, but came out the stronger for it. In terms of our personal jihad, it was a battle that we asked for, struggled through, and came out whole on the other side. But we shared that struggle together. Now we are stronger individually because of that. She keeps some of my strength and I keep some of hers.

The explanation of going through a "special kind of suffering" and coming out "whole on the other side" yields interesting information about the both the role of suffering in agency creation and the understanding of the performing body in the embracement of polygamy. Suffering is usually seen as the antithesis of agency. This is because suffering is understood as the embodiment of pain, pain the body must endure- the body being complete, whole, and autonomous. Talal Asad notes that many people identify:

> pain as the symptom of the afflicted body…[the body] being more often than not a synonym for the individual whose desire and ability to act are taken as unproblematic. . . . When we say that someone is suffering, we commonly assume he or she is not an agent. . . .Pain is something that happens to the body or that afflicts the mind."[50]

Here, pain is described as something that either takes over the body or is inflicted from the outside. It is also described as rendering the individual experiencing the pain as without a choice in whether they want to experience it or not.

But in Jamillah's explanation, suffering is enacted through choice, and through the act of suffering, *sabr* or endurance is created. Thus agency is enacted in the 'throes' of suffering. Suffering is part of the "personal *jihad*" of Jamillah and her cowife and a way to create agency. Agency is not only the result of the suffering body, but it is also necessary for the performance of jihad. In addition, the body that suffers is not an individual body, but a shared body, as the

[50] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pg 68.

women in Jamillah's example "shared the struggle together" through their joint construction of polygamy. Since they both must perform and embody this construction, both the body's pain and agency can only be accomplished through each other. Jamillah's statement that they came out "whole on the other side" yields two additional understandings. One is that agency creation happens while the body is enduring and broken as well as when the 'body' has succeeded or become whole. The other is that the ultimate form of agency happens, yet again, through dependence, when they are housing the "strength" of the other.

In addition to moral and spiritual agentives, the performance of polygamy also brings with it other forms of agency for Jamillah. Jamillah claims that through polygamy, all partners are strengthened by an extra person in with whom to live life. She also states that she gains an intimate bond with her sister in this *deen*:

> what we all gain is an extra person to share this life and *deen* with. If done right, the women will struggle, maybe even go through hell, but we come out stronger with bonds of sisterhood that do not break and more patience and humility than anyone can ask for. I look to the wives of the prophet as the ultimate examples. They made it work .We make it work.

She also implies that it can create a strengthened family unit and is a viable option for the African American community:

> Now we are still really close. I have two children and she has three. We have been married for 14 years. We eat together, cook together, and pray together. It is still hard, but because we mostly spend time together and not with our spouse, I think that it works. There are plenty of African American Muslim men out there, but most are already married. This is because marriage is half of their *deen*. Marriage gives them and us an outlet for sexual desires that is *halal*. This helps us focus on our *deen*…. I think that, especially in the African American community, where marriageable black men are basically gone, polygamy could be a needed option… The sister is in school and I have time away from the kids and a husband. I travel and work. We have children that understand Islam and value women because they see the incredible strength that we have.

Through these examples, Jamillah's narrative indicates that in a community where there is a dearth of African American men in general, because of the political and social ramifications of

slavery and the fact that a large majority of African American men are imprisoned, as well as a lack of single Muslim men, because they are urged to marry, polygamy could be a needed option for the exercising of agency through marriage.

Jamillah's narrative makes problematic the way that polygamy is usually viewed as an oppressive form of marriage that subjugates women and deprives them of their agency. If the creation of *taqwa*, that is piety or a loving fear of Allah (swt), is one of the ultimate goals for both Muslim men and Muslimahs, then polygamy can result in a strengthened body, able to perform various acts that build agency simultaneously through its very multiplicity. In addition, Jamillah's story argues that polygamy offers Muslimahs the ability to produce into being one of the highest forms of agency creation in Islam: the killing of self.[51]

In Islam, the killing of self is one of the hardest acts to perform and suffering or struggle is considered to be a part of its performance. In order for it to be successful, the individual must release to its attachments in and to this world. This is likened to what a person must do in Islam when a loved one has died. After the death of a loved one:

> the devout Muslim is required *to let go*...[Through this act], the devout Muslim seeks to cultivate virtue and repudiate vice by a constant awareness of his or her own earthly finitude, trying to achieve the state of equilibrium that the Qur'an calls an-nafs al mutma'inna, "the self at peace.[52]

This killing of self is something that Jamillah claims to have experienced through her performance of *sabr* in the embracement of polygamy.

At the same time that Jamillah's narrative renders liberal views of polygamy problematic, Naeemah's narrative gives us an alternate view that could re-enliven the debate. Naeemah initial

[51] Here I mean of course the killing of the nafs, and specifically the lower self.
[52] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 91.

reason for seeking marriage was that she wanted to be on her own and be independent. She states:

> I got married at age seventeen. I wanted to get married, not because I wanted to have sex, but rather because I thought it would make me a stronger Muslim and I really wanted my own household and independence because at the time I was living with my sister.

After getting married she found that she was still in the same living situation as before, but now married. She and her daughter were also "not provided for equally" as is dictated in the Qur'an and the *shariah*. This was largely due to the fact that her husband "couldn't afford two families," a fact that Naeemah was "not informed of" before the marriage. Naeemah eventually seeks and obtains a divorce after having lived with her sister for four and a half years.

Naeemah's experience with polygamy was unfortunate and in some ways reflects some other accounts of African American Muslim women's experience with polygamy.[53] That four out of the nine Muslimahs in this study had participated in polygamy, and six out of the nine had the option approached as a topic in marriage—either by themselves or their partners, speaks to its position of potential viability for Muslims the African American Sunni community. Unfortunately, the same reasons that make it viable in this community also render its successful performance daunting. Muslimahs seek marriage in an effort to attain companions in worship and a certain level of financial support. However, in many ways, a large majority of African American men are still reeling from the social effects of not having access to economic opportunity. This makes any marriage in the African American Sunni community in Islam, monogamous or polygamous-very hard. Thus of course the performance of polygamy, which requires enough economic solidity to support more than one spouse, is exceptionally mentally and emotionally demanding.

---

[53] See Moxley Rouse's chapter "Performing Gender" in *Engaged Surrender* and Dannin's, Black Pigrimage to Islam.

But before Naeemah is dismissed, labeled with her own brand of false consciousness and rendered an unknowing participant in a form of a situated patriarchy of oppression, I would like to revisit her reasons for marriage and what she states she gained through its performance. She said that she thought marriage would make her a better Muslim and that she wanted her own house and a level of independence. That she sought 'independence' through marriage is interesting given that marriage in Islam in and of itself fosters a dependency, as has been thoroughly outlined above.

However, the *type* of dependency that it fosters is relevant here. Marriage encumbers a dependency upon one's mate or *zawj* (and through extension, in some ways the *umma*), but not a dependency in general. In this way, the other that an individual is dependent upon in an Islamic marriage is just an extension of themselves. This is likened to a prosthesis utilized by a person who "makes the body modifiable by deliberate, voluntary transformation, thereby leading to the multiplication of new spheres of decision making." The prothesis is not separate from the body, but *is* the body, extending "the body's agency into otherness."[54]

Understanding marriage in this way helps make sense of Naeemah's statement of seeking independence through its performance. Seeing that she was living with family members, marriage would have given her a sense of independence. That she sought it in polygamy is also quite understandable because she saw polygamy as a *sought after* form of marriage:

> my father had many wives and children in his lifetime. I believe the overall total of women was twelve, but I'm not sure. Anyway, when he died, he was married to two, my mother and Sister Sabriya. I was four when my father died. My mother remarried not long after my father's death and Sister Sabriya did the same. Both of them remarried into polygamy. Growing up, I saw them be very close; they were (and are) very good friends. The both also seemed to get along with their co-wives. I never saw any arguments or fights, but I was child, so maybe I was just unaware. Whatever the case, polygamy seemed like a normal marriage option that women chose again and again.

[54] Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture*, pg 18.

As her narrative indicates, Naeemah looked for independence and growth through a form of marriage with which she was familiar and that she felt was normal and productive.

Her belief that she would become a better Muslim is also well founded and indeed, for her, becomes manifested. As I have already shown, Muslimahs believe that marriage helps in the creation and maintenance of *taqwa*. Naeemah claims that she experienced this:

> marriage also helped me understand and appreciate being more pious. It makes life easier in that manner because you don't have to worry about other men approaching you and you don't worry about other men. I can say that while I was married, I was frustrated, but I also grew tremendously spiritually. I learned simple Arabic, started studying more, and grew closer to Allah (swt).

Naeemah's spiritual growth through marriage is a form of agency that she strove for and attained. The statement that her husband was "spiritually strong" and helped her attain and effect certain forms of spiritual and moral agency causes "pause" especially when the dictate that the husband must 'provide equally' is interpreted in various ways. With what must he provide equally?

Naeemah's narrative illustrates that material agency does not override spiritual forms of agency. But at the same time it does underscore an important point: the spiritual cannot be effected without the 'able' body. This body does not have to be able in the sense that it must be independent, individual, whole, or even complete, but in the context in which it performs and for which it performs, it must be *able*. Structures in Islam like marriage are put into place in order to make the body able, even if that ability only happens through dependence and (dis)ability.

In Naeemah's case, she found herself unable to continuously perform her spirituality in an emotionally and physically taxing environment:

> I live in dunya[55] right now and it is not acceptable for us to be unnecessarily treated unequally in this world. There must be a balance. Strive for what will be important in the afterlife, but know that if you do not take care of yourself in this world, you may not be able to adequately prepare yourself for the next one. This is also a part of spirituality. If your daily life prevents you from doing what you need to do for your afterlife then you have to find a way to be able to take care of yourself in this dunya. Allah (swt) knows this and although divorce is frowned upon it is an option that you can take and still be on the straight path.

Finding herself in this situation, she divorced[56] her husband. But since divorce, although strongly discouraged, is considered at times a necessity and something sanctioned in the Quran, Naeemah's actions result in another form of ethical agency, not only on her behalf but also on the behalf of her umma.

Naeemah's divorce manifests ethical agency because marriage in Islam is an individual and a *social* contract that stipulates the implementation of ethical and moral behavior as a religious requirement to safeguard the integrity of marital, family, and communal relationships making this implementation an essential part of the system of Islam. Just as the individual who becomes Muslim has an ethical obligation to the community, as explained earlier through the concepts of *Tawheed* and *khalifah*, all individuals who marry within Islam agree to develop themselves spiritually and morally and fulfill their social responsibility of developing the public good. This responsibility is shared by all in the marriage. If the basic tenets, agreed to in the marriage contract, are not upheld by either party without just cause, then that party's behavior is unethical, both to the other party and the community.

Given the stories of Minah, Jamillah and Naeemah, I would like to give a further analysis on the performance of marriage in Islam by African American Sunni women. African American Sunni women, by embracing the gendered structure of marriage in Islam and particularly by

---

[55] dunya means world, or physical reality.
[56] It is important here to note that Naeemah and her husband adhered to Maliki school of thought in Islam, which enables women to initiate divorce on the grounds of lack of support.

practicing polygamy, have been deemed as performing within an oppressive and patriarchal institution. Patriarchy has historically been regarded as an institution that "disadvantages women" either through the way that men are given the "economic and sexual power" or the "legal power over women."[57] While I do not negate that through structure of Shariah, men are given economic and legal power over women, I do believe that the women's narratives above caution the common belief that all women in Islam are automatically disadvantaged because men are given this power. As these Muslimahs construct their marriages into being, they are also constructing the structure of that marriage. In a community and culture where women have historically held more economic value, so to speak, than their men, they are drawn to discourses that hold men accountable for financial forms of support. In short, the Muslimah's in this study *want* these men to have this power. They also seek agency in the form of marriage itself, a partnership of dependence that historically has been either unattainable or unreachable. For many Muslimahs, marriage is wanted, but the idea that Islam offers a template for the parameters of the marriage, in legal, social, moral, and ethical forms, that is most attractive.

Considering the circumstances of Muslimahs in the African American community, a community that historically has been structured more like a matriarchy than a patriarchy, we have to reconsider whether the performance and arrangement of marriage in this community is patriarchal. Like Denize Kandiyoti states, there are other ways "of talking about the articulation between Islam and different systems of male dominance, which are grounded in distinct material arrangements between genders" without "imprecisely label[ing it] with the blanket term *patriarchy*.[58] While these Muslimah's marriages may be structured in gendered relations that may not be equal, these Muslimahs are not necessarily looking for gender equality. What they

[57] Gerder Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, pg. 212-214
[58] Denize Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," pg. 220-221.

are seeking is spiritual, ethical, and moral equality that translate into gendered relations that are hierarchal. Additionally, although these women may construct gendered relations in the social sphere, these relations exist in hierarchies, not *a* hierarchy, as within marriage, these African American Muslimahs still hold many forms of power, like financial power in Latifah's case and legal power in Naeemah's. They also use tafsir to interpret doctrines which allow for "patriarchal bargains . . . which determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts."[59]As these contexts shift, so too does gender hierarchy and ideology

If Muslimahs are *able* to attain individual, social, and communal desires and needs in a form that may be gendered but not necessarily singularly hierarchal, in addition to ethical, moral, and spiritual desires and needs that are not unequal, gendered, or hierarchal, is marriage in the African American Sunni community necessarily a patriarchal institution? I think that the looseness to which patriarchy is an automatically ascribed formation in which African American Sunni muslim women live their lives needs to be reevaluated, especially considering the framework above, in order to render it problematic. Doing so will go a long way in disentangling the knots that have held together notions of powerlessness, subordination, and lack of agency of African American Sunni women who choose to embody certain Islamic practices.

As these excerpts and narratives reveal, African American Sunni women embrace Islamic norms in regards to dress, marriage, and relationships for varying reasons. *Hijab*, as dress, conduct, and spacial creation is seen as a way of developing tawqa and modesty, as well as maintaining that modesty through specific acts and performances. Marriage is performed also at these intersections. Muslimahs seek marriage to make the performance and maintenance of

[59] Ibid, pg.223.

spiritual and moral virtues easier. At the same time how marriage it performed is influenced by varying individual, communal, and sociopolitical factors.

However, ‘wearing’ *hijab* and the performance of marriage are not sporadic or transitory, but are embodied and negotiated and renegotiated over time and through daily acts. More importantly, the way that *hijab* and marriage are constructed above is not only through the body, but also through a body that is gendered. Because the ability of the gendered body is different, the gendering of this embodiment makes it easier to effect spiritual and moral forms of agency but also speaks to functional and social needs of the individuals involved. Thus spiritual and social agency in the form of *hijab* and marriage takes place at varying intersections of performance.

In this chapter I have shown that, through constructing Islamic feminine norms, women in Islam are able articulate and rearticulate Islamic moral ideals while at the same time create agency in their material lives. Since embodiment is performed and agency enacted at the intersections where Islamic spiritual norms and ideals and the cultural norms of gender merge, embodiment and agency are simultaneously complicit in and alternative to ideological norms. In addition, there can be multiple gendered norms employed in the same culture, as well as movement by African American Sunni women across cultures, further mobilizing identificatory forms of agency.

CHAPTER 4.

Conclusion: Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Research

Over the years, I have felt a particular frustration at the dearth of information available about African American Sunni women, not just in academia but in the public sphere in general. As a member of this community, I know that this frustration is shared by other Muslimahs who feel that our experiences have either been erased as not pertinent or collapsed into other categories in which our view or knowledges have not been represented. Muslim women in general have been portrayed as oppressed, silent, submissive to male dominance, homogenous, and victimized. African American Muslim women in particular have been portrayed as caught up in a paradox of liberatory oppression, existing in their own special kind of patriarchy in the guise of liberation.

In doing this research, I positioned African American Sunni women as producers of knowledge, and in doing so, made available narratives sculpted in their own words which aim to undo representations and 'well intentioned' analyses that perpetuate this view of African American Sunni women. My attempt here is not to be a spokesperson, but to offer their narratives as rich literary texts to be explored, as well as to give my own exploration of them. This research was limited mainly by time and scope, and thus stands as a preliminary analysis of the embracement of Islam by African American Sunni women and their enactment of embodied agency. This limitation also affected the amount of material that could be included in this analysis, as I have only used a small fraction of the narratives produced by just over half of the women in this project. The narratives that I have included, as well as the questions that they evoke, are now available for future researchers and inquiries.

One thing I would like to make clear: special emphasis has been given to agency, and particularly how spirituality effects various forms of embodied agency. This does not mean that I negate the experience of male domination, oppression instituted through cultural manifestations of Islam, or gender manipulation and injustice due to binding and suppressive interpretations of *Shariah* felt by African American Sunni women. In fact, I acknowledge this. However, I also acknowledge that in order to truly understand how African American Sunni women view certain forms of injustice or inequity, the frameworks and contextual realities in which they ascertain justice, equity, and agency must first be understood.

The chapters in this thesis are my first attempt at both presenting these frameworks and offering examples of how African American Sunni women use them to create empowerment. In chapter two, I illustrated how African American Sunni women are religiously and spiritually diasporic by showing how they use Islamic rituals derived from Quran, *Sunnah*, and *hadith* to testify conversion by shaping and living their everyday lives according to these texts. Through acts of testifying, these women effect the creation of multiple 'bodies' that enact multimodal forms of agency in various forms and contexts, disproving the belief African American Sunni women only enact agency through resistance. In doing this, I have included the women whose narratives appear herein conversations concerning how Muslim women negotiate embodied agency in religious and spiritual diasporic locations, conversations in which, to date, they have been rendered absent.

My purpose in chapter three was to illustrate how the creation of moral and spiritual forms of agency is formed in a dialectic with social forms of agency. Muslimahs actually choose to construct into being gendered forms of embodiment through the performance of *hijab* and marriage. The Muslimahs in this study consider these gendered embodiments the perfected way

to attain the feminine divine while at the same time enable them to enact individual, communal, and exterior forms of agency. The way that the feminine divine is embodied is a response to contextual factors in the environment in which the Muslimah lives and performs.

This research explicates how African American Sunni women's agency cannot simply be explained according to how they either comply with or subvert social norms. Instead these texts by African American Sunni women illustrate how embodiment and agency should be seen as contextual, constantly moving, and relational. This view explodes the dichotomous view of how agency either consolidates or subverts structure and offers instead, through an understanding of African American Muslim women daily practices, a framework that illustrates how women in multiple and shifting spaces can enact nomadic constructions of embodiment and agency. I do not offer this as the only framework in which African American Sunni women construct and live their lives. It is, however, an effort to expands our understandings of African American Sunni women and, and it begs for further analysis of the way these women understand Islam and claim it as their own.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abraham, Sameer and Barbara C. Aswad. "The Southbend: An Arab Muslim Working-Class Community." *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, ed., Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983. 163-184.

Abu-Laban, Baha. "The Canadian Muslim Community: The Need for a New Survival Strategy." *The Muslim Families in North America*, eds., Earle H. Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regula Qureshi. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991.75-92.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Romance of Resistance." *American Ethnologist* 17.1 (1990): 41-55.

Ahmed, Nilufer, Gladis Kaufman, and Shamim Naim. "South Asian Families in the United States: Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian Muslims." *Family and Gender among American Muslims*, eds., Barbara C. Aswad and Barbara Bilge. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 155-172.

Alidou, Ouseina. *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Ali, Kecia. "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law." In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism,* edited by Omid Safi, 163 – 189. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003.

---. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflection on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

Anwar, Etin. *Gender and Self in Islam*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Anway, Carol L. "American Women Choosing Islam." *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*,

eds., John L. Esposito and Yvonne Y. Haddad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 145-160.

Asad, Talal. Formations of the Secular. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Aswad, Barbara. "Arab Muslim Families in the United States." *Middle Eastern Diaspora Communities in America,* ed., Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Alison Feldman. New York: Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, 1996. 64-76.

--- and Barbara Bilges. *Family and Gender among American Muslims: Issues Facing Middle Eastern Immigrants and Their Descendants*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

Awde, Nicholas, trans. and ed. *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur'an and Hadīths.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Barlas, Asma. *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

Bukhari, [Muhammad b. Isma'il]. *Translation of Sahih Bukhari.* Translated by M. Muhsin Khan. http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadith*sunnah*/bukhari/ (accesed Arpril 4, 2009).

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

---.*Bodies that Matter***:** *On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Chittick, William. *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts*. New York: SUNY Press, 1992.

---. *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Arabis Cosmology*. New York: SUNY Press, 1998.

Collins, Patricia Hill. “Learning from the Outsider Within.” *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader,* eds., Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, Lydenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Cornell, Vincent. ed. *Voices of Islam: Voices of Tradition and Voices of Spirit.* Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007.

Dannin, Robert. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam.*New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Diouf, Sylviane A. “The West African Paradox.” In *Muslim’s Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations,* edited by Zahid H. Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmad, and John L. Esposito, 268 – 295. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004

Engineer, Asgharali. *The Rights of Women in Islam*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

Esposito, John. “Muslims in America or American Muslims?” *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, eds., John L. Esposito and Yvonne Y. Haddad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 3-19.

Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid Muhammad. *Al-Ghazzali on Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong.* Translated by Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam. Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2002.

Glasse, Cyril. *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. *Not Quite American?: The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004.

--- .*Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 2006.

--- and Jane Smith. *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002.

Hale, Sondra. *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism as a site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 575-99.

Huag, Frigga, et al. *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory.* Trans. Erica Carter. London: Verso, 1987.

IMAN, http://inamcentral.org/about.html (accessed January 26, 2009).

Izutzu, Toshihiko. *Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Iman and Islam.* Salem, NH: Ayer Co. Publ., 1980.

Jaggar, Allison, ed. *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007.

Jawad, H. A. *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1998.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective" *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader,* eds., Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, Lydenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.219-235.

Kaplan, Karen. "The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice.: In *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices,* edited by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 137 – 152. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Karim, Jamillah. "Between Immigrant Islam and Black Liberation: Young Muslims Inherit

Global Muslim and African American Legacies." *The Muslim World* 95.4 (October 2005): 497-513.

---. "Through Sunni Women's Eyes: Black Feminism and the Nation of Islam." *Souls Journal* 8.4 (Fall 2006): 19-30.

---. "To Be Black, Female, and Muslim: A Candid Conversation about Race in the American *Umma*h." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26.2 (August 2006): 225-233.

Khan, M. A. Muqtedar. "A Memo to American Muslims." *Ijtihad: A return to Enlightenment,* October 5, 2001. http://www.ijtihad.org/memo.htm (accessed September 23, 2008).

Khan, Shahnaz. *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

---. *.Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora*. Ontario, Canada: Women's Press, 2002.

King, Deborah K. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: the Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 293 – 317. New York: New Press, 1995.

Kugle, Scott Alan. *Sufis & Saints Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, & Sacred Power in Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Lal, Jayati. "Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and 'Other' in Living and Writing Text." *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader,* eds., Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, Lydenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Lury, Cynthia. *Prosthetic Culture:Photography, Memory, and Identity*. New York: Routlegde, 1998.

Maguire, Daniel. *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Mahmood, Saba. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology*. 6.2 (2001) 202-236.

---. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005. 38-53.

McCloud, Aminah Beverly. *African American Islam*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam.* Translated by Mary Jo Lakeland. Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1991.

Moghissi, Haideh. "Away from Home: Iranian Women, Displacement, Cultural Resistance and Change." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30.2 (1999a): 207-217.

---. "Émigré Iranian Feminism and the Construction of Muslim Woman." *Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives*, ed., Alena Heitlinger. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999b. 189-207.

---."Diaspora of Islamic Cultures: Continuity and Change." *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees* 21.2 (February 2003): 114-119.

---. "Introduction." *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, ed., Haideh Moghissi. New York: Routledge, 2005.

---. *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture, and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Moore, Kathleen. "The *Hijab* and Religious Liberty: Anti-Discrimination Law and Muslim Women in the United States." *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, eds., Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 105-127.

Moxley Rouse, Carolyn. *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*. Berkeley:

University of California Press, 2004.

Mubasaheer Majeed, Debra . "Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church." *Deeper Shades of Purple*: *Womanism in Religion and Society,* ed., Stacey Floyd-Thomas. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Murata, Sachiko. *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.

---. and William C. Chittick. *The Vision of Islam*: New York: Paragon House, 1994

Muslim [b. al-Hajjaj al –Qushayri]. *Translation of Sahih Muslim.* Translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui. http:www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadith-*sunnah*/Muslim/ (accessed February 11, 2008).

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Ideals and Realities of Islam.* San Francisco: Aquarian, 1994.

Qureshi, Saleem. “The Muslim Family: A Scriptural Framework.” *Muslim Families in North America*, ed., Earle H. Waugh, Sharon M. Abu-Laban, and Regula Qureshi. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1991. 32-67.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline and Janet Holland. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and choices*. London: Sage, 2002.

Reinhartz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Rouse, Carolyn Moxley. *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Islam: An Introduction.* Albany, NY: State University of New York

Press, 1992.

---. *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam.* New York: Continuum, 1997.

Scott, Joan. "The Evidence of Experience." *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader,* eds., Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, Lydenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Simmons, Gwendolyn Zoharah. "African American Islam as an Expression of Converts' Religious Faith and Nationalistic Dreams and Ambitions." *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed., Karen van Nieuwkerk. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

---. "Are We Up to the Challenge The Need for a Radical Re-Ordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women." In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism,* edited by Omid Safi, 233 – 248. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.

Stowasser, Barbara. "Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur'an Interpretation." In *Islam, Gender, and Social Change,* edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, 30 – 44. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

---. *Women in the Quran, Traditions, and Interpretation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Torab, Azam. "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Association* 2.2 (1996): 235-52.

---. *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd, 1992.

---. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

Wehrs, Donald. *Islam, Ethics, and Revolt: Politics and Piety in Francophone West African and Maghreb Narrative.*Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008.

Van Doorn-Harder, Pieternella. *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Van Nieuwkerk, Karen, ed. *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

abaya: head covering for Muslim women
adhan: call to prayer
alhamdulillah: "Praise belongs to God."
allahu akbar: "God is Greatest."
arham: mercy
as-salamu alaykum: "Preace be upon you."
ayat: sign; Qur'anic verse
baraqat: prosperity and progress
bida: innovation of faith and practice; deviation from tradition
chador: traditional *hijab* for women
dawah: call to Islam, propagating the faith, activities involving social welfare
deen: religion
dhikr: remembrance of Allah, Sufi practice of repeating Allah's name in order to increase God consciousness, spiritual chanting
eid al –adha: festival on the last day of the *hajj*
eid al – fitra: festival following Ramadan
fatihah:
fard: obligatory
hadith: narrative relating the deeds and words of the Prophet and his companions
hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of the faith
halal: lawful, permissible
haram: forbidden, prohibited, unlawful
haqq: truth
hijab: veil, partition curtain, separation, screen
hijabi: coined word for a woman wearing *hijab*
hijra: migration of Muslims fleeing from Mecca to Medina in 622 a.d.
ijma: consensus, community agreement, and a source of Islamic law
ijtihad: reinterpretation; in reference to Islamic modernization
imam: leader of prayers
Islam: submission to God
islam: first state of Islam
jahiliya: the time of ignorance; pre-Islam Arabia
jallabiyah: Arab overgarment
janazah: cleansing ritual and preparation for the deceased
jannah: paradise
jihad: struggle for purity and in defense of the faith; inner struggle to attain the state of the 'soul at peace'
jilbab: traditional Middle Eastern robe/dress
jumah: Friday
khimar: women's scarf in islam; covers head, neck, and shoulders
khutbah: Friday sermon
lailat al_ qadr: night of power
ma sha' Allah: a statement made to recognize God's blessings, literally, "God willed it"
*masjid (*plural *masajid)*: place for prayer and worship, mosque

muhajjabah: women who wear *hijab*
Muslim: one who submits to God
Muslima: Muslim woman
nafs: common origin of all mankind, selves, soul
niqab: face veil
nisaa: woman
rahak: prostrations for prayer
Ramadan: month the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and month for fasting
rijal: man
sadaqah: almsgiving beyond the obligatory *zakat*
salams: Islamic greetings of peace
salat: daily prayer, one of the five pillars of the faith
salatul-asr: late afternoon prayer
salatul-fajr: early morning prayer
salatul-isha: might prayer
salatul –maghrib: evening prayer
salatul-suhr: early afternoon prayer
salat-ut-taravih: prayer during Ramadan
sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam: "May God bless him and grant him peace," salutations to the Prophet Muhammad
sannatu-muakkadah: prayers offered by the Prophet on occasion, no required but encouraged
sawm: fasting, abstaining from food from sunup to sundown, particularly during Ramadan; one of the five pillars of the faith
shahadah: witness of faith spoken when one converts and during the daily call to prayer; one of the five pillars of the faith
shaitan: satan
shariah: Islamic jurisprudence
shirk: associating other gods and idols with Allah, polytheism
shura: consultation
sitr: curtain
subhanahu wa ta'ala: glorified and exalted
Sufism: a dimension of Islamic tradition that can refer to a spectrum of ideologies and practices including mysticism, pilgrimage to the tombs of saints, focus on inward worship, purification of the heart, spiritual brotherhoods, and allegiance to a spiritual teacher.
suhur: predawn meal during Ramadan
Sunnah: custom, practices of the Prophet Muhammad
Sunni: referring to the dominant group of global Muslims in regard to practice and theology, particularly used to distinguish mainstream African American Muslims from Muslims in the Nation of Islam
sura: chapter in the Qur'an; division of the faith
ta'aruf: coming to know one another
tafsir: religious interpretation of texts in Islam
tajwid: the science of Qur'anic recitation
taqlid: adopting an Islamic legal school
taqwa: God consciousness, the desire to please Allah
tasawwuf: Sufism

tawhid: the oneness of God, monotheism
tawil: mystical or esoteric interpretation of religious texts in Islam
tazkiyyah: purification of the soul
ummah: community, nation
wali: matchmaker
wudu: ritual cleansing
zakat: almsgiving, alms, 2.5 percent tithe levied on wealth, one of the five pillars of the faith
zawj: mate, spouse