Introduction

We were seven brown-complexioned women, each of us covered in vibrantly colored head scarves: pink, green, yellow, blue, and white. Together we sat in Husna’s living room, our feet dangling from her posh white sofas onto carpet posing as silk clouds. In her condo on Chicago’s North Side, a unique mix of women met regularly to study Arabic: one African American, one Pakistani, three Puerto Ricans, and one Eritrean. I was a one-time visitor, but I immediately fit in. I too donned a hijab (hair covering) and could have easily been mistaken for Husna’s sister, both of us women of African descent. It was a great example of the diversity of American Muslims and the connection of our common ideals and pursuits shaping a cross-ethnic community.

But to this picture-perfect gathering, I brought questions that quickly revealed racial divisions among American Muslims, more so than I had anticipated. The questions started during a discussion by Shantesa (African American), Sanjana (Pakistani), and Husna (Eritrean). The Arabic lesson had ended more than an hour ago, but the women’s conversation continued. They were talking about what it meant to be Muslim in America after September 11, 2001. Race came up as much as religion did, as they constantly referred to their status as both religious and ethnic minorities in a majority-white society. Slightly shifting the conversation to race relations within the Muslim community, I turned to Shantesa to ask her whether she felt comfortable as an African American woman attending the majority-Indian and Pakistani mosque where she and Husna had first met. She admitted that she generally felt unwelcome and described the immigrant women as distant toward her in their demeanor and gestures. As a consequence, she had decided to attend that particular mosque only during Ramadan because then, she stated, “I know more African Americans will be there.” Shantesa can go to a mosque “anywhere in Chicago,” and if there is only one other African American woman in attendance, Shantesa guaranteed, “At some point during my visit there, she will make an attempt to
know me.” As a result, Shantesa searches for African American sisterhood during her mosque visits to majority-immigrant Muslim spaces.

Husna adamantly rejected Shantesa’s position and approach. “This is not like a church: you go and you don’t feel welcome and then you switch churches. Islam isn’t like that. When I am at the masjid [mosque], I don’t see Pakistani or Indian or Arab, [only Muslim].”

“It is supposed to be like that in practice,” Shantesa rejoined. But in reality, she asserted, the attitude of immigrant women is more like this: “Yes, you are Muslim, you are welcome here, but you are African American.” After giving a woman “the initial salams [Islamic greetings of peace], when I try to talk to her, it is always like, well, why are you talking to me? It goes on even in this class, that constant feeling that I’m the only African American sister.”

When Sanjana responded to Shantesa, she was as unsympathetic as Husna. She dismissed the discrimination by attributing it to Shantesa’s perception, telling her that because of her “stress” on race, she had already made up her mind that immigrant Muslims would discriminate against her. After all, Sanjana concluded, “I should be the one feeling out of place in this class really, don’t you think? I’m the only desi [person of South Asian descent]. Everybody else here is of African descent. But I don’t feel out of place because I’m here to learn, and I am going to learn despite who is in the class.”

Sanjana and Husna declared that Shantesa was wrong to let her feelings prevent her from attending the majority-immigrant mosque. “You think African American Muslim sisters should get together and have a little party?” asked Husna. “No! All Muslim sisters. That is what I call the sisterhood. We are bonded by one thing, Islam.” But Shantesa held her ground, determined to argue her case:

I welcome sisterhood, especially African American, because my experience as an African American will always be distinct from yours, though I know Islam does not say that it should be. My reality is that I will always be viewed differently from you. You will always be seen in some way as a Muslim first, as an Eritrean Muslim, as an Asian Muslim. On the other hand, I will be viewed first as an African American in this country, and in whichever masjid we go, and in a way filled with negative connotations and looked down and shunned.1

Shantesa is a convert to Islam, and like many other American converts, she once thought that becoming Muslim meant joining a religious
sisterhood and brotherhood with people from countless ethnic backgrounds, in which the bond of religion superseded ethnic affiliation. This is how it should be, Shantesa now realizes, and this is how it is, Husna insists. How can the two hold such opposing views of Muslim sisterhood? And how realistic is this ideal of Muslim brotherhood and sisterhood in the United States, whose Muslim population is made up of very distinct ethnic groups, where most of the converts are people for whom racial discrimination is a fundamental part of their existence in the United States, and where race divides not only the largest religious institution in America, that is, the church, but also its neighborhoods and schools? Shantesa’s ending soliloquy provides some clues, and, I hope, the rest of this book answers these questions while also presenting detailed accounts, like the one at Husna’s house, of what it means to be a part of the American ummah. In this book, I use the most common meaning of the Arabic word ummah to refer to this group, the Muslim community, as well as its ideal meaning, the global Islamic sisterhood and brotherhood united across racial and ethnic differences.

Since the spread of Islam in African American communities in the mid-twentieth century, people have viewed it as a tradition that overcomes racial divisions. Malcolm X was particularly responsible for presenting ummah ideals as relevant to the American racial context: “America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem.” After traveling to Mecca for the pilgrimage, he stated, “I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.”

Do American Muslims live up to the ideal that Malcolm X envisioned? American Muslim Women is a multilayered, ethnographic account of race relations in the American ummah, told through the voices of African American and South Asian Muslim women. I chose women to tell the stories of the American ummah so as to elevate their voices in the production of knowledge about Islam and Muslim communities, areas otherwise dominated by men. Even though women’s words paint portraits of the American ummah, this book also broadly represents African American and South Asian immigrant Muslim relations in ways that resonate with the experiences of American Muslim men and women.

African Americans and South Asians are two of the largest ethnic Muslim groups in the United States. Drawing on interviews with a diverse group of women from these two communities, this book considers what it means for them to negotiate religious sisterhood in the face of America’s
race and class hierarchies. Race relations in the broader society have created a context in the United States in which African Americans and South Asian immigrants come together in only a few sites. Indeed, South Asians are often held up to African Americans as a “model minority.”

We will explore how in the American Muslim community, or the American ummah, African Americans and South Asians both construct and cross ethnic boundaries, and how women in particular move outside their ethnic Muslim spaces and interact with other Muslim ethnic groups. We will see how Islamic feminist theory can help explain how gender-specific experiences affect how women negotiate ethnic spaces, sometimes motivating them to move beyond their own ethnic boundaries, and at other times causing them to remain within ethnic lines.

America's legacy of racial inequality frames not only race relations in the American ummah but also its ethnic makeup. The struggle to gain equal rights for African Americans introduced thousands of them to Islam, especially through the Nation of Islam, the black nationalist religious movement founded in the 1930s. Even though the majority of Black Muslims later left this movement in the 1970s and turned to global Sunni Islam, the revolutionary pose of the Nation of Islam made a lasting mark on African Americans' perceptions of Islam. Even today, Islam remains in African American communities as a symbol of resistance to antiblack racism.

By opening the way for major Muslim migrations to the United States, the struggle for racial equality shaped an American Muslim identity that was appealing to African Americans while at the same time was profoundly influenced by immigrants. For much of the twentieth century, racist immigration policies favored Western European immigrants. But when the civil rights movement challenged the nation's political and economic exclusion of African Americans, it also created the political climate in which its exclusionary policies toward immigrant nonwhites were questioned as well. With the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the end of national origin quotas ushered in one of the nation's largest waves of non-European immigrants. Of the 18 million immigrants who have been admitted into the country since 1965, more than seven million have come from Asia and the Middle East. Millions of Muslims were included in these numbers.

To be Muslim in America, therefore, means to claim a faith tradition marked by both African American and immigrant struggles. American Muslim demographics indicate the prominence of both experiences. Of the estimated three million to six million Muslims in the United States,
more than one-third are African American converts and their Muslim-born children. Muslim immigrants and their American-born children make up the larger part of what remains. South Asians (consisting of Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) and Arabs are the two largest immigrant groups, each also estimated as one-third of the American Muslim population.

Compared with African Muslim immigrants, who make up only 7 percent of the American Muslim population, affluent Muslims from the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East were more likely to gain entry into the United States after changes in immigration law. The era of civil rights, therefore, formed a unique religious community in the United States, one that links African American Muslim converts to nonblack Muslim immigrants. This book analyzes how Islam links South Asians, the most influential of all American Muslim immigrants, and African Americans, the most influential of all American converts.

**Religion and Race**

The largely African American and immigrant makeup of the American ummah presents an important angle from which to analyze race relations, one that includes race, religion, and immigration. Immigration has broadened our analysis of race in the United States. In an era radically altered by the influx of non-European immigrants, new forms of American racism have developed that extend beyond the black–white color line while simultaneously reinforcing it. This new racism refers to both discrimination directed at nonwhite immigrants and the ways in which immigrant assimilation has led to new structures of antiblack racism. The myth of the model minority, for example, represents a form of disguised racism that achieves new ways to racialize African Americans. By portraying Asian immigrants as hardworking, professional, “model” minorities, these widespread images reinforce racist notions of African Americans as “undesirable” minorities. South Asian immigrants have made very little effort to challenge their model minority status or the unspoken distinction it creates between them and African Americans. Rather, many subscribe to this privileged status to set themselves apart from African Americans. As Vijay Prashad convincingly argues, “Since blackness is reviled in the United States, why would an immigrant, of whatever skin color, want to associate with those who are racially oppressed, particularly when the transit into the United States promises the dream of gold and glory?”
Prashad’s question strikes at the very heart of this book. When Muslim immigrants come to the United States, they also pursue the American dream. What does it mean, then, for them to find that a substantial part of their new ummah is America’s “racially oppressed”? Their shared place in the American Muslim community almost forces South Asian Muslim immigrants to agree to some affiliation with Muslim African Americans, and vice versa. Islam’s emphasis on religious sisterhood and brotherhood, reinforced through its rituals of communal prayer and pilgrimage, also encourages this association, as does American Muslims’ minority religious status. In a non-Muslim society, particularly in post-9/11 America, Muslims are increasingly conscious of not only their religious identity but also the ethnic others with whom they share this identity.

By investigating the extent to which a common religious identity brings together two American ethnic groups not ordinarily linked, we explore “the intersection between racial and religious identities.” Several studies have examined how immigrants navigate racial identity options in the United States, but fewer have analyzed how religious identity impacts the ways in which immigrants choose between black and white. This book, however, looks at how religious identity influences race relations and how race affects religious identity. It asks several questions: What is the meaning of the ummah, or shared religious identity, in a racialized society? In a society in which race matters so much, is it possible for the ummah to become a community that transcends racial divisions? Are South Asians less likely to embrace notions of ummah when African Americans occupy such a large part of it? Or does the ummah identity shift the ways in which South Asians would normally distance themselves from African Americans?

With respect to the last question, in some cases it does. In the 1920s, Indian immigrant Muslim missionaries, the Ahmadiyya, deliberately targeted African Americans in major urban centers like Chicago. Prashad cites this as one of several historical instances of “Afro-Asian” connections in the Americas, showing that indeed, some Asian immigrants refused “to be accepted by the terms set by white supremacy. Some actively disregard them, finding them impossible to meet.” In a society in which African Americans are positioned at the bottom of racial hierarchies, such a connection has two meanings: not simply interethnic solidarity but resistance to racism as well.

Independent of the American context, the concept of ummah has a double meaning of sisterhood and brotherhood and also justice. Several Qur’anic verses link ideals of unity to a common commitment to justice,
that is, Muslims’ hearts joined while standing for what is right and preventing what is wrong (3:103–105). Hadiths (reports of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad)13 amplify this notion of a community both united and just:

A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He neither oppresses him nor humiliates him nor looks down upon him. Piety is here—and he [Prophet Muhammad] pointed to his chest three times. It is evil enough for a Muslim to hold his brother Muslim in contempt. All things of a Muslim are inviolable for another Muslim: his blood, his property, and his honor.14

This double commitment to both brotherhood and sisterhood and justice, I refer to as “ummah ideals.”

Given the inequalities resulting from the legacy of racism in the United States, it is this double commitment that makes ummah ideals also doubly relevant to the American context. “The challenge of America may be less in harmonizing relations among groups than in mobilizing intergroup cooperation into strategies for economic and political advancement. If the national goal is to create harmony, then the struggle must not be just for social peace but for opportunity and equality.”15 Ummah ideals commit to both harmony and equality at the same time. In a society challenged by racial injustices, negotiating Islamic sisterhood and brotherhood thus means negotiating race and class inequalities.

Ethnic Mosques and Other Limits to Ummah Ideals

The American ummah is challenged by race and class inequities, which is most apparent in the institution that best defines American Muslim collective life, the mosque. A study of American mosques conducted in 2000 showed that the two largest ethnic Muslim groups attending mosques, African Americans and South Asians, tended to worship separately. Moreover, when South Asians shared a mosque with another ethnic group, that group tended to be Arab. These findings indicate that immigrants of different backgrounds are more likely to worship together than are immigrants and African Americans. Not only do African Americans generally worship separately from immigrants, but their mosques are usually the least ethnically diverse. Mosques that are truly diverse, that is, composed of multiple ethnic groups evenly represented, constitute only 5 percent of all American mosques.16
These findings on the division between African American and immigrant Muslims match my personal perceptions growing up as a Muslim in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I grew up as a Sunni African American Muslim and was never part of the Nation of Islam, my parents once were. They followed the Honorable Elijah Muhammad until his death in 1975. In the footsteps of his son and successor, Imam W. D. Mohammed, my parents arrived at global Islam and traded their “X” for “Karim.” I was born a year later. While I was growing up, my family attended the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, a Sunni mosque community with roots in the Nation of Islam.

For most of my childhood in the 1980s, Atlanta had three other major mosques, all of them within a fifteen-minute drive of one another and all of them majority–African American except the one downtown. In my community, the downtown mosque was referred to as the “immigrant masjid.” Although a range of ethnic groups attended it, South Asians had the largest numbers. During the month of Ramadan, when Muslims strive to live up to Islamic ideals of unity, members of my mosque would visit the downtown mosque. More than anything else, what struck me as most different about the immigrant mosque was that the women did not share the main prayer hall with the men. Instead, we sat downstairs and, unable to see the imam (prayer leader), listened to him from speakers. I preferred the gender arrangements at my masjid, where the women sat behind the men but still could see and hear the imam. As an adolescent, I imagined that this was the better way. I preferred a mosque like mine, whose gender boundaries were not as rigid.

Our visits to the downtown mosque were few and far between. Not until my undergraduate years in the mid-1990s at Duke University as a member of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) did I interact with Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds. After our Friday MSA meetings, I would have ice cream with friends whose parents were from Pakistan and Iran. Or I would have tea at a Turkish café with a friend whose family had fled from Bosnia for refuge in the United States. Or I would attend a “girls’ party” where we ate Malay, Egyptian, and Palestinian dishes and indulged in white chocolate macadamia nut cheesecake for desert. Time and again, I had positive experiences, having never experienced as warm, generous, and abundant hospitality as that which my new Muslim peers seemed to have learned from their parents’ Muslim cultures. I also learned differences that took time to adjust to, like the way in which men and women sat separately in social gatherings.
Through these new friendships, I realized more than ever before that my upbringing had uniquely shaped my identity and sense of purpose as an American Muslim. Like my second-generation American Muslim friends, that is, young Muslims born in the United States to immigrant parents, I grew up practicing Sunni Islam, but not without reminders of my heritage and history as an African American. Along with the lessons of the Prophet Muhammad’s legacy, my family and community instilled in me an attachment to the legacy of African American people. In the halls of Clara Muhammad Elementary and W. Deen Mohammed High, the private schools linked to my mosque community, we memorized and recited the Qur’an in Islamic studies class and memorized and recited the poetry of Sojourner Truth and Langston Hughes in English class. Our teachers and elders reminded us of the higher jihad (struggle), the personal struggle to develop a Muslim character, but also taught us about community jihad, the struggle to contribute positively to the world around us. Naturally, we saw our community jihad, or African American struggle, as a Muslim cause.

From my second-generation American friends, I also learned that others regarded Muslim struggles as something entirely different. My Muslim friends at Duke focused on struggles abroad, believing that Muslims in the United States needed to support Muslims suffering in Palestine, Bosnia, and Kashmir. I accepted these as legitimate struggles for which I should show some concern. But I also found that many of my peers were not willing to see the African American cause as a “Muslim” cause. For many of them, a “Muslim” cause was one that had to do with Muslims only. This type of worldview separated me from my second-generation American friends at the same time that our common identity as Muslim students made the connection between us inescapable.

My personal story illustrates how race consciousness has shaped my Muslim identity as well as the lens through which I see and often make judgments about others who share my identity as Muslim. In other words, religion is the lens through which I imagine our sameness, but race is the lens through which I construct our difference. But in addition, as my narrative shows, our ethnic struggles have made us different.

The weight of our distinct ethnic histories in determining possibilities for Muslim unity became even more apparent after 9/11. Some American Muslims thought that a shared fight against anti-Muslim discrimination would unite African American and immigrant Muslims. But the events of September 11, although a major event in the history of American Islam, were only one part of a set of ethnic histories making up the American
Muslim experience. A common Muslim ground remains challenged by our differing ethnic histories.

Through slavery, a civil war, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and a civil rights battle, African Americans have lived through centuries of struggle to achieve respect and full citizenship in the United States. Through the 1965 immigration act, which overturned a series of U.S. laws that excluded Asian migration, South Asian immigrants established a significant educated, professional class in the United States, often praised as a “model minority.” At the same time, their brown skin and accents make them the targets of anti-immigrant sentiments and policies, which intensified after September 11. African Americans’ and South Asians’ very distinct histories and relations vis-à-vis American whites illuminate the limits of ummah ideals in a society struggling with race and class inequalities. Historical and current configurations of U.S. race and class lines place most African American and South Asian immigrant Muslims in different worlds.

My personal assessment of gender space in the immigrant mosque in downtown Atlanta shows too that it is also through the lens of gender that I, and many others in my mosque community, construct differences between African American and immigrant Muslims. To us, gender boundaries characterized the difference between two Atlanta mosques. Conservative gender segregation became the mark of an immigrant mosque, a mark of difference. Gender, therefore, functions as another lens through which we construct racial and ethnic differences in the American ummah.

Interpreting the difference between African American and immigrant Muslims on the basis of mosques’ gender practices represents a feminist perspective, even though members of my mosque do not call it that. It is feminist in that we interpret and subsequently reject gender arrangements in the immigrant mosque that, in our view, have marginalized women. Although most people associate feminism with some form of struggle and strategy to end discrimination against women, definitions of feminism vary, as they are constantly being modified and renamed in accordance with women’s experiences. Islamic feminism, which we discuss later, represents a specific understanding of feminism and is a useful analytical tool that is used to examine how Muslim women formulate notions of gender justice and often negotiate their relations and encounters with other Muslims based on what they consider equitable gender practices.
Notions of gender justice compete within American Muslim communities as well. Many of the women at the immigrant mosque, for example, do not feel marginalized or treated unjustly when they sit outside the main prayer hall, beyond the view of men. In fact, they prefer a partition, curtain, or wall separating them from men, for various reasons, including privacy. The range of women’s preferences correlates with the range of options in gender space in American mosques. As women negotiate these options, they make choices that resist and/or accommodate the mosque communities’ gender norms, all of which we examine in Islamic feminist discourses. Islamic feminist theories, therefore, provide an established, yet expanding, theoretical framework on which this book builds to portray how gender has shaped American Muslim women’s movement across ethnic lines.

Differences within a Common Heritage

Existing racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions demonstrate that the ummah is not united. Over time, differences in ethnicity, language, and religious ideology have always challenged Muslim unity; but Muslims have always subscribed to the ideal of religious brotherhood and sisterhood. Although not always a reality, coming together as a community inclusive of all racial and ethnic groups is an ideal in the consciousness of most American Muslims. “Ummah consciousness” is fostered across ethnic Muslim communities, albeit primarily through the voices of men. In religious lectures, male speakers refer to the ummah and the challenges it faces. Although the challenges vary, the pleas reflect a common commitment: “unite the ummah,” “help our brothers in the ummah,” “build the ummah,” “educate the ummah,” “revive the ummah.”

Several sites in the American Muslim community demonstrate this ideal in practice. Open a copy of Azizah Magazine, a magazine created by and for American Muslim women, and you will see at first hand the variety of American Muslims. Containing articles and photos representing Muslim women of different ethnic backgrounds, Azizah is a symbol of how their shared identity as American Muslims has enabled a forum connecting African American and immigrant Muslims. Other sites reflecting this common identity are Bridges TV, an American Muslim television network that covers a range of ethnic Muslim experiences; ’eid, a religious holiday, and “Muslim Day,” a civic holiday in some cities, which bring together different ethnic Muslims for prayer and celebration; and Muslim
students’ organizations that bring together Muslim students who share a college campus.

Recognizing that Muslims remain conscious of their *ummah* identity—sometimes embodying it even as they experience and reinforce ethnic divisions—requires that we think about the concept of *ummah* dialectically. The *ummah* signifies both a common heritage and new modes of Muslim identity, unity and difference, exchange and conflict, and intra-Muslim networks and interfaith alliances. This is the *ummah* as it always has existed: a vast and vibrant display of Muslim cultural difference reflected as a single, divine vision.19

The American *ummah* represents the unfolding of a common Muslim heritage in a new context, the United States. Just as American Muslims identify with an American lifestyle, they also have inherited and responded to generations of past Muslim communities. However, different ethnic Muslim groups in the United States receive and respond to their common heritage differently, representing the various possibilities for a single loyalty. This space for difference within a common religious commitment is what keeps the prophetic vision relevant across time and space.

The Prophet Muhammad set the precedent for keeping ethnic identity relevant to the *ummah*. When he established the *ummah* in Medina, he brought together Arab Muslims from different tribes and made them brothers and sisters in faith, their new Muslim identity transcending their former loyalties. However, joining the early *ummah* “did not abolish tribal identity; it only changed the hierarchy of an individual’s identities in society. In essence, the tribal identity of the individual was of secondary importance to an *ummah* identity.”20 But the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad still acknowledged other collective identities.

In their notion of “Muslim networks,” Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence captured a common Muslim heritage grounded in difference. Muslim dialogue across generations and across diverse human groups could not occur except through “networks of faith and family, trade and travel.” Elements distinctive to Islam sustain these networks: a shared religious language (Arabic), common ideals inspired by the Qur’an and the precedent of the Prophet, and shared rites, especially the *hajj*, the annual remaking of human community as millions of Muslim pilgrims journey to God’s house in Mecca. These networks, however, connect individuals and communities across vast cultural spaces. A “networked approach” to Islam takes us beyond a common vision and “reveals the radical heterogeneity” of Muslim life. The *ummah* never signifies a single possibility;
rather, it constitutes “multiple contexts where no one identity predomi-
nates.” As Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a well-known scholar of Islam, wrote, “No segment of the Muslim community has a right to claim to be the ummah any more than a segment of a circle could claim circularity.” A “networked epistemology” thus allows us to see unity and difference at the same time.

Through a networked epistemology, that is, through the lens of Muslim networks, we uncover in this book the ways in which women negotiate Islamic sisterhood. Alongside ethnic identity, ummah consciousness persists in the American ummah because of how Muslims of diverse ethnic backgrounds encounter and interact with one another through actual ummah networks. Muslim identity marks a person as a member of the ummah, and Muslim women who wear a hijab are even more likely to be marked as such. With Muslims expected to acknowledge and even greet one another with wishes of peace when they cross paths, visible Muslim identity functions as the primary medium of connection.

Muslims also make ummah connections through real institutions: mosques, schools, homes, and community organizations. Accordingly, any domain in which Muslims dominate in number or influence, I refer to as “ummah space.” Ummah spaces can be public or private. I refer to networks of Muslims and their institutions in the United States as the “American ummah,” and to Muslims and their institutions in a specific locale as a “local ummah.” I use the term “global ummah” to describe moments in which American Muslims connect with other Muslims abroad, while “campus ummah” designates university-based Muslim groups, and “online ummah,” or “cyber ummah,” refers to cyber Muslim networks “at once free of space and bound to place.” I constantly apply modifiers to ummah to emphasize how the context determines how Muslims imagine themselves as a community. These ummah spaces represent not the ideal ummah but the spaces in which Muslims live out the complexities of ethnic Muslim identities as they sometimes reach ummah ideals. Although all these ummah spaces represent the ummah, they show different angles from which to see and imagine it.

Mapping Ummah Spaces: Chicago, Atlanta, and Abroad

The larger social context has a substantial effect on race relations within Muslim communities. As we will see, the geographies of ummah spaces
help determine the ways in which Muslim women negotiate their Islamic sisterhood. In other words, the location of Muslims’ homes, mosques, and social institutions affect Muslim women’s movements across ethnic lines. I chose to research the ummah in two different cities to emphasize that the contours of American Muslim communities, including their ethnic lines, are decided by the surrounding racial and ethnic landscape.

Between 2001 and 2002, I conducted field research in Chicago and Atlanta. Both are important cities in the American ummah: Chicago because it stands as a major center of South Asian Muslim migrations and at the same time holds a unique role in the development of African American Islam, and Atlanta because of its more recent status as a progressive city with an expanding multiethnic population and nationally acclaimed Muslim institutions. I found that relations between African American and South Asian immigrant Muslims in the two cities are more alike than different. Both cities are known to be racially segregated, a fact that is reflected in interethnic Muslim relations in both locations.

What distinguishes the two cities is the vastness of their ummah networks. Mirroring Chicago’s position as a global city, ummah networks there often function beyond the local level, linking up with Muslim communities across the nation and abroad. In contrast, Atlanta’s fame as an international city is more recent. Its ummah networks are more grounded in local Muslim institutions, particularly the mosque. Consequently, the chapters in this book focusing on Atlanta highlight Muslim networks vis-à-vis mosques, whereas the chapters on Chicago feature more national and international ummah linkages illustrating the overlap among local, national, and global ummah networks.

In many ways, Chicago is the capital of the American ummah. It is the home base for a number of American Muslim institutions and organizations with both national and international reputations, including the community of Muslims under the leadership of Imam W. D. Mohammed, or the WDM community (founded in 1975),24 recognised as the largest organized group of African American Muslims. Between 1999 and 2007, the WDM community held its annual national convention in Chicago, bringing thousands of African American Muslims to the city during Labor Day weekend. Every year, this African American Muslim convention has run concurrently with the national convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), another major American Muslim organization. Although its leadership and membership reflect a greater diversity than that of the WDM community, ISNA’s constituency is majority immigrant.
With the exception of 2002, the ISNA convention also was held in Chicago, bringing thousands of Muslims to the city. Chicago contains more than sixty mosques serving an estimated 285,000 Muslims, and the South Asian Muslim community there is one of the most influential in the nation.  

Atlanta, a steadily progressive urban center that has put the American South on the international map, also has an important place in the American ummah, particularly for African American Muslims. Indeed, African Americans across the nation consider Atlanta a “Black Mecca,” and the success of African Americans in Atlanta has returned many African Americans in the North to the South. Atlanta’s reputation for producing and attracting progressive African Americans is reflected in the Muslim community as well, as it is the home of some of the country’s most progressive African American mosque communities. Atlanta has more than thirty-five mosques serving an estimated 75,000 Muslims.  

Ummah networks in Chicago and Atlanta function primarily through mosques, Islamic organizations, and Muslim homes. I refer to these ummah networks as the “Chicago ummah” and the “Atlanta ummah.” Although this book does not cover all the institutions within these extensive local ummahs, it does describe a broad sample of influential Muslim communities and organizations in both cities. In the Chicago ummah, the WDM community is featured along with other African American Sunni Muslims, especially those attending the Inner-City Islamic Center (ICIC). Although this book is a study of Sunni Muslims, it also touches on the Nation of Islam (NOI), given its historic impact on African American Sunni Muslims. At the same time, this book highlights ISNA, the Muslim Community Center (MCC), the Deen Intensive Program (the DIP community), and the Nawawi Foundation, the dominant South Asian communities. Several of these communities also count a substantial number of Arab Muslims and a smaller sample of other ethnic Muslims, including African Americans. Fewer organizations demonstrate substantial inter-ethnic relations, but one group that comes close to this ideal is the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN).  

The mosques in the Atlanta ummah are the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, affiliated with Imam W. D. Mohammed; the Community Masjid, founded by the African American leader Imam Jamil Al-Amin; and Al-Farooq Masjid and Masjid Rahmah, both of them majority–South Asian mosques. Although the population of all these ummah spaces crosses gender and generation, IMAN and the DIP community have more
second-generation members than first-generation members, as does the immigrant-founded Muslim Students Association (MSA), often the axis of campus ummahs.

These organizations create ummah networks not only in the United States but also abroad, linking American Muslims to ummah spaces in Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, and Mauritania. The DIP community, with its emphasis on traditional learning, links American Muslims to a network of madrasahs (schools of traditional Islamic sciences), from the Zaytuna Institute in California, to the madrasah Azzagra in Spain. Young Muslims in the WDM community travel to Syria and Egypt to learn Arabic, where they meet other Muslim students from several other countries, including Malaysia and Australia. Students in the Nawawi program take summer tours to Muslim China, Turkey, and Indonesia. American Muslims visit the website of Islamic Relief Worldwide to donate money to Muslim orphans in the West Bank, Baghdad, and South Sudan.

Various religious approaches also link American Muslims to other sites in the global ummah. American Muslims who value traditional Islamic learning are increasingly connected to one of the four Sunni legal schools (madhhab): Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Hanbali. Following a madhab links them to the parts of the global ummah influenced by their specific legal school. Hanafi law, for example, connects them to Muslims in India and Syria.

Another traditional approach to Islam adopted by a small but growing number of American Muslims is Sufism. This centuries-old Muslim tradition can refer to various 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. Most of the Sufi-influenced women about whom I write are affiliated with the DIP community and tend to emphasize aspects of Sufism related to refining worship and character. Another characteristic of this community is that DIP students tend to follow a madhab in the tradition of past Sufi scholars.27 Sufism links them to places abroad as well as to great Sufi masters of generations past, including the eighth-century Iraqi mystic Rabī’al-‘Adawiyyah.

The Salafi movement, a very modern development compared with Sufism, links American Muslims to Muslims in Saudi Arabia and several other places. Virtually synonymous with the Saudi-based, fundamentalist ideology Wahhabism, Salafi teachings advocate that Muslims return to a pristine form of Islam that exactly replicates the practice of the first three
generations of Muslims. Unlike later generations of Muslims, who are said to have corrupted Islam with cultural influences, the Salafis assert that these early Muslims (the salaf) embodied “true” Islamic practice as taught by the Prophet Muhammad. Restoring the pure practice of this sacred time, the Salafis vigorously reject bid'ah, new religious practices brought later into Islam, which Salafis judge as having no precedent in the Sunnah, or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. This includes rejecting the long-standing traditions of taqlid (following a madhhab) and Sufism. Salafis in the United States tend to disdain American culture, especially when other Muslims talk of cultivating a distinctively American Muslim practice, a notion that the Salafis reject.

Even though the majority of American Muslims do not identify themselves as either Salafi or Sufi or adhere to one of the madhhabs, most are exposed to these and other Islamic perspectives in the global ummah. These perspectives play a dominant role in shaping dialogue and debate about American Muslim identity. Their influence shows how American Muslims connect to a global heritage at the same time that they imagine new possibilities in the American ummah. Chapter 3, especially, shows how these distinct Islamic perspectives affect the way in which American Muslims both reinforce and cross ethnic boundaries.

**Portraying Muslim Women’s Voices: An Islamic Feminist Practice**

Through my lens as an African American Muslim woman scholar, I portray Muslim women through their own voices as they negotiate the Islamic ideal of a united Muslim community. Muslim women’s voices therefore serve as a primary source of Islamic knowledge and Muslim experience. This book focuses on women’s voices to resist the way in which men have overwhelmingly defined and dictated religious thought and understanding. Due to both cultural norms and the fiqih (Islamic jurisprudence) ruling that men lead the Friday congregational prayer, which includes a religious lecture, men’s voices dominate the public discourses in Muslim communities. This imbalance becomes evident in this book, as I rely on Muslim men’s voices to describe these discourses. Although their voices are valuable and essential, revealing women’s production of knowledge is the more important goal of this book.

Although this book commits to women’s voices, it addresses issues that American Muslims face as a community: women, men, and children. As black feminists teach us, women’s lives are affected by myriad struggles:
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race, class, gender, and sexuality. Gender discrimination is “only part of their struggle.” Similarly, Islamic feminists account for the ways in which multiple structures frame Muslim women’s lives, particularly religion. In observance of the ways in which women committed to Islam derive their ideas of gender justice and activism within a framework of faith, scholars have named their thought and practice Islamic feminism, “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.” Islamic feminist discourse is not primarily derived from secular or Western feminism but from Islamic textual sources. Labeling this feminism Islamic underscores that Islam produces gender consciousness. Muslim women do not have to look to other traditions to advocate gender justice.

Like other scholars writing on Islamic feminism, I recognize that many Muslim women choose not to identify themselves as feminists, owing to the multiple meanings that the label feminist evokes, many of which contradict their identities as Muslims. Aware of this concern, miriam cooke, a specialist on Arab and Muslim women, suggests that we view Islamic feminism not as a fixed identity but as a “strategic self-positioning” asserted alongside other speaking positions, such as Muslim, American, black, Asian, and middle class. In this way, we use the term Islamic feminism not to “impose a label of identity upon those who refuse it but simply as a way of identifying what it appears particular actors think and do.” Also, we find that the thought and practice of the women featured in this book are not always motivated by feminist notions of resistance but nonetheless demonstrate important forms of women’s agency that resonate with Islamic feminist practice.

Within this Islamic frame of protest, gender justice is not women’s only concern. Accordingly, this is a book that deals with gender as well as race, class, American Muslim identity, and immigration. As my analysis of ethnic Muslim relations unfolds, these markers of identity appear in and disappear from the center of focus, often intersecting and overlapping. The centrality of Muslim women’s voices, however, remains constant. This commitment to women’s voices not only fosters the female production of knowledge but also reinforces the value of Muslim women’s voices for all community issues. Their thoughts and practices emerge beyond the usual issues of dress and female segregation to their experiences as religious and ethnic minorities in the United States.

The way that I understand and tell the stories of the American ummah represents one among many voices, “a chorus of voices,” telling one of several versions of the same story. My representation of the American
sume the ummah is neither comprehensive nor final. The ummah spaces that I entered and observed, the women whom I encountered and interviewed, and my telling of their stories all reflect my "life world" as Muslim, African American, and female. Like the Muslim women of my study, I have loyalties to certain Muslim groups within the American ummah. I prefer certain mosques to others; I grew up in a certain type of neighborhood; I fit a certain economic profile; and I have acquired a certain level of education. I am one among the chorus of voices telling her story of movement and network across the American ummah. Of course, I am unique because my research required that I move, sometimes interacting with people in the places that I felt most comfortable, and other times having to "get out of my box" and talk with people in places that made me feel out of place. But always my loyalties and identities dictated how I moved, just as the loyalties and identities of other women in the ummah determine how they move and interact.

Where I fall in terms of ethnicity, religious community, generation, and class influenced, though did not solely dictate, the kind of women whom I encountered and included in this study. I tended to identify with African Americans more than South Asian women. But I do not claim that I had an "insider's" perspective that made my work with African American women easy, effortless, or exceptionally authentic. All communities have multiple layers, and therefore multiple voices and perspectives, which means that an insider stands only relatively inside. "One individual can occupy an insider status in one moment and an outsider in another," depending on to whom she is speaking at a given moment in her community. African American Muslim women make up a broad spectrum of experiences, loyalties, and perspectives that sometimes resonated with my experiences and other times did not. Similarly, among the range of South Asian women whom I met, some I related to very well, others I did not. With both ethnic Muslim groups, I was both an insider and an outsider. The more I talked with women, the more I realized that factors other than ethnicity affected my sense of connection with them.

Religious community was one of these factors. Like me, most of the women in this study practice Islam, occasionally if not regularly attend the mosque, and wear the hijab. But even among practicing Muslim women, allegiances to different mosques, American Muslim leaders, and Muslim organizations distinguish us. Initially I used my ties with women in the WDM community to interview African American women. Similarly, I
built on relationships with South Asian women whom I had met through my participation in the DIP community. But to include multiple voices in this ethnography, I ventured beyond familiar communities to meet Muslim women who identified with other American Muslim leaders or organizations. I was not as concerned about the quantity of women I interviewed as much as the range of experiences that could be explored. I identified community norms but always searched for the exceptional, an African American woman attending a predominantly South Asian mosque, for example, or a South Asian woman at a predominantly African American mosque.

Generation is another factor that significantly influenced my relations with Muslim women. The first generation of African American Muslim women consists of women in my mother’s age group, the baby boomers. I refer to them as first generation because the first large wave of African American conversion occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.37 “First generation” means any adults living during that time. Converts in my age group, although technically first-generation Muslims, have more in common with their Muslim-born peers. For this reason, I group them with the second generation, although I account for their convert experiences.

For South Asians, “first generation” refers to immigrants, and “second generation” refers to the children of immigrants. The majority of South Asians immigrated after 1965, during the same period as the mass conversion of African American Muslims. Thus, both groups came to the United States and to Islam, respectively, in early adulthood. The first generation in both ethnic communities consists mostly of middle-aged women (roughly between the ages forty-five and sixty-five), and the second generation generally includes women in their twenties and early thirties.

There was no marked difference between my access to African American elders and peers. Similarly, with South Asians, I found women of both generations accessible; however, I related to my South Asian peers more than to their mothers, since we share a first language and culture. Because my South Asian friends refer to their elders as “Auntie,” I often use this title when writing about them. For first-generation African American Muslim women, I often use the title “Sister” because in African American Muslim communities, we use “Sister” to show respect for our women elders.

Class and education also shaped our relationships. All my South Asian informants come from middle- and upper-income, educated backgrounds. This is primarily explained by the fact that most South Asian Muslims
in Atlanta and Chicago are affluent, especially those in the mosques and universities where I carried out my research. Poor South Asians, mostly recent immigrants, tend to live in ethnic enclaves that I did not consider accessible owing to language, cultural, and class barriers. My class status as an educated professional provided common ground with South Asian women, especially in the second generation with whom I shared university experiences, career goals, research interests, and “study abroad” stories.

Whereas most of my South Asian interaction was limited to middle- and upper-income women, I did spend time with African American Muslim women from a range of class backgrounds. My privilege did not significantly distance me from poor women. Yet for the most part, my African American informants were primarily middle-class or lower-middle-class women who had had access to some educational and cultural resources common among upwardly mobile African Americans.

Although my personal life narrative shapes my ethnography, I conducted my research with techniques that allowed me to gather data, analyze them, and present them in a way that gives an authoritative account of the participants’ perspectives. I interviewed forty-five women and fifteen men in Chicago, and twenty women and ten men in Atlanta. Fewer than half of them are actually cited in this qualitative study. I consider this work a preliminary inquiry into the layers of race relations among American Muslims. The questions I asked and the individuals I interviewed offered perspectives that will be informative and useful for future researchers in the same way that my qualitative research drew from earlier quantitative research, particularly the 2000 mosque study. In other words, my analysis, while not quantitatively exhaustive, is qualitatively insightful. It portrays Muslim women with a richness and detail that reveal what it means to negotiate a religious sisterhood against America’s race and class hierarchies.

My first chapter reinforces this point for the reader, that is, that we must analyze *ummah* ideals in the context of race relations in the larger society, particularly those between immigrants and African Americans. With the influx of Asian and Latino immigrants into the United States, new ethnic identities have been formed and racialized in ways that pit African Americans and immigrants against each other. Racial prejudice against African Americans becomes part of the Americanization process for immigrants, and prejudice against immigrants becomes part of the ongoing
struggle for equity in employment and education for African Americans, especially when it appears that immigrants are exploiting black communities. Chapter 1 highlights the salience of both race and class in group interaction but demonstrates that race continues to function as the primary power construct shaping U.S. ethnic relations. The second half of the chapter explains how American race and class hierarchies take on meanings of power and privilege specific to American Muslims, and it also looks at other markers of identity creating divisions in the American ummah: national origins, religious background, ethnic history, gender, and generation.

In chapter 2, I use the city of Chicago to demonstrate how race relations in the American ummah are shaped by local context. Chicago is known for its racial residential patterns, to which American Muslims have responded by accommodating them. This means that Muslim spaces—where Muslims live, worship, and establish community—are racially segregated. The Chicago ummah, how I refer to Chicago’s network of Muslim spaces, assumes an ethnic geography mirroring the broader society, one in which the majority of South Asian immigrants live north of the city and African Americans live in the south. Using ethnographic portraits, I show Muslims experiencing the inequalities of race and class, as well as discrimination based on national origin and religion, in the broader society. These inequalities situate ethnic Muslims in separate geographical locations and shape very distinct American Muslim discourses within these separate ethnic Muslim spaces. Religious lectures in mosques and other Muslim spaces, as well as informal conversations among Muslims, provide a window into the different experiences and concerns that separate African American and South Asian immigrant Muslims. They also demonstrate that American Muslims’ common experiences create overlapping discourses indicating ways in which American Muslims can cross ethnic boundaries.

Chapter 3 analyzes why and how Muslim women in Chicago move outside their ethnic Muslim spaces and across boundaries. Through seven women’s narratives (first and second generation), I demonstrate two main categories of movement: (1) that inspired by ummah ideals to connect with other ethnicities in the American ummah, and (2) that inspired by a range of motivations not necessarily linked to Islam or a religious identity. Islamic feminist theory frames part of my analysis as I show how women’s gender-specific experiences, that is, gender inequalities, inspire some women to move across spaces in the Chicago ummah in search of
gender justice. Beyond gender injustice, various inequalities frame women’s movement, from those of race and class to those of religion and national origin. The stories featured make apparent the complexity of individual identities that incorporate simultaneously the locations of woman, Muslim, American, and ethnic American minorities. Their narratives also show how these multiple speaking positions produce new possibilities for African American and immigrant relations.

To what extent does the common aspiration to establish a uniquely American Muslim identity create opportunities to cross ethnic boundaries? Chapter 4 explores this question. The matter of projecting a Muslim identity that accommodates and privileges the American experience (as opposed to the immigrant experience) emerged with greater urgency after 9/11 as an anti-Muslim backlash questioned Muslims’ authenticity as Americans. Focusing on young adult Muslims, this chapter analyzes the opportunities and challenges of creating a common American Muslim identity inclusive of both African Americans and immigrants. First, through the narratives of second-generation South Asian women, I describe the hardships they face as they construct their American Muslim identities, including how they reconcile their commitment to traditional Muslim practices with newly emerging ones more compatible with their experiences as Americans. At the same time, the chapter explains that second-generation African American Muslims have always emphasized American over immigrant Islam. While the push to develop an American Muslim identity might draw second-generation South Asians toward African American Muslims, resistance to immigrant Islam and loyalties to African American Muslim communities continue to temper the interaction between the two groups. Nonetheless, both groups occupy a common context that calls them to do the same kind of work: to negotiate both a place for Islam in America and a place for American Muslims in the global ummah.

Chapter 5 analyzes the relations between African American and South Asian immigrant Muslims in the city of Atlanta. It focuses on mosque spaces, since they function as the primary means by which Atlanta Muslims construct and cross ethnic boundaries in the Atlanta ummah. Gender norms, especially gender lines, define for many Atlanta Muslims the difference between an immigrant-influenced and an African American mosque. We are interested, therefore, in how gender lines influence women’s movement across mosques. Gender lines, including separate doors for women and cramped women’s spaces, often intimidate women from going
to the mosque or even from trying an unfamiliar one. However, both African American and South Asian immigrant women are rethinking their place in the mosque and are both challenging and accommodating gender lines, often through Islamic feminist strategies. I describe the kinds of interethnic exchanges and friendships that form in the mosque and their extension beyond public worship space into the private realm of women's homes.

Chapter 6 continues this book's analysis of second-generation Muslims and how they negotiate ethnic lines in ways different from those of their parents' generation. Racism, class distinctions, women's dress, and identity are among the issues that we revisit here, but in new and interesting ways, as the chapter highlights two cases of interethnic friendship on college campuses in Atlanta. This chapter also extends our examination of gender lines by describing the ways in which cross-ethnic friendships must navigate parents' expectations, many of which relate to cultural gender norms. Second-generation Muslims must negotiate both their parents' ideals and gender attitudes in the ummah. Intercultural marriage is used in this chapter as an important example of this twofold negotiation.

American Muslim Women expands our notions of Islam, Muslim women, and race in America, all at the same time. It reveals how multiple forms of identity frame American Muslim experience, at some moments reinforcing ethnic boundaries and, at other times, resisting them. In the conclusion, I revisit these various dimensions of American Muslim identities and the ethnic communities that shape them and also make suggestions for fostering cross-ethnic ummah relations. My recommendations are inspired by Islamic sacred teachings and the insights of American Muslims.