

Introduction

Being Muslim Women

This is a book about being Muslim. More precisely, this is a book about how women of color, primarily within, but not limited to, the United States, have crafted modes of Muslim being and practice that constitute critical histories of Islamic life and culture in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States. At the same time, this is a book about how women of color have continually shaped Islam's presence in the nation's racial and gendered imaginaries during this time and how women and issues of race and gender are essential to understanding Islam's cultural meanings in the United States. Stated another way, *Being Muslim* is an exploration of women—primarily Black, but also Asian, Arab, Latino, African diasporic, white, and multiracial—producing Muslimness as a way of racial, gendered, and religious being—for example, as both “American” and “global” subjects, as U.S. Muslims, and as part of the *ummah*, the global community of believers. This book is also an investigation of Islam's significant historical-cultural presence in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States as a religion, political ideology, and racial marker, with a focus on how this has been produced and signified by women.

A series of questions drives its inquiry: How do we tell a story of Islam in the United States that foregrounds the lives, labors, presence, and perspectives of women of color throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? How does a focus on women of color produce alternative narratives of Muslim life and Islam's historical presence in the United States? How have Black women shaped histories of American Islam, and what are the legacies of their labors? What is the role of race in the formation of U.S. Muslim women's religious practices and cultural expression, and how have desires for agency and discourses of feminism influenced U.S. Muslim women's lives? How have Muslim women in the

United States engaged questions of social justice and struggles for freedom through Islam? How do race and gender shape modes of religious practice and identity construction? Finally, is it possible—or for that matter, necessary—to articulate a collective experience of *being Muslim women* in America across time, space, and racial difference? If so, what does this experience tell us? And what is at stake in its telling?

In its response to these queries, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* presents a series of previously untold or underexplored narratives that explore U.S. Muslim women's lives, subjectivities, representations, and voices during the last century. In the existing literature on American Islam, men's voices and perspectives dominate. Further, in the handful of texts addressing U.S. Muslim women's issues, there is generally a separation between the stories of Black American and non-Black American Muslim women, who are primarily Arab and South Asian American, although not at all exclusively.¹ As a result of such divisions, a number of texts on U.S. Muslim women, perhaps inadvertently, privilege the stories of non-Black Muslim women of Arab and South Asian backgrounds and relay U.S. Muslim subject formation as a process of immigrant Muslims "becoming American."² Such language enacts an erasure of the lives and representations of Black Muslim women (who are already American) and generally relegates their experiences to a separate chapter or section, as opposed to situating them as a central component of Islam's historical narrative in the United States. In addition, "becoming American" also marginalizes the experiences of many Latina and white female converts, who are also already American.

In *Being Muslim*, I instead place these varied narratives on a historical continuum and argue that a desire for gender justice as expressed and conceived of by women of color has continually impelled and informed the construction of U.S. Muslim women's lives. While a number of scholars have noted Islam's affiliations with movements of Black liberation, antiracism, and anti-imperialism in the United States,³ few have contextualized Islam in relation to women's participation in these movements or through desires for gendered agency and freedom as expressed by women of color. Indeed, if as Kimberlé Crenshaw has written, "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism," and "these experiences tend

not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism,” this book suggests that Muslim women in the United States have historically mobilized their engagements with Islam and articulated ways of being Muslim as simultaneous correctives to patterns of racism and sexism specifically directed at women of color.⁴ *Being Muslim* seeks to demonstrate how women’s ways of being Muslim and practicing Islam have continually functioned as a rejoinder and critique of the intersecting politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion. By doing so, it reveals how “Black feminism,” “womanism,” and “woman of color feminism”—terms I explore more fully toward the close of this introduction—constitute integral components not only in approaching U.S. Muslim women’s narratives and representations but also in fully narrating the twentieth- and twenty-first-century story of Islam in the United States. Their histories and meanings also gesture toward how organic forms of “Islamic feminism” and “Muslim feminism”—terms I explore at the close of this introduction and at length in chapter 5—are emerging in the contemporary United States.

Although a great deal of this book’s focus is on the experiences and representations of Black American Muslim women, *Being Muslim* refuses balkanizing logics that might lead some to call this a book about only “Black American Muslim women,” as opposed to “U.S. Muslim women.” Indeed, I devote much of my focus here—the first three chapters, to be precise—to investigations of Black American Muslim women’s lives owing to the realities of the historical record; prior to the 1960s, almost all U.S. Muslim women who appeared in the press or popular culture were African American. Thus, any historically accurate account of American Islam and U.S. culture must necessarily make central the lives and experiences of Black American Muslims—and in this case, Black American Muslim women—as their contributions have forcefully shaped the meanings and presence of Islam in the United States. Instead of stories of Muslims “becoming American,” I suggest that narratives of being Muslim in America are far more flexible (and less exclusionary) in how they are applicable to approaching all U.S. Muslim women’s subjectivities across racial and ethnic categories—and I detail the contexts and processes that women have historically and culturally configured their identities and practices as U.S. Muslims. Whether one is a third-generation Black American Muslim, a

recent immigrant from Pakistan, a Mexican American convert, or a Syrian refugee, posing the question of how to be a Muslim woman in the United States offers insights, I suggest, into how Muslim-ness is produced and sustained against white, Christian social and cultural norms, as well as allowing us to see how Islamic identities and practices have evolved in relation to the shifting political exigencies of our times. As such, *Being Muslim* brings together a series of explorations of U.S. Muslim women's lives that begins with stories of Black American women and their engagements with Islam as a spiritually embodied practice of social protest. This book moves on to a story of the encounter between "Islam" and "feminism" in the media during the late twentieth century, as signified through the bodies of "Middle Eastern," white, and Black American women, and it closes with a look into how women of color feminism and womanism shape expressions of "Islamic feminism" in the lives of contemporary U.S. Muslim women across racial, class, generational, and regional lines. Because I suggest that the legacies of early twentieth-century Muslim women, such as those featured in the first three chapters, shape present-day formations of being Muslim, the book proceeds chronologically, to show how being Muslim in the United States is an iterative and reiterative practice that arises out of racial and gendered structures of feelings within the domestic United States, as well as through the diverse transnational locales and diasporic cultural spaces that constitute U.S. American Islam.

Throughout the volume, I argue that a central component of Islam's presence in the United States is its enduring presence and significance as a Black protest religion and expression of Black cultural power.⁵ Islam's legacy of Black protest, the book demonstrates, is critical to approaching the study of women, gender, and American Islam, as well as the collective subjectivities of U.S. Muslim women. This argument does not seek to marginalize or displace the experiences of non-Black Muslim women in the United States, nor does it ignore the transnational formation of U.S. Muslim women's subjectivities and the networks of culture, religious knowledge, economics, and labor that inform their lives. Indeed, blackness itself is always diasporic and cannot be viewed as merely "domestic"; it is also always part of larger Pan-African formations and consciousness. Instead, *Being Muslim* demonstrates how Islam's ideological and material presence as a minority religion in the United States

is ineluctably linked to histories of blackness and Black people and culture in ways that did not simply disappear after the large-scale arrival of Muslim immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East to America after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act in 1965 (which lifted restrictive immigration quotas) or because “Islam” has become conflated with foreign “terror” in contemporary political discourse. In addition, the last two decades have seen a sharp increase in the number of African Muslim immigrants in the United States, who have their own complex relationship with blackness and Black American Islam.⁶ While I do not explore the nuances of Black American versus African immigrant Islamic practices in the United States, I am aware that this is a rich site of exploration, which deserves further investigation. Yet, as I consider in this volume, the nation overwhelmingly came to know, think about, and discuss “Islam” and “Muslims” in relation to, and in the context of, Black American people and culture for most of the twentieth century (and indeed, even long before then), a discourse that merged and overlapped with orientalized notions of Islam and the Middle East.

Thus I suggest that Islam’s “blackness” in the United States—which dates back to earliest days of chattel slavery but which this book examines most closely from the early twentieth century to the present—continually informs the construction and evolution of contemporary U.S. Muslim identity, politics, and culture in both implicit and explicit ways, as well as in how Islam is discussed and how Muslims are racialized within the national imaginary.⁷ For this reason, *Being Muslim* asserts that the lives of Black American Muslim women across the last century present paradigmatic experiences of U.S. Muslim life, insofar as they demonstrate how ways of being Muslim and practicing Islam have consistently been forged *against* commonsense notions of racial, gendered, and religious belonging and citizenship and require constant attention to, and cultivation of, embodied practices that are articulated *against* accepted social and cultural norms. Their experiences also reflect how the blackness of American Islam—that is, Islam’s historical and cultural presence in the United States as emanating from Black American communities and culture—constitutes a set of racial, religious conditions with which non-Black Muslims must always engage and reckon with, even if this reckoning is characterized by disavowal. It is this continual *againstness*—which this book calls “affective insurgency”—at the

scale of the body, one's community, the nation, and the *ummah* that I argue is a central hallmark of U.S. Muslim women's lives.

"WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN"

In the early 1970s, the poet, activist, and intellectual Sonia Sanchez composed a series of Muslim poems. One of the leading voices of the Black Arts movement and certainly one of its most prominent female writers, Sanchez joined the Nation of Islam (NOI) in 1972 and remained a member through 1975. During these years, Sanchez, using the name Sister Sonia X Sanchez, wrote prolifically about her experiences of being a Black Muslim woman engaged in the organization's political, cultural, and spiritual project of Black nationalism and self-determination. When interviewed in 1989 for the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, Sanchez said she was initially drawn to the Nation because it represented "this sense of what it meant to be an African American woman or man . . . this sense of support for Blackness." She continued on to say that "it [the NOI] was the strongest organization in America. . . . I had twin sons and I took them into the Nation, in a sense, I think, for probably protection. There was a real atmosphere of strength in the Nation." She also described its appeal for Black people who were just becoming "receptive" to their own blackness, to Black women who were coming into recognition of their own beauty and power. The NOI told Black women, Sanchez continued, "Yes, I respect your Blackness. I say you are a Black women, and you're beautiful and you're queen of the universe."⁸

It is important to note that Sanchez became a Muslim following the assassination of the NOI's most famous member, Malcolm X, in 1965—a man she had considered a friend and comrade—and in spite the controversy around the role of the NOI in Malcolm's death. The historian Ula Taylor has posed the question, Why anyone would join the NOI in the 1970s, following Malcolm's murder? In response, Taylor argues that "the religious nature of the Nation of Islam was not the major impetus for new membership" during that period, that it was instead the NOI's "secular programs, promising power and wealth, [which] were the key to its expansion."⁹ In some regards, this was true for Sanchez. Her words demonstrate her attraction to the NOI's institutional structure and reveal how she saw the group as the strongest, most effective, and most

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FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS
Interviewed by
Dudley Randall

**ANNUAL
LITERARY
AWARDS**

**ECONOMIC ASPECTS
OF PAN-AFRICANISM**

**Fiction by
George E. Kent**



NEW POEMS by
Sonia Sanchez

Figure I.1. Cover of the January 1974 issue of *Black World* magazine, featuring Sonia Sanchez.

viable group through which to achieve Black self-determination while also finding safety and protection for herself and her sons from the dangers of white supremacy.

Yet while such “secular” programs may have drawn Sanchez into the NOI, her poetry from those years is decidedly “religious” in content and tone, specifically in the how it employs Islamic terms and affirms God’s centrality in the construction of Black NOI Muslim women’s identities. In 1973, Sanchez published the poem “We Are Muslim Women,” which first appeared in *Black World* magazine’s January 1974 issue and was later published as part of Sanchez’s poetry collection *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*, which she dedicated to her father, Wilson Driver, and her “spiritual father,” NOI leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.¹⁰ Written the year after Sanchez joined the NOI, the poem is an unflinching declaration of Black Muslim womanhood, an avowal of black women’s beauty and power, and an expression of devotion to God. In it, she interweaves being Muslim with women’s self-determination and establishes “Islam” as a spiritual landscape and vehicle for Black women’s liberation. The poem opens:

WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN
wearing the garments of the righteous
recipients of eternal wisdom
followers of a Divine man and Message
listen to us
as we move thru the eye of time
rustling with loveliness
listen to our wisdom
as we talk in the Temple of our Souls.

In this stanza, we immediately notice the embodied and metaphysical nature of Black Muslim womanhood. Muslim women wear specific “garments”—such as head coverings and modest robes—in order to express their spiritual devotion to “a Divine man and Message,” the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the message of Islam. Sanchez portrays “Muslim women” as righteous and wise and as key figures who transcend temporality, “mov[ing] thru the eye of time” in order to connect Black people to their future liberation. She also affirms their

“loveliness” as Muslim women, gesturing toward the admiration Black women are supposedly due in Islam, and establishes women’s knowledge and being as a space of worship, that is, a “Temple of our Souls.”

Across the poem’s five stanzas, Sanchez continually announces “WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN” as a repeating refrain and intones “MUSLIM” as the signifier and expression of her—and other Black women’s—embrace of blackness through Islam. To be a Muslim woman is to be exalted and to have a direct relationship with God, which is directly addressed in stanza 3:

WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN
 dwellers in light
 new women created from the limbs of Allah.
 We are the shining ones
 coming from dark ruins
 created from the eye of Allah:
 And we speak only what we know
 And we do not curse God
 And we keep our minds open to light
 And we do not curse God
 And we chant Alhamdullilah
 And we do not curse God
 WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN

Here, Sanchez writes Black women into the creation myth. Infused with Islamic imagery, this section employs an anthropomorphization of Allah as a being with “limbs” and “eyes” to render “Muslim women” as the corporeal descendants of the divine—“created from the limbs of Allah”—a characterization that subverts Christian teachings that say women are made from Adam’s rib. She names Islam as the state of being and political force in which Black people may “speak only what we know,” as opposed to trumpeting what they now recognize as the lies and hypocrisies of white America, specifically in regard to Black inferiority. Full and shining Black female personhood emerges out of the poem’s proclamation of Muslim-ness. This is not an individualized Muslim-ness: In her usage of the plural pronoun “we,” Sanchez emphasizes the collective nature of being Muslim as Black women, engaged together in a moral,

cultural, political, and spiritual endeavor for which, she states at poem's end, "the earth sings our gladness."

In its collective expression of Muslim womanhood, Sanchez's poem ultimately articulates "Islam" as a set of racial, religious, and gendered *affective* practices of Black liberation for Black women. Such practices are expressed, not as solely political or secular acts, but as a set of unified moral practices ("we do not curse God"), religious rituals ("We chant Alhamdulillah"), and collective identity formation (the repetition of "WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN"). The Muslim-ness the poem demonstrates—its feelings, its practices, its desires—is a type of being produced in the racial and gendered contexts and against which it is articulated. Spoken through poetry, Sanchez's proclamation of Muslim women's identity is legible because it announces Muslim-ness *against* the realities of physical and sexual violence directed at Black women; *against* notions of Black women as ugly, inferior, unwanted; *against* the sexism and misogyny of the church and patriarchal interpretations of biblical scripture; and *against* the degradation and subjection of blackness and Black people. Muslim-ness "shines" and Black Muslim women "dwell in light" because of the darkness of the racist and sexist logics against which Islam refracts itself through the bodies, voices, and actions of Black Muslim women. To put it another way, in Sanchez's poem, being Muslim is not only a set of proscribed religious practices but a state of *insurgent* being, in which the embodiment of Muslim womanhood itself is a form of unruly and rebellious expression against social, cultural, and political norms of race, gender, and religion. In the early 1970s, the proclamation of Muslim womanhood in Sanchez's poem announced itself against anti-Black racism, misogyny against Black women, and racist and sexist interpretations of Christian doctrine. Being Muslim, as expressed in "WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN," is an insurgent ethical, political, and religious framework in which "Islam" facilitates holistic practices of Black women's liberation and spiritual awakening.

Sanchez was a member of the Nation of Islam for only three years. Although she would cite the group's patriarchal tendencies and the stifling of women's creativity as her reasons for leaving in 1975, Sanchez clearly and unequivocally declared her identity as a Muslim woman both in her poetry and public appearances (as seen in her photo on the cover of *Black World* magazine) during that time. Thus her words and presence

indelibly shape the cultural history of women of color and American Islam and demonstrate how states of being Muslim—of being Muslim women, to be precise—in the United States arise at particular moments in history in response to and against specific racial and gendered iterations of Islam in U.S. culture. Such iterations do not disappear or dissolve in the face of shifting political contexts, I argue, but are negotiated and navigated through in future iterations of U.S. Muslim women’s identities.

In 2015 Duke University student Nourhan Elsayed offered another expression of U.S. Muslim women’s identity formation that reveals its affective nature and the continual racial and gendered insurgency that marks its formation. In an essay titled “Feeling Muslim,” published in the *Chronicle* (Duke’s student newspaper) on February 16, 2015, Elsayed describes her feelings walking across her college campus as a young, Egyptian American Muslim woman who wears the headscarf. “Before college,” her essay begins, “I never felt Muslim.” Once there, however, she becomes painfully aware of her Muslim-ness, especially in light of certain events that took place between 2013 and 2015. Of this awareness, she writes:

When the Boston marathon bombings occurred—I felt Muslim. I felt what it meant to walk into a store and have 10 years of inaccurate media fueled hate projected on to my body by someone who knew nothing of me. When the *adhan* was going to be announced from the Chapel, I felt Muslim. When people’s comments about my faith were wrought with a brand of animosity I still wish I didn’t know existed so close to home, when people threatened to hurt Muslim students on this campus, I felt Muslim. . . . In post-9/11 mainstream America, to be Muslim is to be the bearer of evil.¹¹

In referencing the Boston marathon bombings of 2013, the January 2015 controversy on the Duke campus regarding the calling of the *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer),¹² media coverage of Islam and Muslims, and threats to Muslim students at Duke and beyond, Elsayed articulates feeling Muslim as a type of fraught, ontological response, in which her sense of being is determined by a constant awareness of how her presence connotes distorted conceptions of Islam and Muslims.

This feeling is further heightened because Elsayed's essay was written as a response to the murders of three U.S. Muslim university students—Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu-Salah, and Razan Abu-Salah—the week prior. On February 10, 2015, at approximately 5:11 P.M., a forty-six-year-old white man named Craig Stephen Hicks murdered Deah, Yusor, and Razan execution style in their home in a condominium complex in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Deah and his wife Yusor were dentistry graduate students at the University of North Carolina, and Razan, Yusor's younger sister, was a first-year student at North Carolina State University's College of Design. All were of Palestinian descent.¹³ The two young women, Yusor and her younger sister Razan, like Elsayed, wore headscarves. Police reports later confirmed that all three—Deah at age 23, Yusor at 21, and Razan at 19—had died from gunshot wounds to the back of the head. Hicks, also a resident in the same complex, confessed to the murders, and news soon emerged that he was an unemployed gun enthusiast and atheist who had actively disdained religion on social media, particularly Islam. Many in the Muslim community in North Carolina viewed the murders as an anti-Muslim hate crime, and the killings sent shock waves through American Muslim communities as an example of an ever-rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiment across the country.¹⁴

Against these events and a tide of larger anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and Europe, Elsayed closes the essay with the prayer that “feeling Muslim [doesn't] mean fearing for your life.”¹⁵ Beyond her religious practices or cultural affiliations, she has come to feel Muslim through the experience of knowing she is a trope of terrorism, of being aware that her body conjures notions of violent jihadists, suicide bombers, and oppressed women. Her essay reveals how feeling Muslim is to move through the world with the knowledge that both your body *and* your religious beliefs—the misperceptions of your internal and external states—rouse fear, loathing, and violence in others. Yet though she inspires fear, it is, in fact Elsayed, as a Muslim woman, who expresses fear that she is not safe, who fears she is vulnerable to attack, and who must always be on guard. Unlike the years before college, Elsayed may no longer forget that she is Muslim, that she wears a headscarf, that feeling Muslim means she is constantly fearful of threats to her safety and well-being. She is now ineluctably aware—and thus must carry in her

body—what people think of her faith in constructing her own racial, gendered, and religious being in America. Some solace comes, however, as she stands “side by side in the crowd of over 5,000 people asking God to grant mercy” at a candlelight vigil for Yusor, Razan, and Deah—a space in which she finds temporary respite from her fears.¹⁶

In contrast to Sanchez’s poem, Elsayed’s essay articulates “Muslim-ness” against the ongoing logics of the War on Terror and its effects on U.S. racial politics. A decade and a half after President George W. Bush introduced the term to the U.S. public as formal set of state military and securitization strategies in response to the 9/11 attacks, “terror” has become a normalized presence in American life, which has sutured Islam and Muslims to notions of terrorist threat and anti-Americanism. Elsayed also voices her Muslim-ness against the demographic shifts of U.S. Muslim communities in the decades since the publication of Sanchez’s poem. Whereas in 1974 the majority of Muslims within the United States were still African American (whether part of the Nation of Islam or other Islamic organizations), by 2015 immigration from South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa in the ensuing decades had transformed Islam’s domestic presence, with Black Muslims by then making up approximately one-fourth to one-third of the U.S. Muslim community, South Asians one-fourth, and those from the Middle East and North Africa one-third.¹⁷ Alongside these demographic shifts, changing geopolitical and economic relations between the United States and the Middle East around issues of oil production and supply in the 1970s and 1980s, and then subsequent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, profoundly influenced cultural discourses around Islam and Muslims and normalized “Muslim” and “Arab” as interchangeable terms in the national lexicon. As such, in the almost fifty years between the publication of Sanchez’s poem and Elsayed’s essay, the nature of being Muslim in the United States had been reshaped and recontextualized by the changing nature of domestic racial politics, racial and ethnic demographics of U.S. Muslim communities, and projects of U.S. militarism and empire in the Middle East.

Yet despite these shifts, Elsayed is engaged in Muslim-ness as a state of insurgent being against hegemonic norms of race, gender, and religion in America. In 2015, Elsayed’s experience of being Muslim is forged vis-à-vis orientalist constructions of Islam as a signifier of foreignness

and terrorism, as well as against ongoing logics of white and Christian supremacy that produce U.S. Muslims as lesser citizens. Like Sister Sonia Sanchez before her, Elsayed incorporates the charged political nature of Islam and being Muslim in the nation's cultural imaginary into her processes of identity formation as a U.S. Muslim woman. Unlike being Muslim in Sanchez's poem, however, Elsayed's Muslim-ness in 2015 is not a pronouncement of political or spiritual empowerment, nor is it a means to reject the violence and dehumanization of racism; instead, it is a grappling with her existence as its constant projection. For Nourhan Elsayed, fifteen years after the start of the War on Terror, in the face of the demographic shifts within U.S. Muslim communities and in U.S.-Middle East relations, and following the horrific murder of three young U.S. Muslims in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, being Muslim is to feel profoundly unsafe because of one's Muslim-ness while seeking solace or refuge in her Islamic beliefs and practices. Thus, whereas Sonia Sanchez and other Black women embraced Islam as space of safety and sanctuary from anti-Black racism and sexual violence, young women like Elsayed struggle with whether to even express their Muslim identity in public spaces for fear of recrimination while navigating how to practice Islam as a faith while confronting "Islam" as a racialized and pathologized trope of terror. Yet in both instances—whether in the embrace of "Islam" and Muslim womanhood as an ethos of Black liberation and protection, or in the awareness of "Islam" and Muslim womanhood as signifiers of terrorism and thus catalysts for racial-religious hatred directed at Muslims—being a Muslim woman in the United States is always a deeply political and politicized process, in which women must continually create themselves as Muslims against the fraught intersections of race, gender, Islam, and the nation that circumscribe their lives.

In *Being Muslim*, I want to suggest that ways of being Muslim constructed by Black American Muslim women like Sister Sonia X Sanchez (and many others before her) operate as a historical index for the lives of women such as Nourhan Elsayed, who are part of a racially and ethnically heterogeneous generation of U.S. Muslim women made up not only of Black, Arab, and South Asian Americans but also of large numbers of Latino, white, and multiracial Muslims. Through the stories of women in the Nation of Islam, of Black women in the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, and of public figures like Betty Shabazz and the jazz

singer Dakota Staton, I reveal ways of being Muslim in the United States that are steeped in the broader struggles of women of color in the United States while also intersecting with other domestic and transnational struggles of Muslim women worldwide. In linking their experiences, I seek to show how the “hate” directed at Muslims in the United States should be framed not only through logics of orientalism and xenophobia but also through the historical legacies and contemporary expressions of anti-blackness, misogyny, sexual violence, and the acknowledgment of the United States as an imperial settler colonial nation. At the same time, I want to show how women’s ways of being Muslim in the United States, while seemingly partitioned by race and class, share common characteristics with how Islam signals a type of ontological response to notions of race and gender in the political realm. To understand anti-Muslim racism in the contemporary United States requires careful attention to the complex and multiple meanings Islam has historically held in our national imaginary, as well to the multifaceted ways race, gender, and class have produced Muslim-ness in the United States. As such, the stories of Black American Muslim women like Sanchez and others demonstrate how Islam has been historically mobilized by women of color to counteract the dehumanizing logics of racism and sexism and how being Muslim has been enacted and reenacted by women of color as a type of political, cultural, and spiritual ontology against white supremacy, gendered violence, and state terror.

American Islam as Lived Religion and Racial-Religious Form

To understand varied formations and expressions of being Muslim as expressed by women such as Sonia Sanchez, Nourhan Elsayed, and others, this book approaches Islam in the United States as a “lived religion” and “racial-religious form,” paying careful attention to how gender informs understandings of each term, as well as how Islam has historically functioned at times as a signifier of political ideology. The encounter between Islam as lived religion and racial form in the United States, I argue, produces Muslim women’s being as a continual process of “affective insurgency,” a concept I have already mentioned. By “affective insurgency,” I refer to the multiscalar, diffuse, and ever-shifting forms of againstness that this book argues are the hallmark of U.S. Muslim

women's lives. As I will discuss, this againstness is not, nor has ever been, directed at a singular target; instead, it is a set of affective responses that emerge out of the ways Islam is consistently lived insurgently by women, responses that arise out of the ways U.S. Muslim women engage, navigate, and counter the ways Islam is imagined as an unruly and insurgent political presence at various moments in history.¹⁸ In this section, I seek to bring together a set of terms from varying scholarly disciplines and discourses—namely, religious studies, ethnic studies, American studies, and women's and gender studies—to instigate a more robust conversation around U.S. Muslim women's lives and representations and to show how interdisciplinarity is always crucial to this endeavor. It is important to note that, as a scholar of race and gender in the United States—not a theologian, a scholar of Islamic studies, or even a scholar of religious studies—I do not attempt to address Islam through interpretations of its texts and teachings; instead, I focus on its presence and influence in people's lives and how this shapes the making of culture.

The concept of lived religion is drawn from the field of religious studies, where scholars such as Robert Orsi, David D. Hall, and Meredith McGuire have argued for an approach to the study of religious practices and impulses that is rooted in people's everyday lives.¹⁹ As Orsi writes in his essay "Everyday Miracles," individuals "do not merely inherit religious idioms, nor is religion a fixed dimension of one's being, the permanent attainment of a stable self. People appropriate religious idioms as they need them, in response to particular circumstances. All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life."²⁰ As this quote demonstrates, scholars of lived religion consider how religious meanings and actions are enacted and felt through the social environments of their practitioners' daily lives and acknowledge the presence of religion beyond holy texts and organized religious spaces and institutions. In the field of religious studies, lived religion has marked an attempt by scholars to abandon—or at least look more critically at—established categories of orthodoxy (correct belief) and orthopraxy (correct practice) and instead consider how religious beliefs and practices emerge through culture, lived experiences, and daily life, and not only in spaces of worship and religious institutions. Yet, as with the larger field of religious studies itself, there has been an absence of analysis in discussions of lived religion

in regard to how race influences these everyday contexts in which religion takes place.²¹

In my considerations of U.S. American Islam as a lived religion, I engage closely with the existing scholarship on Muslim women in the United States and, in particular, research and writing on and by Black American Muslim women that closely examines intersections of race, gender, religion, and sexuality and acknowledges “Islam” not only as religious tradition or a set of religions practices but also as a signifier of political insurgency. The scholar Sherman Jackson forcefully situates “Blackamerican Islam” (as he calls it) within the “thoroughly American phenomenon of ‘Black Religion,’ essentially a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism”²²—in other words, a form of U.S.-based liberation theology. In addition to Islam’s “protest against anti-black racism,” as described by Jackson and others, for many Black women, the religion also operated, as the Islamic studies scholar Amina Wadud writes, “an escape from the overwhelming phenomenon of double oppressions as an African-American woman,” a spiritual tradition that seemingly offers “care, protection, financial support, and adoration for (Black) women.”²³ Whereas Wadud goes on to say that many of these promises went unfulfilled, her words reflect how Black American Muslim women, in addition to a theology of racial liberation, also engaged Islam as protest against sexism and misogyny enacted upon Black women in the United States. As such, the experiences of Black American Muslim women reveal historical legacies of Islam in the United States as lived and practiced that directly contradict orientalist constructions of the religion as inherently oppressive to women and Muslim women as being forced to practice Islam. This is not say, however, that women of color *only* engaged Islam as politics. As I will demonstrate, women’s reasons for being Muslim were, and are, always at once, political, cultural, moral, ethical, and deeply religious.²⁴

The notion that Islam itself holds the potential for women’s liberation has been central to women’s ways of being Muslim in America, particularly for Black American Muslim women and, subsequently, other women of color. Although most of the Black American Muslim women I discuss here would not call themselves “feminists,” they certainly implemented Islamic teachings and scriptures into their lives as potential sources of emancipation from racism and sexism, whether in the home,

their communities, or in the public sphere. (I discuss the tensions produced by the term “feminism” in the next section, as well as in chapter 5.) The work of the anthropologist Carolyn Moxley Rouse is especially illuminating for understanding Islam’s emancipatory significance in lives of Black American women. In her influential 2004 work on Black Sunni Muslim women in Los Angeles, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*, Rouse argues that “African American Islam is a political stance of engaging the world, not only a way of escaping it.”²⁵ Rouse’s argument that Black American Muslim women “surrender” to Islam in a “way that engages their political consciousness and produces not only a spiritual but social epiphany” captures how lived religion operates as an organizing concept for the women and histories gathered here.

However, whereas Rouse’s study focuses exclusively on Black American Muslim women in 1990s Los Angeles, *Being Muslim* extends her argument of Islam as means of lived political engagement to the last century and to non-Black Muslim women as well. This book considers—to paraphrase Orsi’s citation above—how Islam has been appropriated as a religious idiom by both Muslims themselves and for the nation-at-large in ways that respond to the changing politics of race, gender, religion, and nation during the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States. In the case of both Black and non-Black Muslim women in the United States, I argue that political consciousness and social epiphany are vital to understanding their engagements with Islam, especially as “Islam” has become increasingly enmeshed with the logics and optics of U.S. militarism, surveillance, and terrorism. As a result, being Muslim itself is, and has continually been, a type of religious *and* political ontology, an identity that is perceived and practiced in politicized contexts, especially in regard to Muslim women. Thus I argue that histories of Islam’s political insurgency, its continual againstness to hegemonic racial, gendered, and religious norms, are always present in processes and expressions of being U.S. Muslim women. One history or experience does not subsume or replace the other, with such various iterations weaving and overlapping in complex and multifaceted ways.

In much of the existing scholarship on women and Islam in the West, the politicization of Muslim women’s bodies has been contextualized through frameworks of European colonization and Western orientalism.²⁶ As such, Muslim women’s agency and empowerment, including

articulations of feminism and Islam, are generally expressed in relation to postcolonial movements in Africa and Asia and oftentimes do not consider the experiences of U.S. Muslim women. As stated above, *Being Muslim* supplements such frameworks by examining how Muslim women in the United States have engaged questions of religious agency and feminist practice, within and through American contexts of race and gender. I point out that long before the War on Terror, Black American Muslim women infused Islamic religious practices with social consciousness, which they carried out in different spaces than Black men and which may not have been recognizable as “political,” in practices such as prayer, fasting, dress, dietary restrictions, and so forth. In the contemporary era, I contend that social consciousness continues to motivate religious, cultural, and political ways of being for a new, multiracial generation of young U.S. Muslim women who have come of age in the decade and a half following 9/11 and, now, under a Donald J. Trump presidency. *Being Muslim* demonstrates how the lives and labors of Black Muslim women critically underwrite and inform ways of being Muslims among a new generation of U.S. American Muslims, specifically in the ways that Islam has been at once lived as a religious identity, a political stance, and an expression of racial and gendered agency in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, in order to track how “Islam” has been produced through racialized logics for much of the last century, this book engages the notion of Islam as a racial-religious form, in which categories of gender and sexuality are always constitutive. The term “racial-religious form” builds on the concept of “racial form,” borrowed from the work of the literary scholar Colleen Lye in her *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945*, in which she considers how stereotypes of “yellow peril” and “model minority” inform Asian racialization in the United States, what she calls “the Asiatic racial form.” Through materialist analysis of literary texts, Lye interrogates the putatively paradoxical nature of the terms “yellow peril” and “model minority” and argues that both are actually “two aspects of the same, long-running racial form,” owing to how Asians in both are continually tied to “the trope of economic efficiency.”²⁷ The Asiatic racial form, she argues, is the product of shifting U.S.-Asia relations within contexts of globalization that produce “the historical conditions, . . . social terrains, . . . and representational

material” of race making, that is, of ascribing meanings to certain groups of bodies on the basis of race.²⁸ To put it another way, changing economic, political, and social circumstances engender varying racial tropes or stereotypes of particular groups, which all coalesce into the racial form, in which meanings do not disappear but actually accrue to produce “mythic persistence into the present.”²⁹

In the case of Muslims in the United States, the idea of the racial form is useful, as “Islam” and “Muslim,” while religious signifiers, have continually been characterized through racial terms. In addition, as the United States has increased its military presence in the Middle East and as Muslims from Southwest Asia have increasingly entered the U.S. economy as migrant workers and refugees from the latter decades of the twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge, as Junaid Rana does in his work on transnational Pakistani labor migrants in the wake of the War on Terror,³⁰ that “Muslims” have also accrued negative racial meanings in relation to capital, what Iyko Day has described as the type of “bad capital” that has been historically associated with Asian bodies in the United States.³¹ Rana traces the historical construction of the Muslim through European and U.S.-based racial logics in his 2007 article, “The Story of Islamophobia,” in which he writes, “Without a doubt, the diversity of the Islamic world in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, and other markers of difference, would negate popular notions of racism against Muslims as a singular racial group. Yet, current practices of racial profiling in the War on Terror perpetuate a logic that demands the ability to demand what a Muslim looks like from appearance to visual cues. This is not based purely on superficial cultural makers such as religious practice, clothing, language, and identification. A notion of race is at work in the profiling of Muslims.”³² Rana elaborates by identifying how Muslims were associated with indigenous peoples during the Reconquista, as they were the infidels and heathens who needed to be destroyed within Europe, while indigenous people in the United States were those who were to be conquered in the New World. This affiliation shifted with the forced arrival of African slaves to the Americas, many of whom were Muslim, an affiliation that continued with Black conversion to Islam during the early mid-twentieth century. At this time, Islam came to “represent a liberatory racial identification for African Americans” and became affiliated with blackness, specifically, the desire for

Black freedom—for many within Black communities—and Black rebellion—in the eyes of the state and the white cultural mainstream. Finally, Rana discusses how in the U.S. War on Terror, the Muslim has come to be conflated with Arabs and South Asians and “is incorporated into a racial formation that is adamantly anti-immigrant,” that is, produced through anti-immigrant sentiment. Through his genealogy, Rana clearly shows how “the Muslim” has been iterated and reiterated through various racial logics and has taken numerous forms.

Yet Islam as merely a “racial” form is insufficient to capture the complexities of anti-Muslim sentiment that have become part and parcel of U.S. political discourse. As Sophia Rose Arjana argues in her 2015 study, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, while negative constructions of Islam and Muslims have certainly been racial, they are also about “anxieties surrounding categories beyond race—in particular, those related to religion, gender, and sexuality.”³³ Arjana articulates the intersection of these anxieties through the figure of the “Muslim monster” within the “West’s *imaginaire* of Islam: the idea of the Muslim as a frightening adversary, an outside enemy that doesn’t belong in modernity, who due to an intrinsic alterity, must be excluded from the American and European landscapes.”³⁴ Working from the medieval period to the present, Arjana presents an array of Muslim monsters in the Western literary, cultural, and political imagination and charts the myriad ways that Muslims, in particular Muslim men, are rendered monstrous, “as interruptions that disturb normative humanity, civilization, and modernity”³⁵—which she demonstrates long precedes the advent of orientalism as a field of study in the eighteenth century. In Arjana’s analyses, it becomes apparent that Islam is monstrous because it exceeds race into the ideological. Its monstrosity arises because of Western beliefs that it is a pathological religious system, which marks Muslim bodies, as well as infecting their hearts and minds.³⁶ As Islam is a religion—not a race—with a set of foundational texts and practices (i.e., the Qur’an and hadith, the Five Pillars) in which all its practitioners engage, the West conceives of Muslims as following its “monstrous” ideology in lockstep; for example, if one Muslim is a terrorist, they all support terrorism, that “Islam” itself encourages terrorism. Thus, to name Islam as both a racial and religious form—a racial-religious form—in the United States is to note how not only Muslim bodies but also Islamic beliefs and practices are marked by abject monstrosity.

In addition to monstrosity, *Being Muslim* argues that within the United States during the course of the last century, Islam's racial-religious form has been signified through insurgency—the notion that Muslims are actively engaged in activities that rebel against and undermine Western “freedoms and democracy.” Beyond orientalism, this form emerges through historical contexts of anti-blackness, U.S. foreign policy, and anti-immigrant sentiment. They have been primarily manifest in the tropes of the Radical Black Muslim and the foreign Islamic Terrorist (which I explore at length in chapters 2 and 4). Both are linked to notions of national threat, explicitly as threats to white, Christian, Anglo-Saxon norms and beliefs (as Rana details above), with the latter emerging as a ubiquitous, and menacing, figure in the post-9/11 United States. Yet in regard to the trope of the Radical Black Muslim, perhaps most famously represented through the figure of Malcolm X, it is critical to note that Islam's racial-religious form operates differently in the mainstream (white) and Black cultural imaginaries; whereas it functions as a symbol of threat and violence in the former, within Black cultural politics and discourses, as already discussed, Islam is oftentimes viewed as a religion of Black liberation, associated with representations of strong Black manhood and morality, antiracist struggle, revolutionary nationalism, and/or principled political protest, as exemplified by Malcolm X, as well as by the late boxer Muhammad Ali, by the basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and, for some, by the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Thus such racial difference fractures the racial-religious form of the Black Muslim radical in the U.S. cultural imaginary, as Islam holds divergent—and oftentimes contradictory—meanings, which are dependent upon racial affiliation as well as political ideology.

What is not divergent, however, is that all of these tropes are wholly gendered and almost always signify Muslim men. Yet, whether for the Radical Black Muslim or the foreign Islamic Terrorist, the female counterpart to such stereotypes is the figure of the Poor Muslim Woman, who is perceived to be oppressed by Islam and coerced into subjugation by Muslim men. Even in understandings of Islam as a religion or ideology of Black protest, Muslim women are portrayed—if they are represented at all—as silent supporters of Black men, relegated to domestic space. In their subjugation, Muslim women are understood to be tacitly supporting Islam's racial and religious insurgency. In *Being Muslim*, I identify

the Islamic Terrorist, the Poor Muslim Woman, and the Radical Black Muslim as primary manifestations of Islam's racial-religious form in the United States, all of which are tied, I argue, to tropes of cultural insurgency and rebellion—racial, gendered, and religious—against white Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms. In the case of the Radical Black Muslim, I identify both the “positive” and “negative” aspects of Islam's racial meanings—that is, Islam as Black liberation, Islam as anti-white threat—and argue that both produce distorted images and understandings of Muslim women's lives. Throughout the book, I consider how U.S. Muslim women grapple and negotiate with Islam's unruly insurgent presence and how they themselves in turn work against such logics to produce their identities in affective and embodied ways.³⁷

As stated above, this book understands being Muslim, or “Muslimness,” as I call it at times, as emerging out of the engagement between Islam as lived religion and racial-religious form, which produces being Muslim as a continual process of affective insurgency, at times forged against Islam's own insurgent presence in the nation's cultural and political imaginaries. Islam is lived and practiced by U.S. Muslims as a non-white, non-Christian religion that is largely perceived in the last century as beyond the pale of Western values and liberalism, as well as an unruly, dangerous, and monstrous ideology, associated with blackness and Black people, as well as foreign terrorist threat. As such, Muslimness arises not only from enacting Islamic religious or cultural practices, but from the feelings and modes of embodiment that emerge in response to and against the ineluctable non-white and non-Christian presence of Islam in the United States. I argue that this process is always affective, enacted through the movements and negotiation of the body, how a body relates to the world around it, how a person feels in their own body and makes relationships with others, and perhaps most important, in the connections imagined and manifested between the self, heaven, and earth. As the influential work of the anthropologist Saba Mahmood demonstrates, the body as engaged in acts of religious and/or ethical formation is a vehicle of self-making, but one that takes place in “the technical and embodied armature” of a religion's moral-ethical frameworks and/or state power.³⁸ Thus, while the affective insurgency of U.S. Muslim women's bodies I identify here are undoubtedly agential—that is, it is produced through acts of agency on the part of women enacting

them—they do not necessarily connote acts of resistance or subversion to hegemonic norms of race and gender. Indeed, at the same time that I seek to locate the social justice impulses of women of color within American Islam, I am also incredibly mindful of how the experiences and actions of many of the individuals documented here may reinforce “nonliberal” ideas (i.e., of heteronormative gendered and sexual relations, Victorian models of womanhood, polygamy, etc.). To characterize the actions and choices of U.S. Muslim women as insurgent is not advance their actions and modes of being as some sort of unified resistance to oppression or to advance Islam as an inherently counterhegemonic force against Western forms of racist, sexist, and imperial power. Instead, the recognition of processes of affective insurgency in U.S. Muslim women’s lives is a means of making legible how religious identities and practices are animated in the “contact zones” between bodies and the social worlds around them—locations defined by the literary and cultural theorist and scholar Mary Louise Pratt as those “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”³⁹ Muslim identities and practices have always been expressed in such exceedingly uneven relations of power in the United States, with women’s identities further circumscribed by hierarchies of gender and sexuality against which they meet, clash, and grapple.

Islam, Women of Color, and Feminism in the United States

Being Muslim situates “feminism” as critical to approaching women’s ways of being Muslim in the United States during the past century, both in how Islam has constituted a religious framework of gendered agency for primarily women of color, and in how Muslim women have constantly negotiated their identities against Western feminist logics that categorize them as submissive, inferior, and unfree. In regard to the latter, in the United States and Europe, feminism and Islam are often posed as oppositional terms. As discussed in the previous section, the idea that Islam itself is somehow inherently oppressive and/or dangerous to women—and is thus antithetical to feminism—has become part of Islam’s racial form in America. The Poor Muslim Woman is a static and

essentialized trope that is deployed to justify U.S. military attacks and military occupation in the Middle East, the profiling and surveillance of Muslim communities in the United States, even the notion of “banning” Muslims altogether from the country.⁴⁰ To borrow the title of a 2013 book by the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, the notion that Muslim women “need saving” by the West, or by Western feminist ideals, is a primary logic through which Muslim women are seen in the United States, while Islam is continually portrayed as an inherently misogynist religion that sanctions and promotes the oppression of women.⁴¹ Such logics are rooted in the long history of what the scholar of religion and Islamic feminist Leila Ahmed calls “colonial feminism,” a discourse that I discuss further in chapter 4, which, Ahmed argues, arose as late nineteenth-century European colonizers in the Middle East cited women’s seemingly low status in the region to show the cultural inferiority of Islamic societies, which justified colonial occupation.⁴² The “feminism” of the colonizing/occupying power—whether it be the British in nineteenth-century Egypt or the United States in 2002 Afghanistan—is thus prescribed as a tonic to Muslim women’s oppression: an ideology Muslim women should and must subscribe to in order to throw off the sexist yoke of Islam (not to mention their veils).

In the United States, many Muslim women have avoided calling themselves “feminists” for a number of reasons. First, in recent decades, feminism has increasingly been deployed to shame Muslim women for their religiosity. As the novelist Mohja Kahf writes in her book *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, which tells the story of a young Syrian American Muslim woman growing up in the Midwest during the 1970s and 1980s, Muslim women may be subjected to “a broken feminist record” that tells them that religion is an instrument of male dominance, modesty and chastity are forms of patriarchal control over women’s bodies, and thus religious women are stupid, brainwashed, or at the very least, victims of false consciousness.⁴³ Feminism, in contrast, is a “secular” orientation—a positioning that has led many Muslim scholars and clerics, mostly male, to characterize feminism as un-Islamic innovation that is unnecessary, and even dangerous, for Muslim women. Second, then, Muslim women distance themselves from feminism because it is considered to be harmful to one’s *deen*, or faith, in particular in how it asserts *equality* between men and women as a goal, whereas Islam is

said to promote *complimentarity* between the sexes, insofar that men and women are equal before God yet should not strive to perform the same tasks or occupy the same roles in society. Many scholars and Muslim women themselves feel that feminism demeans women's esteemed roles as wives and mothers in Islam, while emphasizing that Islam already grants women rights to own and hold property, to work outside the home, and control their own income. At the same time, though, because of such logics, men "are given the authority to manage the affairs of women and even punish women if they do not obey," writes the human rights activist and religious studies scholar Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, which "seriously erodes the rights given to women in Islam that Muslim are so quick to brag about."⁴⁴

Third, and most important in regard to the narratives in this book, many U.S. Muslim women's adverse responses to "feminism" stem from the term's affiliations with a feminism that privileges the epistemologies and interests of white European and American women and thus disenfranchises and marginalizes the voices and subjectivities women of color. As Carolyn Rouse writes, such suspicion is particularly pronounced among Black American Muslim women because of how "Black women's distrust of 'feminism' can be said to be forged over centuries," from the open racism of white women in the suffrage movement to the second-wave feminists of the 1960s who "were rebelling against a particular 'Western' set of gender roles and ideas of femininity" that did not take into account the lived realities of Black women or other non-white women in the United States.⁴⁵ For example, Amina Wadud, author of *Qur'an and Woman*—the first gender-inclusive interpretation of Islam's holy book⁴⁶—and a Black American convert to Islam who has been a longtime and, at times, controversial advocate for gender justice in Islam,⁴⁷ conscientiously does not call herself a feminist:

I . . . describe my position as pro-faith, pro-feminist. Despite how others may categorize me, my work is certainly feminist, but I still refuse to self-designate as a feminist, even with "Muslim" put in front of it, because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies. Besides, as an African-American, the original feminist paradigms were not intended to include me, as all the works on Womanism have soundly elucidated. In addition, socialist feminism has focused

clearly on the significance of class as it furthers problematizes the origins of feminism in the West. Finally, Third World feminisms have worked tediously to sensitize women and men to the complexities of relative global realities to resolving universally existing but specifically manifested problems in the areas like gender.⁴⁸

In Wadud's words, we see how, even as she rejects the designation of "feminist," she gestures toward alternative feminist discourses beyond white feminism—namely womanism, socialist feminism, and Third World feminisms—"feminisms" with which she finds affinity and compatibility with her identity as a Muslim woman. Indeed, as stated earlier in the introduction, while many Black and other non-white Muslim women have sought gender justice through Islam, their wariness with whiteness-invested "feminism" and its attendant logics of racism, classism, U.S. exceptionalism, and now, anti-Muslim bias inhibits them from allying themselves with the term or the struggles that organize under its name.

With full acknowledgment of these trepidations regarding "feminism," however, *Being Muslim* argues that alternative feminist formations, such as the ones mentioned by Wadud, animate the history of Islam in the United States and have informed women's ways of being Muslim across the last century. As such, I contend that it is critical to understand the emergence of women's ways of being Muslim and practicing Islam in relation to such alternative "feminist" histories forged at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion in the United States. Specifically, I consider "Black feminism," "womanism," and "women of color feminism" as terms that have been used to denote women of color's desires for gendered agency and justice against hegemonic forces of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, as well as the critical social thought of women of color. While women of color have, of course, always been involved in antiracist struggles, as well as struggles for women's rights, Black feminism came to the fore forcefully in the 1970s and 1980s, when Black feminists sought to articulate the complexities of their identities and activism and refused the partitioning of their racial, gender, and sexual identities upon a political landscape that often demanded that they choose between their participation in struggles for women's liberation or Black freedom. As the authors of the

Combahee River Collective Statement—one of the key documents of contemporary Black feminism—wrote in 1978, “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are more often experienced simultaneously.”⁴⁹ The Combahee Statement is largely acknowledged as the first major formulation of intersectional politics and intersectionality—the concept that would be formally coined by the legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s to denote the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and domination. In 1990, the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins offered an expansive analysis of Black feminist thought as an intellectual legacy of critical social theory expressed through “African-American women’s social location as a collectivity [that] has fostered distinctive albeit heterogeneous Black feminist intellectual traditions.”⁵⁰

Yet while the authors of the Combahee Statement and scholars like Collins defined themselves as Black “feminists,” others rejected the term, opting instead to call themselves “womanists.” The term “womanist” is most often attributed to the writer and poet Alice Walker, who first used the term in a 1979 short story, “Coming Apart,” in which she wrote, “A womanist is a feminist, only more common.”⁵¹ She more explicitly defined the term in her 1983 volume *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, in which she stated that a “womanist” is “a black feminist or feminist of color [who] . . . loves other women, sexually or non-sexually” and “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility, and women’s strength.”⁵² In the same spirit as the Combahee Collective, Walker also emphasized that a womanist does not partition her racial, gendered, and sexual identities; a womanist is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.”⁵³ Walker’s definition famously ends, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” essentially characterizing “feminism” as just one variant of womanism, which is understood as the broader and more encompassing concept.⁵⁴

In its centering and privileging of the experiences of Black women, womanism appealed to those committed to Black nationalist and Black Power struggles and who did not wish to ally themselves with the perceived racism and hypocrisy of white feminists. As Collins noted, womanism “seemingly supplie[d] a way for black women to address gender

oppression without attacking black men.”⁵⁵ Womanism also offered, Collins continues, “a visionary meaning,” in that Walker and other womanists saw it not just as a social movement or ideology (like feminism), but “as an ethical system” which was “continually evolv(ing) through its rejections of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice.”⁵⁶ In the academy, the womanist imperative to build relationships with Black men, as opposed to the seeming separatist gender ideologies of feminism, as well as its call for social justice, appealed to many Black Christian women, who were committed to enacting gender reform within religious frameworks. Womanist theology thus emerged through Black women’s centering of their experiences in interpretations of biblical traditions, teachings, and scripture and offered Black female Christian theologians the opportunity to speak directly “to black women in the pews or on the prayer mats,” as opposed to in academia or political rallies.⁵⁷ Thus, “womanist theology” came to be primarily articulated in the academy and theological seminaries as a collective religious ethos for Black Christian women who were “committed to the analysis of gender, race, and class . . . in order to deconstruct oppressions, sometimes recover lost meanings, and construct re-envisioned possibilities of being fully human.”⁵⁸

Whereas Black feminism and womanism primarily signified the critical social thought, intellectual labors, and activism of Black women, “women of color feminism”—or “U.S. Third World feminism,” as it is also called—articulated a coalitional commitment to social justice by women of color in the United States, as well as making clear the transnational activist alliances between women of color (WOC) in the United States and the “Third World.” The anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, is often cited as a catalyst for WOC and Third World feminist theorizing and organizing in the United States. *This Bridge Called My Back* brought together the essays of Black, Latina, Native/indigenous, and Asian American women, as Moraga and Anzaldúa wrote in their introduction to the 1981 edition, to “reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the US” that was rooted in the ways “Third World women derive feminist political theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience.”⁵⁹ Whereas much of the writing included in the collection is decidedly political in tone, it

also consistently centers the feminist notion of the personal as political, including women's spiritual lives. At the start of the sixth section of the anthology, titled "El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision," Moraga and Anzaldúa specifically address the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of women of color, writing:

We, the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. . . . The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to "transcend" our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But our vulnerability *can* be the source of our power—if we use it.⁶⁰

The passage demonstrates how religion, as lived and practiced in "the everyday world" (i.e., as a lived religion), is a critical force in formations of women of color feminism, as a catalyst and/or vehicle for their "visible and public acts" of struggle. To put it another way, Moraga and Anzaldúa explain how religion and spirituality shape the lived experiences and, thus, affective insurgencies that make women of color "more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against," oppressions that are signified through racial, religious, and gendered forms and tropes that constrict women's lives. Yet in crafting identities that fully acknowledge the rituals and religion of women of color, the authors assert, women of color may also produce a sense of shared experience, of shared vulnerability, that "*can* be the source of our power."

Although the experiences of U.S. Muslim women may not be unproblematically mapped upon ideologies of Black feminism, womanism, and women of color feminism—for example, regarding LGBTQ communities and issues of sexuality, which many in U.S. Muslim communities continue to grapple with—I strongly contend that all three represent crucial systems of thought that have shaped the lives of U.S. Muslim women from the early twentieth century to the present. In particular, they are central to understanding the intersections of the personal and the political, the private and the public, and the religious and the secular in U.S. Muslim women's identity formations as well as to acknowledging

how the experiences of Black American Muslim women and non-Black Muslim women in the United States are interconnected through histories of struggle. Perhaps most important, these alternative feminisms deeply inform how a multiracial and multiethnic generation of religiously observant, politically engaged Muslim women in the post-9/11, Trump-era United States are crafting relationships around race, gender, and faith to produce new modes of gender justice in Islam from which are emerging discourses of Islamic feminism and what I call U.S.-based “Muslim feminism,” a term I use to situate the lives of the women discussed in this book into a larger history of Islam and feminism in the United States.

While I further elaborate upon Muslim feminism in chapter 5 in the specific contexts of U.S. racial politics, Islamic feminism, as Margot Badran writes, is “a term created and circulated by Muslims in far-flung corners of the global *umma*” which she notes began to have widespread purchase in the 1990s.⁶¹ In her 2009 book, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Badran defines the term, stating, “What is Islamic feminism? Let me offer a concise definition: It is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the *Qur’an*, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced.”⁶² Islamic feminism, Badran continues, is “being produced by Muslim women from both majority and minority communities in the African and Asia as well as from immigrant and convert communities in the West.”⁶³ miriam cooke adds that Islamic feminist discourse operates as “multiple critique” that responds to the various forms of subjugation Muslim women encounter in transnational systems of power and is deployed as “a multilayered discourse that allows them to engage with and criticize the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them while making sure they are not caught in their own rhetoric.”⁶⁴ It is of note—and, indeed, cooke cites the work of the Black feminist sociologist Deborah King on “multiple consciousness” in her essay—that multiple critique bears a strong resemblance to intersectionality theory. It is also significant that the world’s best-known “Islamic feminist”—although, as stated above, she does not self-identify as such—is Amina Wadud, who writes frequently about the intersections

of race, gender, and religious identity and references Black feminist, womanist, and WOC feminist paradigms in her advocacy of gender justice in Islam. Such connections indicate how, within the United States, expressions of Islamic feminism have consistently been—and will continue to be—shaped and influenced by discourses and ideologies of Black feminism, womanism, and WOC feminism.

A critical point of convergence between Black/WOC feminism and Islamic feminism occurs in the work of the U.S. Muslim scholar and theologian Debra Majeed, who advances a theory of “Muslim womanism” in her research on polygyny in Black American Muslim communities. She states that Muslim womanism is premised upon “the multiple and interlocking experiences of African American and other Muslim women of color” and constitutes “an epistemology, or way of knowing, that positions the experiences and wisdom of women at the forefront of any consideration of Muslim family life.”⁶⁵ Muslim womanism, Majeed continues, overlaps with aspects of womanism (as espoused by Walker and others) and Black feminism (such as that expressed by the Combahee Collective), but it also “contains elements distinct from both, particularly in regard to its attentions to the varied conditions of black womanhood and diverse perceptions of justice as experienced by African American Muslims and the values of Islam they articulate.”⁶⁶ In other words, Muslim womanism is grounded in the lived experiences of Black Muslim women, in ways of being Muslim and practicing Islam as enacted and embodied by Black women, an assertion of gendered power and agency that is, to return to Moraga and Anzaldúa’s words in *This Bridge Called My Back*, “derive[d] specifically from our [in this case, Black women’s] racial/cultural background and experience.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Islamic and religious studies scholar Jamillah Karim names the work of U.S. Muslim women in various racial and ethnic communities who are fighting issues of gender injustice “as embodying dimensions of Islamic feminist practice.”⁶⁸ She identifies these issues in racially specific ways, citing how African American (Muslim) women might criticize some of the misogynistic attitudes and practices of African American men, whereas South Asian or Arab American Muslim women might decry cultural norms in their communities that prohibit women’s participation in mosque spaces. “When women resist race, class, and gender inequalities and hold their ethnic Muslim

communities to *ummah* ideals of justice and equality,” asserts Karim, “they are certainly acting as Islamic feminists.”⁶⁹

As the works of Majeed and Karim demonstrate, forms of Islamic feminism are expressed and signified in the United States through the lived experiences of race and gender and against the realities of racism, sexism, and social inequality. Throughout this book, I identify and approach the stories and representations of the U.S. Muslim women gathered here as part of a broader tradition of Muslim women seeking forms of racial, gendered, and religious justice during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one that is rooted in the experiences of Black women but that has evolved in ways that inform the lives of all U.S. Muslim women, both Black and non-Black. Like Karim, I identify their desires and labors as part of the broader Islamic feminist tradition as well as being inexorably linked to histories of Black feminism, womanism, and WOC feminism in the United States, the intersections of which I argue produce a legacy of “U.S. Muslim feminism.” In the stories of Black women in the Ahmadiyya Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, or of the women of Islam or of the Nation of Islam from the 1950s through the 1970s, or of Sisters Betty Shabazz and Dakota Staton, I highlight the complex matrices of power in and through which their desires for gender justice arose and manifested themselves in their relationship with Islam.

Finally, *Being Muslim* centers how issues of safety and security are critical to all discourses and ideologies of feminism and gender justice, and in particular for women of color, and thus to the examinations of U.S. Muslim women lives. To consider how Islam has functioned as a space of safety for women, as well as a source of violence directed toward women, a number of my chapters employ the concept of the safe harbor as defined by Toni Morrison in her 1973 novel *Sula*. Morrison uses the term to describe the relationship between the novel’s two female protagonists, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who realize, as young Black girls growing up in Medallion, Ohio, in 1922, “that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them,” and thus they “set about creating something else to be.”⁷⁰ “In the safe harbor of each other’s company,” Morrison writes, “they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things.”⁷¹ In this space, at least momentarily, they do not fear

bodily harm; they forget that they are targets of physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Yet while their safe harbor provides solace, it ultimately owes its existence to the dehumanizing forces of racism, sexism, poverty, and white supremacy: the very catalysts of the safe harbor's creation. Thus Nel and Sula's "safety" is premised on violence, a desire to create "something else" only because what already exists is fatal. Their safe harbor is ephemeral, shifting and evolving in response to external circumstances. Indeed, as those familiar with the novel know, Nel and Sula's adult relationship becomes marked by competition, disdain, jealousy, and ultimately, betrayal—emotions brought about by their struggles with the limits of race, gender, sexuality, and class that inform the trajectories of each of their lives.

Being Muslim argues that such safe harbors are integral to the lives and histories of U.S. Muslim women. They are spaces of respite; they may be cultural, political, and religious; they can be physical and ideological; they may span the space of a home, a *masjid*, a community, a classroom, a Facebook group, or an email Listserv. They are the spaces where Muslim women in the United States have been able to "abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things," where they need not explain away their bodies or the engagements of their bodies with Islam but simply focus on and proceed with relationships premised upon their worldviews as shaped by their understandings and lived practices of Islam. Yet U.S. Muslim women are never, truly *safe*, because safe harbors themselves are contingent upon the continual presence of racist, patriarchal, and imperial violence that necessitate their formation in the first place. As such, U.S. Muslim women, like the ones gathered here, know that it is precisely due to the ephemerality of such safe harbors that being Muslim enjoins practices of social justice, so they may work, worship, and live, insurgently, against that which endangers them.

* * *

As I stated earlier, the first three chapters of this book focus on the lives and representations of Black Muslim women. Chapter 1, "Four American Moslem Ladies': Early U.S. Muslim Women in the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, 1920–1923," begins with an examination of the earliest known photograph of self-identified Muslim women in the

United States. Taken in 1922, the photo features four African American female converts to the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, a South Asia-based missionary movement that attracted significant numbers of Black women between the 1920 and 1960s. I offer a multilayered and, at times, circuitous account of the histories that produced the photograph, specifically the racial politics of 1920s Chicago, the race and gender politics of the Ahmadiyya missionary Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, and the desires for safety and spirituality that led Black American women to Islam.

In chapter 2, “Insurgent Domesticity: Race and Gender in Representations of NOI Muslim Women during the Cold War Era,” I consider how the domestic spaces of Black Muslim women were portrayed in photography, media, and literature of the 1950s and 1960s and how the male gaze mediated these representations. In analyses of the 1959 CBS news documentary “The Hate That Hate Produced”; *The Messenger* magazine, the first official publication of the Nation of Islam, edited by Malcolm X in 1959; a 1963 photo essay in *Life* magazine, photographed by Gordon Parks; and James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, the chapter characterizes images of the domesticity of Black Muslim women as “insurgent visions” of American Islam, oftentimes imagined by men yet enacted with women’s consent and participation.

Chapter 3, “Garments for One Another: Islam and Marriage in the Lives of Betty Shabazz and Dakota Staton,” examines the lives of two of the most prominent Muslim women in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s: the wife and later widow of Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz, and the jazz singer Dakota Staton. The Muslim-ness of both women was inexorably linked to, and oftentimes wholly predicated upon, their status as wives of Black American Muslim men. Through an exploration of how each woman approached Islam and marriage in their daily lives, I argue that Shabazz and Staton viewed their marriages and Muslim identities concurrently and through the racial and gendered contexts in which they approached marriage as an integral component of their practices of Islam.

In chapter 4, “Chadors, Feminists, Terror: Constructing a U.S. American Discourse of the Veil,” I shift focus away from Muslim women in the United States to examines American media coverage of the Iranian women’s revolution in March 1979. I look at how the major American television networks and print news media described Iranian Muslim

women, covered the U.S. feminist Kate Millett's trip to Iran, and depicted the treatment of Iranian women in the feminist press. Crucial to my analysis is how post-civil rights era racial logics and the mainstreaming of second-wave feminist logics contributed to the construction of contemporary American "discourse of the veil," the term used by Leila Ahmed and others to describe the Western fetishization of the Islamic headscarf as a symbol of women's oppression.

Chapter 5, "A Third Language: Muslim Feminism in America," presents the voices of four U.S. Muslim women who actively incorporate social justice practices into their engagements with Islam and who articulate a clear relationship with gender justice and feminism in their lives. I explore how their work and perspectives refract the racial and gendered legacies of U.S. Muslim women across the last century, and I introduce the concept of Muslim feminism to link their experiences across racial, ethnic, and generational boundaries.

In the conclusion, "Soul Flower Farm," I visit a small urban farm in the East Bay Hills in California run by Maya Blow, a Muslim homeopath and herbalist. Through Blow's work, I consider the ways U.S. Muslim women, and Muslims more broadly, are engaging urban farming, environmentalism, and movements for food justice as "Muslim" issues in the twenty-first century by building upon existing legacies of women of color in American Islam.

Terminology

Before moving on, I want to briefly discuss and explain a number of the terms I use in the book. As this is a volume about Islam as a lived religion, about how women have produced ways of being Muslim against fraught political and cultural landscapes, I am mindful of the power of nomenclature. The terms we use matter, both in acts of self-signification and in how others identify us.

To refer to Muslims within the United States, I use the term "U.S. Muslims." I use this term, as opposed to "American Muslim" or "Muslim American" to clarify that my work does not engage with the diversity of Muslim life across the entirety of the Americas, which includes North, South, and Central America and the Caribbean islands. Furthermore, "U.S. Muslim" does not imply the necessity of formal citizenship or a

notion of “claiming America” as a prerequisite for a U.S.-based Muslim identity. However, when speaking of Islam’s historical presence in the nation, or referring broadly to Islamic practices in the United States, I employ the term “American Islam.” This is due to the fact that there has already been a substantive body of work on Islam in the United States that uses this term, which I engage and build upon here.⁷²

I use the term “Black American Muslim,” or “Black Muslim,” to refer to African American Muslims, regardless of their sectarian or organizational affiliations, although at times I also use the term “African American Muslim.” The idiom “Black Muslims” was once primarily used to describe members of the Nation of Islam and, as a result, was often-times rejected by African American Muslims who were not part of the group or who did not want to be affiliated with the NOI’s black nationalist politics. My usage suggests that whether one was or is a member of the Nation of Islam, political insurgency has always marked being at once Black and Muslim in the United States and that it is critical to claim—not elide—this affiliation. As such, African American Muslims in the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam or who follow Sunni Islam are also at times referred to as “Black Muslims” here. I use both the terms “Black American” and “African American” to refer to people of African descent in the Americas.

In the case of U.S. Muslims of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, I aim to be as specific as possible—for example, South Asian Muslim, Lebanese American Muslim, and so on. At times, when discussing interactions between Black Muslims and those of Asian, Arab, or African descent, I employ the terms “Black and non-Black Muslims.” I prefer the latter term to “immigrant Muslim.” Many non-Black Muslims in the United States are not immigrants. Some are second- or third-generation Americans, and others hail from families who have been in the United States for over a century. This terminology reflects the distinctive racial composition of U.S. Muslim communities, which, as stated earlier, is approximately one-third Black, one-third South Asian, and one-third Arab/Middle Eastern, although there are also significant and growing numbers of white and Latino converts to Islam.

Finally, I apply the term “Muslim” across sectarian differences in U.S. Muslim communities. As I am interested in the ways people have named and created themselves as U.S. Muslims, not in religious debates, I take

an ecumenical approach to Muslim identity and do not engage discussions regarding the permissibility or authenticity of Muslim organizations. I strongly believe each and every group named here is integral to the fabric of U.S. American Islam. I also fully acknowledge that I do not adequately address Shi'a Muslim women's experiences of race and gender in the United States, a critical strand of this history I hope to take up in the future and encourage other scholars to explore as well.

* * *

To close, I return to a question I posed at the start of this introduction: What is at stake in articulating a collective experience of being Muslim women? In writing a women- and race-centered narrative of American Islam, I have constructed this book against the rampant discourses of anti-Muslim racism, anti-blackness, sexism, and misogyny that pervade our present. *Being Muslim* reveals how religion inflects realities of race and gender in this country, how being Muslim is refracted through the lived experiences of race and gender and through the historical and ongoing precarity of Muslim life, which produces women's continual desire for safety and sanctuary. While my focus here is on Muslim women in the United States and Islam as lived religion and racial form within the nation, I also understand that transnational flows of knowledge and circuits of free-market capitalism produce the "new ethnicities"—to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall—of a global Islam that defy and challenge national boundaries.⁷³ *Being Muslim* demarcates its inquiry on the United States, not to reify or celebrate the nation-state or the racial categories produced therein, but to examine Muslim-ness as formed within the specific contexts of what Toni Morrison has called the "wholly racialized society" of the United States.⁷⁴ Its aim is not to parochialize American Islam but to tell a story of U.S. Muslim women across time, space, and racial difference that allows for more expansive possibilities of affiliation and exchange among vulnerable populations both in the United States and worldwide.