Introduction

Esperanza: Stuff is kind of mashed up, and now [Arab and South Asian U.S. American] sisters are wanting to dress like the [U.S. Black American] sisters they see on stage. . . . It's girls that are probably first generation here, trying to find the aesthetic that fits them that is not their mother's or from their mother's land, which I can sort of understand since I come from an immigrant [Dominican] background, but what happens is that they start picking from the people that are around them, like the magazine White culture, and then they want to add an urban element cause it's a cool thing, cool to be from an urban environment, right? (Laughs)

Su’ad: What is urban? (Laughs) Is that a euphemism?

Esperanza: I don't even know what it is. (Laughs) You wanna wear cargo pants? . . . See, I have a camouflage scarf, I've worn it only once because this Pakistani girl walked up to me like (mimics a voice) “This is so cool” and I was like [to myself] I can't even pretend like that's OK with me (Laughter). And it's a girl that I love! Now I want to back this up by saying I have been wearing camouflage my whole life, I'm the camouflage queen! . . . I wear it a lot because I like it but also I feel like I can, it's appropriate for me to wear it because my brother was in war, people! (Laughs) Like geez, this is my actual surname on my jacket. Anyway so this sister comes just really sincerely, “I really like your scarf, where can I get it from?” and I was kind of like, “Like, thank you,” but I don't know really what else to say.

It's a compliment but in another way it's really a thievery because we don't have much, right? Like where does culture come from? It comes from people who don't have much. That's where hip hop comes from, that's where house music came from. That's where tying your hair up [in a scarf], wearing fatigues, because you ain't got no other clothes, right? So you got to make do with what you have, and when someone is taking that, you don't have anything left because you don't have much...
to begin with. You going home to your mansions—how many mansions did I visit in the last week, right?! You going home to silverware that’s really silver but you taking my scarf?! Just let me have something. (Laughter)

And I get it; you can’t really tell people what they can put on their body. I get that; but there is a certain level you can at least give due to where it’s done and at least try to do it authentically yourself. You have to know your boundaries and give knowledge and respect.

Esperanza is a single mother in her early thirties. She is a multimedia artist who loves to teach but also teaches to pay the bills. I met up with her at her home in Humboldt Park in Chicago, and after she let her kids know “we handling important business here,” we lounged and she shared her reflections on being raced, gendered, classed, and Muslim. Although Esperanza is a convert to Islam and was born and raised in Chicago and I was born to Muslim parents and raised in Brooklyn, we hit it off right away. This was because of the other things we had in common: Latinidad, being part of the hip hop generation, and having intimate knowledge of the joys and the frustrations of growing up working class in the ‘hood. Indeed, our respective experiences of race, class, and gender as Muslim women were often parallel.

I had seen Esperanza at hip hop cultural events around the city, always observing folks, as artists are apt to do, before we formally met at an event at the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, IMAN. IMAN is a Muslim-run nonprofit that provides services, community organizing, and arts-based activism on the southwest side of Chicago. IMAN was a key site for me in the field just as it was a place of central importance for many of my interlocutors, who I refer to as my “teachers” because I drew on their generous sharing of their knowledge and experiences. These “teachers,”

such as Esperanza, are the progenitors of a discourse, an epistemology, an aesthetic, and an embodiment that I call Muslim Cool.

Forged at the intersection of Islam and hip hop, Muslim Cool is a way of being Muslim that draws on Blackness to contest two overlapping systems of racial norms: the hegemonic ethnoreligious norms of Arab and South Asian U.S. American Muslim communities on the one hand, and White American normativity on the other. For my teachers—U.S. Black, Latin@, Arab, and South Asian American Muslims engaged in
hip hop–based activism—IMAN was a place where their intersecting identities, often rendered invisible by these hegemonic racial and religious norms, were visible and valid.

**Esperanza:** When it first started I was so excited to find IMAN. I was excited mostly because I came from an artist background and I came from a church background and since I became Muslim I never found that type of community and that type of outlet. Progress Theater was the first group I saw [and] I literally cried, I had no idea Muslims could even do this. I was like freaking out, I mean I didn’t just go to church, I was in *church*, it was for real! It was like people in the aisles, jumping up and down, so it just made me so happy!

When Esperanza saw Progress Theater perform at IMAN, she saw herself. The specific event was Community Café, which showcased performers who were generally Muslim, usually extremely talented, and predominantly working with hip hop and a sonic landscape that was charged with Blackness as a radical political perspective and expressive culture. Although not a hip hop group, Progress Theater, an ensemble founded by two U.S. Black Muslim women, fit right in: its storytelling exhibited a Black feminist aesthetic and its performances, which mixed theater, poetry, and song, were deeply grounded in Black expressive cultures, particularly those of the U.S. South. The ethnoreligious hegemonies of Arab and South Asian U.S. American communities would prescribe that Muslims could not “do that”; they could not engage Black expressive cultures as Muslims. Yet with Progress Theater and at IMAN, Esperanza found, the opposite was true: they could and they did.

**IMAN** is a site of Muslim Cool because it privileged Blackness as a politics and as an expressive culture of resistance and did so with a diverse constituency. Like my teachers, IMAN’s events and work include Muslims (as well as non-Muslims) who are U.S. Black, Latin@, Arab, and South Asian American from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Accordingly, race and class tensions are also part of Muslim Cool, and Esperanza’s subsequent experiences of cultural appropriation dampened her initial euphoria. IMAN, as a Muslim space, was affirming for Esperanza, but it was also a source of frustration. Esperanza wore camouflage because she liked it but also because racialized systemic in-
equalities had shut her family out of economic opportunity and shut-tered her brother into “the service.” In contrast, the “Pakistani girl” who thought the camouflage was cool had access to a set of class-based and cultural privileges—she was educated and suburban and had more cultural authenticity as a Muslim. Accordingly, the Pakistani girl’s potential appropriation of camouflage was embedded in unequal power relations: Esperanza loved the girl and the girl loved her scarf but, as Esperanza put it, all that love was fraught, “no matter how much Islam we have in common.”

The camouflage-loving Pakistani girl was not merely a cultural interloper; she was also a racialized and gendered Muslim subject navigating her identity at the crossroads of hip hop and Islam. The Pakistani girl in Esperanza’s story reminded me of Rabia, a young Pakistani U.S. American woman who was one of my key teachers in the field. I could imagine Rabia admiring Esperanza’s scarf with the same kind of unbridled enthusiasm, but in contrast to the first “Pakistani girl,” Rabia was an activist who worked in Englewood, a predominately Black neighborhood in Chicago. I asked Esperanza whether this made a difference:

**Su’ad:** Is there a difference, you think, with Rabia?

**Esperanza:** It is a really weird balance because a lot of these sisters are darker than me, are darker than my children, but they have such a suburban White mentality, and they are trying to figure out the crossroads, but yeah, there is a difference for Rabia, now that she is going to work in Englewood every day, she is not as naive about the struggle, but she had to fight for that and she is still fighting for it because she is still that educated Pakistani girl from the suburbs, at the end of the day. But it’s the same on the other end: I could never really escape this no matter how much Islam we have in common. Even if I escaped this, even if I married a Pakistani man, even if I married Muslim and I married up and got real silverware, right? [Laughs] That camouflage would still be mine.

For Esperanza, Rabia was different because “the struggle” was not just a fashion accessory for her. However, she noted insightfully that this did not mean that Rabia, she, or any of us could escape the complex realities of race, identity, and power in the fight to contest hegemonies and over-
come inequality. This insight is critical to understanding Muslim Cool: at the meeting of Islam and hip hop, intersecting notions of Muslimness and Blackness challenge and reconstitute the racial order of the United States.

I developed the concept of Muslim Cool through my long-term ethnographic research with young multiethnic Muslims primarily in Chicago, Illinois. I argue that by establishing connections to specific notions of Blackness, my teachers configure a sense of U.S. American Muslim identity that stands as a counterpoint to the hegemonic norms of Whiteness as well as to Arab and South Asian U.S. American communities. These connections are critical and contested interventions: critical because they push back against the pervasive phenomenon of anti-Blackness, and contested because questions of race, class, gender, and nationality complicate and trouble Muslim Cool’s relationship to Black identities and cultures.

I make three central arguments in this book. First, I argue that Blackness is central to the histories, engagements, entanglements, and experiences of U.S. American Islam. The term “Blackness” in my work refers both to the histories, traditions, and customs of Black peoples and to the circulating ideas and beliefs about people of African descent. My rendering of Blackness is Diasporic (Hall 1990) and polycultural (Kelley 1999) and as such conceptualizes Blackness as culture and discourse, which relies on and exceeds the body, Black and otherwise.  I contend that Blackness shapes the individual Muslim experience in the United States and interethnic Muslim relationships as well as the terms of U.S. Muslim engagement with the state. Second, I make a case for the continuing significance of race and Blackness in the contemporary United States. The book focuses on interminority relationships to articulate a narrative of race and racism in the United States that transcends the Black-White binary but also the fallacy of postracialism, which holds that racism, particularly anti-Black racism, is over and that any talk of race is actually counterproductive to the work of antiracism. I identify the ways in which race, and specifically Blackness, is marshaled in the work of antiracism. For Muslim Cool Blackness is a point of opposition to white supremacy that creates solidarities among differently racialized and marginalized groups in order to dismantle overarching racial hierarchies. Yet as the stories in this book illustrate, these solidarities
are necessarily entangled in the contradictions inherent in Blackness as something that is both desired and devalued. The engagement with Blackness by young U.S. Muslims, Black and non-Black, is informed by long-standing discourses of anti-Blackness as well as the more current cooptation of Blackness in the narratives of U.S. multiculturalism and American exceptionalism. Accordingly, my third central argument is that any analysis of contemporary Blackness must contend both with the ways in which it is used to resist the logics of white supremacy and with its complicity in that supremacy.

A light-skinned Latina, Esperanza hesitated to consider herself Black. She explained by example, “I didn’t grow up eating those foods, I had to learn how to make macaroni and cheese as an adult.” Nevertheless, Progress Theater’s performance was still deeply meaningful to her. This was because Black expressive cultures, both U.S.-based and in the broader African diaspora, shaped her own experiences as a Latina who did not know how to make macaroni and cheese but who grew up on ecstatic evangelical church culture as well as house music and hip hop. Esperanza’s macaroni and cheese learning curve is reflective of the Chicago context in which Black is defined as having roots in the U.S. South. However, Blackness, in the discourse and practice of Muslim Cool, and as I use the term in this book, is not limited to Black traditions originating in the continental United States.

For example, as I describe in chapter 2, my teachers contest claims that “music is haram” (forbidden) by placing hip hop in an Afro-diasporic Islamic genealogy. This genealogy is constructed through historic Africa and its transatlantic diaspora to assert the religious permissibility of Black music. Likewise, the style of head wrapping that I describe in chapter 3 is a practice found outside the United States. Yet Muslim Cool’s relationship to place, specifically the United States, is not inconsequential. When multiethnic U.S. American Muslim women take up the Afro-diasporic head wrap tradition, this practice must also be interpreted with attention to the specificities of Blackness in the United States. Similarly, when U.S. Muslim hip hop artists travel abroad on the state-sponsored cultural diplomacy trips described in chapter 5, Blackness is entangled in its relationship to U.S. empire. Accordingly, the Blackness engaged in Muslim Cool is Diasporic—linked to the particulars of the Black experience in the United States as well as to questions of Black
Muslim Cool is a way of thinking and a way of being Muslim that resists and reconstitutes U.S. racial hierarchies. This push and pull at the core of Muslim Cool is grounded in its relationship to hip hop. Hip hop, as an artistic form—expressed in DJing, emceeing, dance, and graffiti—and as a form of knowledge and cultural production—from ideas and language to fashion and style—is a site of critical contradiction and contestation. Perceptions of hip hop music and culture range wildly: hip hop is seen variously as deeply mass mediated and commodified and as a quintessential example of an expressive culture of resistance. The “hip hop wars” (Rose 2008) in the mainstream media and within the hip hop community reflect this kind of binary framework, with each side claiming to know what hip hop really is. However, hip hop is a traded commodity and an oppositional culture at the same time. Hip hop epitomizes what Stuart Hall described as the contradictory nature of Black popular culture: it is simultaneously rooted in the lived experience of the African diaspora and appropriated in ways that are unrecognizable to that lived experience (1998). Importantly, my claim for hip hop’s rootedness in the African Diaspora is not a move to mark hip hop as “Black” in an essentializing way that erases, most specifically, the Latin@s, Black and non-Black, who were central to hip hop’s development (Flores 2000; Rivera 2003). Rather it acknowledges hip hop’s rootedness in the African Diaspora is not a move to mark hip hop as “Black” in an essentializing way that erases, most specifically, the Latin@s, Black and non-Black, who were central to hip hop’s development (Flores 2000; Rivera 2003). Rather it acknowledges hip hop’s grounding in a Diasporic and polycultural Blackness (in which Latinidad is always an interlocutor, if not a participant) forged by involuntary and subsequent migrations and manifest in the aesthetics privileged in the music and culture (Rose 1994). Moreover, the contestation identified by Hall is not unique to Black popular culture, but it is a defining characteristic of the mass production of Blackness: the proliferation of Black expressive forms de-values Black life as often as it celebrates it.

The contradictions and contestations of hip hop are often depicted through the homonyms “roots” and “routes”: hip hop is rooted in Afrodiasporic expressive cultures and has traveled on routes far beyond its origins (Gilroy 1993; Peterson 2014). To the pair of roots and routes, I add the loop. I take “loop” from the hip hop sampling technique in which a selected piece of music is looped to play over and over as part of the creation of a new piece of music. Whereas roots and routes extend...
and splinter into multiple pathways, the loop extends and returns, not in a closure but in a cypher, the communal and competitive space in which hip hop culture regenerates and develops. The loop is a metaphor for the linkages between Islam, hip hop, and Blackness in the twenty-first century that create Muslim Cool: Islam, as practiced in U.S. Black American communities, shaped hip hop, which in turn shapes young twenty-first-century Black and non-Black U.S. Muslims who return to Blackness and Islam as a way of thinking and a way of being Muslim—as Muslim Cool. Like a looped musical sample defined by sonic repetition and variation, Muslim Cool is a site of critical continuity and change.

“My Mic Sounds Nice”: Interventions

This book is an intervention in several existing literatures. Anthropological research has a long history of studying Muslim communities. The Muslim body (as well as Black and Black Muslim bodies) has served as material and conceptual territory, as labor, and as a specimen for the construction of Euro-American colonial projects—projects that made and were made by anthropology. Today, the anthropology of Islam has moved away from a primarily orientalist narrative and attempts to offer more complex pictures of Muslim life. This is a critical challenge to the post–9/11 narrative of the “Muslim” as singularly backward and barbaric (Mamdani 2005; Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2009). However, although this work is important, much of it continues to focus on Muslims outside the United States and Europe, and this disciplinary emphasis on non-Western Muslims has an unintended effect: it reproduces the notion of Muslim as “other,” which ends up reifying the static notions of “us versus them” that this research intends to undo.

These unintended consequences also resonate outside anthropology. Early scholarship on Islam in the United States told a diaspora narrative in which Muslims emigrated from an “Islamic homeland” to the “West.” The narrative centered on a bicultural clash between “American” and “Muslim” identities. Muslims were seen as analogous to other “ethnic” immigrants who face the challenges of integration and assimilation into the (White) American mainstream. This ethnicity-assimilation paradigm not only marginalizes nonimmigrants, replicating internal ethnoreligious hegemonies, but it can also elide the distinctions between
different groups of immigrants. Moreover, it locates Blackness and critical race studies at the fringes of the study of U.S. American Islam.

In the field of hip hop studies, scholars have tended to study hip hop as a text. The most common methodologies include lyric analysis (i.e., what does the music say; Cobb 2007; Dyson and Daulatzai 2009; Neal and Forman 2012), critical examinations of representation (i.e., what sorts of images are produced and reproduced in hip hop; Morgan 2000; Hopkinson and Moore 2006), and hip hop as a discourse linked to narratives of race, class, gender, and sexuality under material conditions of inequality (Rose 1994; Rose 2008; Morgan 2009). The contributions these studies have made are significant and unquestionable; yet, as others have noted (Dimitriadis 2009) they have left a critical area of inquiry underexplored. When researchers venture outside studios, stages, and street corner cyphers to different sites of inquiry, such as family rooms and friendships, what does hip hop look like there?

This question can be extended to the site of religion, which has also, until recently, received inadequate attention within hip hop scholarship. The social, cultural, economic, and political landscape of 1970s New York City and the expressive cultures of the African diaspora are common themes in retellings of hip hop's birth story. Yet these histories typically fail to account sufficiently for questions of faith, ethics, and spirituality in hip hop's birth narrative (Pinn and Miller 2009). Building on earlier work (Pinn 1999, 2003), a new body of research is emerging around these questions (Miller 2012; Utley 2012; Miller, Pinn, and Freeman 2015). This scholarship successfully challenges narrow notions of religion and spirituality that would disqualify the “religious” in hip hop, but has yet to fully attend to Islam's theoretical significance to the ways in which hip hop music and culture engage religion and spirituality.

In response to all these trends, Muslim Cool is an ethnographic study of Muslim life within the United States. It identifies the U.S. American Muslim experience as entangled in the workings of race, religion, and gender in the contemporary United States. It avoids reifying Islam/West dichotomies because it does not cast Muslims as peripheral or as outsiders who navigate assimilation but rather as actors whose lives and experiences are critical to the production and reproduction of the contemporary United States and the “West” more broadly. Further, while the ethnicity-assimilation paradigm continues to dominate some inter-

_Muslim Cool_ is a study of the relationship between race, religion, and popular culture. It also joins a growing body of work that has begun to explore Islam’s relationship to hip hop in the United States. These scholarly and artistic contributions analyze the role of Islamic theologies in the development of hip hop along with examining the role of hip hop in individual pathways toward conversion to Islam (Spady and Eure 1991; Swedenburg 1997; Floyd-Thomas 2003; Banjoko 2004; Aidi 2004, 2009; Alim 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Miyakawa 2005; Knight 2008; Taylor 2009; Davis 2010). Like these studies, *Muslim Cool* traces the ways religious identity is constructed through hip hop, but it also documents the particular epistemological impact of Islam and Muslim practice on hip hop music and culture. This impact, I contend, was fundamental to the development of hip hop ethics and activism. *Muslim Cool* advances hip hop scholarship by bringing ethnography to hip hop research which has historically privileged textual analysis and explores the hip hop narratives of young men and women, in a genre that typically privileges males.¹¹

“People’s Instinctive Travels and Paths of Rhythm”: Muslims in Chicago and the United States

Precise demographics about Chicago’s Muslim community are scarce. The most extensive survey was done in 1997 by East-West University. This report estimated the total Muslim population of Chicagoland, which includes the city of Chicago and surrounding counties, to be 285,126 (Ba-Yunus 1997, 12). Nearly ten years later the Chicago chapter of the advocacy organization Council on American-Islamic Relations put the total population at approximately 400,000 (Inskeep 2006). The hundreds of thousands of Muslims who live in the Chicago metropolitan area come from a variety of backgrounds. Chicago’s Muslim community
is U.S. Black American, AfroLatin@, Latin@, White, South Asian, and Palestinian American. Chicago Muslims also hail from Nigeria and the Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo). They represent a variety of Muslim experiences and Islamic perspectives, including converts and those born to Muslim families, Sunni and Shi’a Islam, Sufism, the Nation of Islam, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. These communities, some of whom have had a presence in the area since the early twentieth century, live throughout Chicago’s north, south, and west sides as well as in its northern, southern, and western suburbs.

The diversity of this metropolitan Muslim community maps onto the Chicagoland landscape in fragments, mimicking the racial and ethnic segregation for which the city continues to be known (Massey and Denton 1998; Pattillo-McCoy 2000; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Bogira 2011). Today, as depicted in classic sociological texts—Black Metropolis (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993), The Ghetto (Wirth 1929), Gold Coast and Slum (Zorbaugh [1929] 1976), and others—Chicagoans live in neighborhoods segregated by race and class. According to the 2010 census, African American communities remain concentrated in the traditional “Black Belts” on the South Side and West Side of Chicago, while Latin@ neighborhoods are found squarely within the near northwest and southwest sections of the city. Furthermore, as White families continued to move to the outer suburbs over the last decade of the twentieth century, communities of color with U.S. and foreign-born residents made their homes in the abandoned inner suburbs. Urban patterns of residential segregation were thus replicated in the suburbs. Muslim immigrants and their U.S.-born children reside in immigrant enclaves within the city, such as the West Ridge neighborhood that is home to the commercial and cultural district of Devon Avenue, or within ethnic enclaves in the suburbs, such as the Harlem Avenue community in Bridgeview. Immigrant and second-generation U.S. American Muslims also live in wealthy, majority-White suburbs. In comparison, most U.S. Black American, AfroLatin@, and Latin@ Muslims continue to live in predominantly Black and Latin@ neighborhoods. These same neighborhoods are often located within or near areas of concentrated poverty (Brookings Institution 2003).

Even with their slightly higher levels of education and income,12 U.S. Black American Muslims live in segregated urban and suburban...
neighborhoods and are blocked from accessing the kind of advantages experienced by their South Asian and Arab U.S. American Muslim counterparts who live in White majority suburbs (Karim 2008). As a result of these residential patterns, racial segregation has become a fact of Muslim life in Chicago. From who runs the masjid (mosque) to whom parents consider suitable marriage partners for their children, institutional and community life is divided along lines of race and ethnicity.

Like the Chicagoland Muslim community, the U.S. American Muslim community is diverse. It represents more than eighty different countries and has origins in the African Muslim populations of the transatlantic slave trade as well as Ottoman-era Muslim immigration to the United States. Likewise, divisions within the Chicagoland ummah (Muslim community) are a microcosm of broader divisions of race, class, and power that shape the national U.S. Muslim community. Tensions around race, class, and power in the U.S. Muslim community play themselves out across what community members call an “indigenous-immigrant” divide. The indigenous-immigrant divide describes a fissure between the three largest ethnic groups among U.S. American Muslims: U.S. Black Americans on the one side, and U.S. American Muslims of Arab and South Asian descent on the other. U.S. Black Americans are configured as “indigenous” or “more native” to the United States in comparison with their Arab and South Asian U.S. American counterparts, who are seen as “immigrants” to the country. The use of the term “indigenous,” which was first appropriated by U.S. Black American Muslims in the 1960s (Nyang 1999), is meant as a critical inversion of an ethnocentric prejudice that privileges “immigrant” Muslims over “indigenous” ones.

This prejudice links race, ethnicity, class, and religion into an ideological framework that marks “immigrant” Muslims as more religiously legitimate and authoritative than Black U.S. American Muslims, a phenomenon that Sherman Jackson identifies as “Immigrant Islam.” Jackson defines Immigrant Islam as the monopoly asserted by Muslim immigrants over the power to define Muslim identity and practice in the United States (Jackson 2005, 4). This claim to monopoly is based on the possession of ancestral ties to the “Muslim world,” and it “enshrines the historically informed expressions of Islam in the modern Muslim world as the standard of normativeness for Muslims everywhere” (Jackson 2005, 12).
Under these ideological guidelines, a Muslim of Arab descent, for example, is presumed to have proximity to the Islamic tradition, and her religious practices and perspectives are endowed with authenticity simply because she is Arab. By contrast, a Muslim who cannot claim immediate descent from the “Muslim world,” such as a U.S. Black American, is presumed to be new to the Islamic tradition, and her religious practices and perspectives have to be authenticated. Claims to proximity are a powerful form of cultural capital for Muslims in the United States who are geographically distant from traditional centers of Islamic learning yet entrenched in an ummah-wide crisis of the nature of Islamic authority today (Grewal 2013, 34). Immigrant Islam is an ethnoreligious hegemony grounded in this cultural capital, which makes the Muslim immigrant a religious and cultural normative ideal in the United States. This hegemonic norm holds internally within the U.S. American Muslim community as well as in certain state policies and popular narratives on Islam in the United States that rely on the Muslim-as-immigrant type. This state and media engagement endows further legitimacy on “immigrant” Muslims as Muslims over their “indigenous” sisters and brothers.

Muslims have a long history in the United States, beginning with the involuntary migration of enslaved African Muslims. So it is important to note that the rise of the ethnoreligious hegemony of Immigrant Islam is tied to the arrival of a particular cohort of émigrés: Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia who arrived in the United States in larger numbers after the loosening of racialized immigration quotas in 1965. Muslims from those regions had immigrated to the United States prior to 1965, but their communities did not yet represent the face of Islam in the popular imagination as they do today. Rather, in the mid-twentieth century U.S. Black American Muslims were the prototypical Muslims on the domestic front. This was due to the convergence of a number of factors, such as the powerful and visible organizational presence of Black Muslims in the antiracism movements of the twentieth century, the ability of certain Muslim communities to “integrate” racially and culturally into broader U.S. society, and the relatively small size of these Muslim immigrant communities and their institutional life in comparison to contemporary numbers.

Moreover, as American Studies scholar Sylvia Chan-Malik argues, the post-1965 demographic shift in the U.S. Muslim population precipitated
diverging “and in many cases mutually opposed visions of Islam and the [U.S.] nation” (Chan-Malik 2011, 12) For U.S. Black Americans Islam was a spiritual tradition of resistance that was critical of the United States and designed to undo the racial logics of white supremacy, whereas South Asian and Arab U.S. American Muslims “saw Islam as a religious and cultural inheritance . . . [and] America as a land of prosperity and opportunity” (Chan-Malik 2011, 12). Critically, these perspectives, coming out of particular raced and classed positions, wield differential power and influence.

Classic U.S. American logics of anti-Blackness collide with these claims to religious authority and legitimacy. Ideologies of anti-Blackness that fuel anti-Black racism—the ideology in action—are grounded in the racial taxonomies of white supremacy. White supremacy advances notions of racial superiority and inferiority that privilege those identified as White as ideal—the culmination of human potential—and normative—the standard against which all other sentient beings are judged. White supremacy produces a racial logic that sets up a grid of associations in which Blackness, in relation to Whiteness, is always and already less-than, in terms of value, history and, most importantly, humanity. Blackness is also configured as morally deviant when juxtaposed against the idealized standard of normative Whiteness. Paradoxically this “deviance” is also positively valued as a site of the pleasures repressed by the standards of Whiteness. Accordingly Blackness marks leisure instead of hard work, erotic liberty in lieu of sexual restraint, a womanhood that is super heroic, and a Christianity, free from the strictures of the Protestant ethic, that talks loud and long to God. This is “an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of White society are defined, and by extension, through which they may be defied” (Samuels 2004, 147–48).

Like all immigrants to the United States, Arab and South Asian migrants are encouraged to adopt ideologies of anti-Blackness as an immigrant rite of passage. They are primed to see U.S. Black Americans as less-than and deviant—a pathological and downwardly mobile population that is best avoided. Yet as non-Whites, Arab and South Asian U.S. American Muslims have their own complex relationships to Whiteness. Arabs and South Asians are racialized, as perpetually foreign and as alternately model minorities or enemies of the state (Jamal and Naber 2007;
Sharma 2010). The racial logics of white supremacy in the United States discriminates against Arab and South Asian U.S. Americans while simultaneously incentivizing the adoption of anti-Blackness by yielding limited kinds of privilege and access when these non-White U.S. Americans successfully avoid Blackness. Since one-third of all U.S. Muslims are Black a consequence of this distancing has been to render Blackness necessarily “un-Islamic”: lacking religious authority and authenticity. Accordingly, the assertion of ethnoreligious hegemonies can work within the racial hierarchies of U.S. society to maintain the logic of white supremacy. This alignment with white supremacy has made the ethnoreligious hegemony of Arab and South Asian U.S. American Muslims one of Muslim Cool’s primary interlocutors. Instead of avoiding Blackness, Muslim Cool is a move toward Blackness in the construction of a U.S.-based Muslim identity.

The racial and ethnic bifurcation of the American Muslim community into “indigenous” and “immigrant” Muslims reveals critical tensions, but the terms themselves are imperfect designations. They elide the history and lived experience of, for example, third-generation Arab American Muslims or U.S. Black American Muslims with Caribbean immigrant parents. The terms also render U.S. American Muslims who are indigenous to the Americas invisible, which reinscribes the erasure and violence of U.S. settler colonialism. I find value in Jackson’s overall theorization and acknowledge that these terms are efficient in writing and have become common in everyday U.S. American Muslim discourse. However, I do not use the terms “indigenous,” “immigrant,” or “Immigrant Islam” in this book. I find that they tend to obfuscate rather than illuminate the significant raced and classed power dynamics that lie at the core of the tensions between Black U.S. American Muslims and Arab and South Asian U.S American Muslims. Accordingly, in lieu of Immigrant Islam I employ the much more clunky phrase “ethnoreligious hegemony” of South Asian and Arab U.S. American Muslims and use “indigenous” and “immigrant” only in quotation marks when necessary to communicate how my interlocutors use those terms.

“Don’t Sweat the Technique”: Methodologies and the Field

This book is based on more than ten years of research on Islam and hip hop, which I began before even considering a graduate education.
I attended the first (and thus far the last) Islamic Family Reunion and Muslims in Hip Hop concert in 2003 which ignited my interest in the topic. My formal research includes twenty months of anthropology fieldwork in Chicago (from early 2007 to late 2008) and subsequent participant-observation research and interviews in Chicago, New York City, the California Bay Area, and the United Kingdom (2010–2015).

I went to Chicago at the invitation of Dr. Rami Nashashibi, executive director of IMAN. I met Nashashibi in the fall of 2006 at a meeting of young American Muslim activists and nonprofit leaders. We discussed our mutual projects: his (then) dissertation project on “ghetto cosmopolitanism” (Nashashibi 2009) and my interest in hip hop among young Muslims. At that time I had my sights set on conducting fieldwork in Morocco, but Nashashibi invited me to spend some time in Chicago, suggesting that IMAN’s work was directly related to my interests. I accepted the invitation and began fieldwork in January 2007 as the event coordinator for “Takin’ It to the Streets.” This event, known as “Streets,” is IMAN’s biennial community festival. It has become one of the largest community festivals in Chicago and features a wide range of activities, including speeches by local and nationally renowned Muslim and non-Muslim leaders, community service projects, children’s activities, sports tournaments, and musical performances. In 2007, the year I worked on the event, an estimated crowd of ten thousand people from just about all walks of life gathered from different parts of the city and the country to participate in the festival. Streets takes place in Marquette Park, where in 1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was greeted with rocks, bottles, and firecrackers during a march to protest residential segregation in the exclusively White neighborhood (James 1966).

The neighborhood surrounding Marquette Park is no longer predominantly White but rather U.S. Black American and Mexican American; however, the same issues of residential segregation and racialized inequalities continue to prevail in the neighborhood and throughout the city. Continuities between the past and the present made this site a symbolically meaningful location for the work that Streets was designed to do. With a goal to use art and education for community mobilization, IMAN’s staff and volunteers often described Streets as the embodiment of the organization’s vision of an American Muslim community that is
critically engaged (Nashashibi 2005). This vision is defined by a commitment to “heal the ’hood.”

IMAN’s commitment to heal the ’hood is a commitment to antiracist work. This work includes projects on the ground in the South Side of Chicago that seek to counter the material effects of anti-Black racism, such as the organization’s work on mass incarceration through a reentry program that provides skills and jobs for the formerly incarcerated. This work also included countering the ideologies of anti-Blackness as they circulate among U.S. American Muslims by centering the U.S. Black American experience as a critical site to critique the status quo, within and outside the U.S. American Muslim community. Most specifically, by its support of arts-based activism through hip hop, Blackness became the means through which young Muslims, Black and non-Black, came to learn and incorporate that critique in their own self-making as Muslims.

I worked at IMAN for six of the twenty months I conducted fieldwork, but I continued to attend the organization’s events, specifically programming geared toward youth, after the end of my employment. I was also allowed to use the IMAN offices to conduct interviews with local Chicago Muslims whom I met in the field. This was possible because IMAN served as a central location of Muslim life in Chicago, even though it was not in the center of the city. I consider IMAN a central site of Muslim Cool, given that many of my teachers began their journeys of Muslim self-making through IMAN. But my research interests and the relationships I built with young Muslim women and men also took me all over Chicagoland, which includes the city as well as its northern, western, and southern suburbs.

In the field I had two core groups of teachers. The first group comprised 18- to 22-year-old youth leaders in arts-based social activism, primarily at IMAN. They were primarily Black and South Asian U.S. American Sunni Muslims. Almost all were born in the United States to Muslim parents. With this cohort of teachers, I conducted participant observation, structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and focus groups. I also spent time with key teachers at home and at school, at youth organizing meetings, and at a range of other activities. The second group was a slightly older cohort of young adults in their late twenties and early thirties, whom I also engaged through participant observation, interviews, and a focus group. Alongside my interactions
with these two groups of teachers, I interviewed parents and older community figures who played important leadership roles in the Chicagoland Muslim community. I also attended a broad range of events, including banquets, fund-raisers, fashion shows, rallies, lectures, conferences, and jummah (weekly Friday congregational prayers), in the Black, South Asian, and Arab U.S. American Muslim communities of Chicago.

*Muslim Cool* results from an innovative methodological approach that brings performance studies as method and representation to anthropology. Performance ethnography consists of “staged, cultural performances . . . based on ethnographic data from the specific spheres of (a) the subjects, whose lives and words are being performed; (b) the audience, who witnesses the performance; and (c) the performers, who embody and enact the data” (Madison 2005, 172). The elements of performance ethnography are identical to those of more common ethnographic inscription: fieldwork, ethics, data collection and analysis, and thinking with, through, and without theory. However, as an embodied ethnography it is distinct from more common ethnographic practice because of the ways performance communicates “a sense of immediacy as well as the breadth and complexity” of the issues (Batiste 2005). Performance is visceral, in the moment, and—of particular import to those interested in public anthropology—accessible both within and outside the academy.

My use of performance ethnography as a methodological tool falls within the anthropological tradition of embodied knowledge. The practice of embodied knowledge resists the logocentrism that dominates the Euro-American intellectual tradition (Gilroy 1993). Instead of privileging the word, this practice identifies the body as a site of knowing. As Gina Ulysse reminds us, “the research process is an embodied endeavor, one in which lived and felt experience, through all the senses, is integral to both the data collection process and the knowledge produced” (Ulysse 2008, 128–29). In anthropology, this tradition is vibrantly illustrated in the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham. Both Hurston and Dunham were authors of artistic work that contributed to public discourse by challenging popular and academic narratives about Black people. These works were based on ethnographic fieldwork and bridged the gap between art and the academy.
Despite their groundbreaking contributions, Hurston and Dunham remain marginal figures in the anthropological canon (McClaurin 2001; Chin 2014). Their marginality is a result of anxieties about anthropology’s status as an “objective” science and the discipline’s failure to decolonize itself fully (Harrison 1997). Nevertheless, their practices of embodied knowledge are central to one of the discipline’s key methods, namely, participant observation. To do participant observation “you have to be there,” sharing time and space—even when confounding these categories through technology—with your interlocutors. This “being there” is not disembodied but rather requires the anthropologist to participate—to speak with, dance with, eat with, Gmail chat with, feel with (Hage 2009)—her interlocutors; through shared experience, knowledge is produced intersubjectively.

I enter this tradition with my performance ethnography piece entitled Sampled: Beats of Muslim Life. Sampled is a one-woman show composed of a series of movements or vignettes, akin to scenes in a play but without a linear narrative structure. The piece uses movement, theater, and poetry to ethnographically (re)present my research and findings. The title, Sampled, is a reference to the practice of citation found in both hip hop and the academy. Hip hop artists “sample” or take excerpts from previously recorded songs in the composition of their own music. Similarly, academic scholars are also expected to “sample” the ideas of other intellectuals in the process of constructing their own original contributions. Likewise, the narratives in my performance ethnography are samples—excerpts and examples—of multiple stories I encountered in the course of my fieldwork. The characters I play do not embody specific interlocutors; rather, they are embodied (re)presentations of the many young U.S. American Muslims I encountered and learned from in the field.

My performance ethnography, like this book, does not presume to speak for my teachers or assert possession of indisputable knowledge. Sampled is a performance ethnography constructed in my own words, yet drawn from an intersubjective production of knowledge. Its vignettes document, explore, and interrogate the key themes of Muslim Cool. Chapter 3 describes how I used performance ethnography as a method of data collection and analysis. Chapters 2 and 4 use Sampled as a means of representing the complex of contradictions and contestations that make up Muslim Cool.
“Where I’m From”: An Ethnographer with a Point of View

Like hip hop, Muslim Cool also has roots and routes; it is both tied to place and deterritorialized. The places of Chicago and the spaces created by IMAN were critical locations in the construction of Muslim Cool as a way of being Muslim in the contemporary United States. At the same time, these ideas have taken routes far beyond Chicago and IMAN. The movement of Muslim Cool documented in this book has crossed boundaries of race and class, gender and nation. Likewise, following the pattern of Muslim Cool and my multiethnic activist teachers, I have also moved across multiple boundaries.

I moved across boundaries as an anthropologist who was born and raised Muslim in the United States, a status I shared with most of my teachers. To some, this shared demographic fact makes me a “native anthropologist,” and with this title might come the assumption that I had unfettered access to my teachers and their community and perhaps “natural” insight as well as a lack of critical distance due to the ways in which my own identity and those of my teachers overlap. However, as many others have argued, these assumptions, which essentialize the “native” ethnographer, elide the complexities of position and power that shape the research experiences of all anthropologists (Narayan 1993; Ulysse 2008).

In the field, simply being Muslim was never enough. In fact, my race and ethnicity (Black and Latina), my gender (female), and my regional identity (reppin’ Brooklyn, New York!) as well as my religious community affiliations and my performance of Muslimness mediated my access—how I was seen in the field, what was said to me, and what was kept from me—as well as my own interpretations of my field site. For example, when I arrived in Chicago I was initially known as “the sister from New York,” and therefore it was not that I was a Muslim but my relationship to IMAN that afforded me entrée into some local communities. In other instances, when my IMAN affiliation showed its limitations, it was my relationship with congregations and prominent leaders in Brooklyn, New York, where I was raised that opened doors for me.

Taking my Black Muslim body into non-Black Muslim spaces also shaped the research process. The ethnoreligious hegemony described earlier marks the U.S. Black American Muslim as a Muslim with a lack
of religious and socioeconomic pedigree. I confounded many of these assumptions because I did not convert to Islam, I spoke Arabic, I had studied Islam in the Middle East, and at the time I was pursuing a Princeton Ph.D. with a degree from Georgetown University in hand. While my non-U.S. Black American teachers were often engaged in activism in multiethnic Muslim and non-Muslim spaces, their home communities were much more segregated. Therefore, when I went home with them and met their parents, some of these assumptions about U.S. Black Muslims were circulating along with the expected range of parental concerns about a stranger spending time with one's child.

In these situations, my different forms of “pedigree” were useful. For example, during a visit with one Pakistani American immigrant mother, my familiarity with a specific Sufi saint and the time I had spent in the Middle East not only made her more comfortable with her daughter spending time with me but in fact seemed to make her think I might be a good influence on her daughter. Had I lacked this pedigree, would the mother have eventually warmed up to me, despite my Blackness? Probably. But what was clear, in this situation and others, was that my Ivy League “pedigree” and my performance of a particular kind of Muslimness—through speaking Arabic, having studied in the Middle East, and wearing a headscarf (though not all were comfortable with my headscarf style)—mattered.

I also moved across boundaries as a hip hop head. In the hip hop community a “head” is someone who loves and is invested in hip hop. My love for and investment in hip hop comes from my relationship to the music and the culture. As a member of the hip hop generation, hip hop is the soundtrack to my life—there is a hip hop song to mark almost every significant moment in it. Moreover, growing up in Brooklyn and particularly being a teenager during the golden era of hip hop made my connection with it even more meaningful. I was Black and Muslim, being raised in a household with cultural nationalist leanings, and the music and culture of hip hop were replete with Islamic references and pro-Black and pan-African messages.

The kinds of linkages between Islam, Blackness, and hip hop that invigorate my teachers’ sense of Muslimness also shaped my own. In my pre–9/11 Brooklyn, to be a Muslim meant being known as righteous and seen as someone to respect, a reverence that was reproduced in hip hop
music and culture. This admiration for Islam and Muslims persists in most hip hop communities today, although beyond the borders of those communities the meaning of being a Muslim has shifted in critical ways. In the post–9/11 United States, to be a Muslim is to be known as a target of suspicion and seen as a threat. To be a Muslim also means to be racialized as “Brown” and not Black. Accordingly, the links between Islam and hip hop that were so paramount in my own upbringing have faded for many. Now, hip hop and Islam are often imagined as “worlds far apart,” and in the cases in which they come together the most popular narrative is one of hip hop as a tool of the so-called radicalization of young Muslims.

What I share with my teachers as well as where my knowledge diverges from theirs are what have motivated my interest and passion for this project. My analysis reflects the insights gained from firsthand on-the-ground ethnographic fieldwork, as well as forms of embodied knowledge I have gained by following the routes of Muslim Cool and drawing on the roots of “where I’m from.”

“The Blueprint”: Outline of Muslim Cool

Chapter 1, “The Loop of Muslim Cool: Black Islam, Hip Hop, and Knowledge of Self,” begins by tracing the loop of Muslim Cool: Islam, as practiced in U.S. Black American communities, shaped hip hop, which in turn shapes young twenty-first-century U.S. Muslims who return to Blackness and Islam as a way of thinking and a way of being Muslim. I illustrate the ways in which hip hop, Black Islam, and the history of Black subjection in the United States serve as prisms through which they interpret their own racialized locations as U.S. American Muslims. Chapter 2, “Policing Music and the Facts of Blackness,” examines the meanings of race and Blackness within U.S. Muslim communities by exploring the often fraught musical context of U.S. American Islam. In this chapter, I argue that Black music is targeted for two parallel tracks of regulation: disavowal and instrumentalization. I use these U.S. American Muslim debates around music to illustrate both the complexities of interethnic intra-Muslim relations and the ways in which these internal Muslim debates reflect primary engagements with Blackness in the United States today.
Chapters 3 and 4 explore Muslim Cool as racial-religious self-making that occurs at the complex intersections of race, class, gender, and style. Chapter 3, “Blackness as a Blueprint for the Muslim Self,” begins the discussion by investigating a specific headscarf style, the “‘hoodjab,” to uncover how Blackness, interpolated through the ‘hood, gives meaning, that is contested, to the female practice of Muslim Cool. Chapter 4, “Cool Muslim Dandies: Signifyin’ Race, Religion, Masculinity, and Nation,” explores the sartorial interventions of men I call Muslim dandies. I ask: how do Muslim men use dress to claim a U.S. American identity that directly confronts white supremacist ideas of Black pathology and likewise, hegemonic ethnoreligious aesthetics that render U.S. Black American Muslim men marginal in many U.S. American Muslim contexts?

Chapter 5, “The Limits of Muslim Cool,” moves the discussion from interracial and gender dynamics to the dynamics of Muslim Cool’s relationship to the state. It explores the ways Muslim Cool is entangled in neoliberal regimes of knowledge and power as well as U.S. imperialism. I trace the constraints that engagement in twenty-first-century arts and civic engagement culture places on my Muslim teachers’ aspirations to reproduce a Black radical alterity to reveal the limits of Muslim Cool’s resistance to hegemony. *Muslim Cool* concludes by reflecting on the relevance of the concept to contemporary struggles against anti-Blackness.

“Stakes Is High”: Why Muslim Cool Matters

At its core, this book offers an examination of the critical cultural reverberations that arise at the meeting of Blackness and Muslimness in the twenty-first century. This meeting articulates a far from postracial reality in which race and Blackness continue to be significant terms of engagement in the United States, shaping how individuals and communities understand themselves and position themselves vis-à-vis each other and the state. The convergence of Muslimness and Blackness influences how individual Muslims in the United States experience, articulate, and perform their religious identities. But this intersection has a meaningful impact on inter-Muslim relationships as well. *Muslim Cool* illustrates the critical importance of Blackness to all U.S. Muslim self-making, including those who move away from Blackness as well those who, like my teachers, move toward Blackness as a way of being Muslim. These
cultural reverberations that shape individual and community self-making are critical markers of change and continuity into the ways U.S. Muslims are positioned and position themselves as racial subjects and racialized citizens.

For many, the categories “Muslim” and “American” are not racial categories: Muslim is a religious designation and American is a national identity. Yet paradoxically, many non-Muslim U.S. Americans’ understanding of who Muslims are in relation to the United States is framed by the question, “Why do they hate us?” The question is an indicator that these categories function as “racial projects” (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). “Muslim” is not simply a label of faith but rather a racialized designation, which mediates access to and restrictions on the privileges of being an American, itself also a racialized category.

In the late twentieth century, “Muslim” emerged as a racial category through historically specific processes of racial formation: older orientalist fantasies of the “exotic” east and white supremacist logics that privilege White and Christian citizens in the United States merged with the U.S. pursuit of economic and political dominance in resource-rich Muslim-majority nations. The convergence of these forces gave rise to what scholars call the “racialization of the Muslim” (Volpp 2002; Razack 2008; Jamal and Naber 2008; Maira 2009; Rana 2011). As a racial type, the Muslim is known through specific bodies—those with brown skin and “Middle Eastern” looks—and behaviors, such as prayer and the wearing of beards and headscarves. Importantly, these bodies and behaviors are not just markers of racial difference but also signals of the Muslim as a threat that have been used particularly since 9/11 to regulate and control Muslim bodies (Rana 2011). These signs of Muslim threat have come to serve as a shorthand justification for a regime of state surveillance in which U.S. American Muslims are monitored in their prayer spaces, charities, schools, homes, and even their intimate lives (Khera 2010; Cainkar 2011; Aaronson 2011).

In the United States, the category “Muslim” is racially triangulated against normative ideas of Whiteness and Blackness. Although U.S. American Muslims are racially and ethnically diverse, the Muslim as a racial type is non-White, “immutably foreign, and unassimilable” (Kim 1999) as well as non-Black, “mostly moderate and mainstream” (PEW 2007). This relationship to Whiteness and Blackness facilitates the fur-
ther typing of the Muslim into the immutably foreign and unassimilable “Bad Muslim” on the one hand, and the moderate and mainstream “Good Muslim” on the other (Mamdani 2005; Maira 2009). The latter ideal type performs a middle-class respectability that is valued in mainstream U.S. America, yet the “Good Muslim” is also routinely “Brown” and thus never quite escapes the tendency to conflate “Muslim” with “foreigner.” Accordingly, while U.S. American Muslims may experience the intersection of race and Muslimness in varied ways, the category “Muslim” continues to occupy a subordinate social position.

The racialization of the Muslim as Brown and foreign is a departure from the mid-twentieth century, when the “Black Muslim” was the dominant face of Islam in America (Curtis 2006). The Black Muslim designation was shorthand for the Nation of Islam and for a practice of Islam that was considered heterodox and seen as a dangerous form of Black protest. Like the “Muslim” of today, the Black Muslim was known by specific bodies and behaviors: black skin, bow ties, and preaching “hate.” Likewise, the Black Muslim was also under intense state surveillance under the COINTELPRO program (an FBI Counter Intelligence Program), which included the use of agent provocateurs to destabilize Black Muslim communities. Therefore, although the racial type associated with Muslimness has changed from Black to Brown, there is also continuity; the Muslim continues to be seen as a threat to the state that is managed not only through state surveillance but also through notions of multiculturalism.

Muslim Cool poses a direct challenge to this racialization of Muslims as foreign and as perpetual threats to the United States. It confronts the idea of a break with the past that is implied in readings of the contemporary moment as “postracial” and offers a more complex narrative of both the U.S. Muslim experience and the meanings and performance of Blackness today. Accordingly, Muslim Cool is not a portrayal of a multiethnic postracial utopia built through hip hop music. Rather, it problematizes the ways Blackness is used in U.S. American self-making as both a threat to America’s progress and a symbol of it. Muslim Cool is neither the story of a complete break with the past nor an easy tale of resistance but rather a charting of the powerful and dynamic ways in which Blackness and Muslimness merge to challenge and reconstitute U.S. racial hierarchies.